

## Sharpen Your Teeth

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# Sharpen Your Teeth

by [STARSDidathing](#)

## Summary

A betrayed Tony Stark leaves the Avengers. He's angry and bitter but he's not about to stop being a hero. The problem is that not everyone is happy with his decision.

## Notes

In a-round-about way, this was slightly inspired by an anonymous commentor "Ren" who read one of my Asgardian!Tony fics and said right up there with that Tony was Evil and Mermaids. This wasn't exactly "evil" but it came close? Maybe? Either way, you had me thinking about it and with the inspiration of a song I've been toying with this idea. So if you read it, "Ren", I hope you enjoy :)

**Update - 7th December 2015:** Damn you all! I now have *ideas*; so yes, there will be more of this. No promises on when though! I'm trying to finish a long FrostIron story, some prompts and a few half-started oneshots. But I will do my best to update this in the next few weeks. I'll also add new tags each chapter as they become relevant :)

# Chapter 1

## Chapter Notes

This is now being translated into Russian by Raiwe and can be found [here](#)! They are still working through the chapters - a mean feat considering how long this is! Let your Russian speaking friends know to check it out :)

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

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## ARC 1

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The public learned about Tony Stark leaving The Avengers three months after it happened.

Tony had been aware from the start of the numerous ways things could and would blow up. He had in fact *prepared specifically* for those things and was grateful for Pepper's continued, if grudging, support. He knew from her frown - and their numerous arguments - that she thought he should reunite with them, that he should *swallow down* one more betrayal and make nice for the cameras and for the sake of the world. She knew better than to push too hard for it though.

'*Creative differences*' was one of his favourite things to say to any reporter that was game enough to ask. Because while Tony might have refused to be associated with or on a team with the Avengers again, he wasn't about to stop being Iron Man. The Avengers would also inevitably be needed to save the day and they'd need public support to do that. Tony might despise and never forgive them; he might forbid them from his tower, cut off their access to SI technology and stomach fighting alongside them if the world was in the balance. But forgive them? Be a part of the team again? Tony would rather be The Merchant of Death.

The Avengers weren't speaking about it either and in his more bitter moments he might chuckle at that, after all, betrayal cut both ways. It sliced into the person who wasn't trusted enough to hold their faith; and it sent a backlash of guilt and bad publicity down on the people who turned their backs and *lied* when they shouldn't have.

'*Iron Man would be welcome to return should he wish to*'. Captain America had told everyone at a press conference early on. Tony only knew because Pepper had sent him a copy of the speech, trying to help change his mind and show him they were apologetic. *Hah!* Ashamed was more like it, and what was the phrase? Once bitten, twice shy?

More like; once stabbed, twice vengeful. He wasn't going anywhere near that *team* again. He'd always known he was better off on his own.

“Hey, J-” Tony cut himself off with a grimace. He still couldn’t get used to it; the silence and the loss of one of the truest friend’s he’d ever had. It wasn’t like JARVIS didn’t still exist out there but it wasn’t the same. “Nevermind,” he muttered before FRIDAY could try and query him.

It was still hard to swallow.

Nothing had been the same for a long time; not since the invasion, not since Ultron, not since getting rid of the arc reactor - not since Thor came back with too much information, too many new enemies and a whole new twist on Loki. Not since the foundations Tony was standing on split underneath his feet and left him alone and rotting.

Tony gritted his teeth as well as clenched the glass in his hand. He was trying to cut back on the drinking, *trying* to be responsible now that he was a one-man-band again. It was harder than it looked. He’d grown complacent, grown *used* to people - *friends* - who would watch his back; he’d forgotten the cardinal rule he’d learnt after Obie; don’t trust a fucking *thing* - and he was kicking himself for it.

He almost wanted to see the Avengers get splattered against something; it was too bad revenge wasn’t feasible. He knew if another Chitauri invasion happened, it would be impossible for him to beat it alone. No, Earth needed the Avengers and all the wishing in the world wasn’t going to change that.

Or how much a part of him still felt punched, bitter and hurt.

But he just took another sip from his glass, glaring icily at the wall and trying to ignore that wounded place in his chest. He’d opened himself up and watched them trample all over it – and yet they were surprised when he snapped shut like a clam? He’d expected resistance and arguments in the face of his decision and he’d shot down everything the Avengers had tried but he knew they were still expecting him to come back, to *crawl back* into their fold.

Like fuck.

They forgot he was a genius, they forgot *how* Iron Man was formed. They forgot *doesn’t play well with others*. He wasn’t a soldier but a self-serving man who got coined as a hero because it was a close enough description to look good.

He’d been anticipating all kinds of people would try and talk him around and he had arguments for when what remained of S.H.I.E.L.D decided to ignore his refusal to speak to them. When they attempted to break through his security and chastise him; like he was a child throwing a fit, like he should simply ‘know better’.

Tony had been predicting a lot of different conversation and outcomes, but never once did he envision that the God of Mischief would teleport into his penthouse to glare at him.

Blinking, Tony had just looked at the demi-god. His hair was much the same as it had been during the invasion, just a little less crazy and unbrushed. He was decked out in almost identical armour only there was no staff and no helm. His eyes had less of a crazy-glaze too and his skin was perfect this time, not blotchy and almost feverish.

“You look well,” Tony commented because his brain-to-mouth filter was apparently dead.

Loki bared his teeth in more of a snarl than a smile. “Man of Iron.”

Lifting his glass in something resembling a toast, Tony acknowledged, “That would be me.”

He took a drink but never let his eyes drop from where he was watching Loki. He knew that Loki was unlikely to be looking to kill him. Thor, Asgard, hell, the rest of the realms, all seemed to believe the tortured and coerced story. Loki was still a fugitive and had a lot of other charges to account for but there was nothing specific to tie him to the destruction of Earth, or Tony in general. Of course, that was if everyone was to be believed.

The silence stretched between them as Tony swallowed and put down his glass. He contemplated waiting for the other to make a move, but he had never been particularly patient. “Soooo,” he drew out the word, “how’s space?”

Loki let out an irritated breath through his nose and Tony could see one of his fists was clenched. “I hear your little team has lost itself a pivotal member.”

Tony raised his eyebrows. “Was that a compliment I heard in there? Also,” because even his enemies needed to get this *straight*, “they’re not *my* team.”

“Hmm,” the noise Loki let out didn’t sound thoughtful though; rather it was closer to a muffled growl. “Did the son of Odin not pass on his concerns for the universe to you?”

“Oh?” And wasn’t this a bizarre conversation he was caught in. “The big, bad, purple thing with really bad relationship goals?” Loki’s eye twitched and for his own enjoyment Tony added, “You want a drink, Renaissance Fair?”

“You know of the enemy you face and yet you spurn your allies?” Loki spoke before Tony could make good on his second offer to the mage. Tony’s face went blank at the words but Loki just pressed harder. “You would invite death on your world for your own amusement?”

“Problem with what you said there; you can’t reject allies you don’t have.”

“Was this team a farce then? Was all my efforts to unite you in vain?”

“Okay, now you’re just getting egotistical.”

Loki actually let out the growl he’d repressed earlier but the second the sound faded he wiped the emotion off his face. It was actually impressive. Tony had a good poker-face but the way Loki literally made his face clean of some pretty powerful feelings was ridiculously skilled. He supposed that was what a thousand years with Thor as a brother would do to you.

“I don’t have time for your petty human quarrels,” - *petty*, Tony mouthed with narrowed eyes but was ignored - “The Mad Titan *will* come and you must be aligned with Thor.”

Despite his flippant words to Loki, Tony *had* listened to the warning that had been given a few months before the split. Thanos sounded like a real *swell* guy and also *not* someone he wanted to gatecrash Earth. He didn’t want to see his planet and *himself* go up in smoke - and

it was because of that threat that he was even planning to work with the Avengers in the future in order to stop it from happening.

*But*, and Tony took a thoughtful sip of his scotch while his mind calculated; *now there was Loki*.

Didn't that open all new doors of possibility?

Loki had always been fascinating; wickedly intelligent, skilled at magic - fucking *magic* which was a thing and Tony had wanted to sink his teeth into unravelling that since Loki had first showed up. He was also similar enough that Tony had admitted in his darker moments that they probably would have gotten along if they had met differently. But now Thor had revealed that Loki wasn't a cardboard-cut-out villain but a torture victim with a vendetta a mile wide.

He was also distinctly unimpressed that Tony seemed to have messed up his plans by rebelling, yet, that also meant that he intended for Tony to live long enough to fulfil them. Tony felt very much like the cat that had landed itself with a big bowl of cream. He'd done enough dancing to other people's tunes recently, or simply downplaying some of his natural tendencies or thoughts to better fit into a team that would *still* turn around and stab him in the back. It was time to be a bit more like Tony Stark; to go for what he wanted and damn the fucking rest.

Loki wasn't going to kill him, and Tony knew a vindictive survivor when he saw one.

"I refuse to be an Avenger," Tony told Loki, watching as his face twisted into a furious scowl. He looked ready to stalk forward and it gave Tony flashbacks to the last time they'd stood inside his penthouse together. This time, however, it was going to be slightly different. Tony didn't have a list of people he could recite as his backup, so he needed to change that. "*But*, I will ally myself to *you*."

Loki stopped in his tracks, his face going slack with shock before it quickly turned assessing. "Why would you do that?"

The words dripped with suspicion, but Tony just grinned. "I've tried one model, now I'm looking for an upgrade."

"You would offer yourself to a liar and villain? Oh, what desperate lengths you must go to. Tell me, Stark," He smirked, "whatever did you do to make it so impossible to go back?"

Tony's didn't drop his smile but all the warmth and humour bled out of it. "I could ask you the same thing. Thor was notoriously tight-lipped about *how* you ended up with Thanos."

"Do not wander too far in that direction, mortal," Loki warned sharply. "You are a useful piece but can easily be extinguished."

"Yeah," Tony drawled. "I don't think you're going to kill me. We both know I'm too important to this world." Tony eyed Loki's twitch of frustration with delight. "Killing me would make it much harder for you to accomplish your plans."

Loki didn't deny it but he did start to move closer. "So you would throw yourself at my feet rather than at the Avengers?"

"No throwing," Tony didn't flinch even with only the bar now between them. "Equal partnership. Maybe with a clause or two on betrayal; I'm over that stabbing feeling, how about you?"

Tony saw something flicker in Loki's eyes; realisation and understanding before it was carefully masked again. "And what would such an alliance entail?"

"I'm assuming you have such things as magic contracts, unbreakable vows, all that sort of stuff?"

"I do." Tony knew he wasn't imagining the unfurling of glee and mischief in Loki's eyes; and why wouldn't the other be amused?

Tony was still on the same side as the heroes but he was, in essence, betraying the Avengers by siding with their enemy. Oh, it wasn't true; they were after the same goal and Tony wasn't about to start destroying cities, but it was beside the point. Tony was offering Loki everything he'd just removed from the Avengers; his mind, his inventions, his tower, and the support of Iron Man.

Loki had come to snarl and fight and force him back into the Avengers. What he'd found instead was a man who was much more open to alternative solutions than he'd probably expected.

"I think we can come up with a deal," Tony suggested. "A mutually beneficial relationship to take out an approaching enemy."

"And what of when your former friends discover your new allegiance?" Loki had somehow moved closer, almost leaning over the bar and putting less distance between himself and the God of Mischief than Tony had ever intended - but he wasn't about to back down.

Tony lifted his chin slightly. "Does it look like I give a shit?"

"Oh no," Loki's smile was pure Trickster, "I believe you'll quite enjoy their reaction."

Tony matched the expression. "Well, I won't deny *that*."

"Hmm," that sound was definitely thoughtful, "An alliance."

Putting down his glass, Tony didn't let himself rethink it as he held out his hand. Loki looked down at it before catching Tony's gaze with his eyebrows raised. Tony shrugged, "Consider it an act of intent."

Loki's lips twitched but he raised his arm and a pale, slightly cool hand clasped his own. Tony expected it to be shook but Loki pulled him even closer instead, their faces were inches apart and Tony's breath hitched with surprise. Loki tilted his head not unlike a cat. "It's rare for a mortal to surprise me, Tony Stark, yet you are becoming quite consistent with it."



He wasn't sure if the encroachment on his personal space was a challenge or an attempt to make him uncomfortable, but Tony refused to let it be either. He actively moved slightly closer, causing a brief widening of Loki's eyes before he told the mage, "Babe, you ain't seen *nothing* yet."

## Chapter End Notes

I very specifically didn't want this to be a "Tony goes Dark" story. That is *not* what this is. This is bitter, hurt, angry Tony who was betrayed by the Avengers but is *still a good guy*. He's just a good guy who is willing to make alliances for his own reasons (one of which is to spite people.)

**EDIT:** The first few chapters of this story have recently been translated into Chinese by [allyStk!](#) Please find below the following chapters on Lofter. It is also accessible on ao3 via the link at the top of the story :)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5, 1/2](#)

[Chapter 5, 2/2](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7, 1/2](#)

[Chapter 7, 2/2](#)

### **NEW EDIT:**

This story is being translated into Portuguese on Wattpad and you can find the story [here!](#)

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Notes

So you all whittled me down, and yes, this is now a chaptered story. I'm still trying to work on other things so *no promises on updates*. I probably won't have a lot of time to devote to this until I've finished my current FrostIron story (which I won't start posting until it's completed). I still wanted to update with something so that everyone would know it was being continued :)

So please enjoy what I have mental dubbed the "Flirty Filler Chapter".

Oh and special note and **HUGE** thanks go to HalcyonFrost who I wouldn't know what to do without. She is my cheerleader, voice of reason and eternal sweetheart. I doubt this would continue to exist without her encouragement and her willingness to read before a post :) (Also. *\*whispers\** She has a Tony-goes-Dark story. You should check that out. It's *awesome*. *\*nudge, nudge\**)

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

Brokering an alliance with Loki was both easier and harder than Tony anticipated.

On the one hand, Loki seemed to enjoy when Tony argued with him, but on the other hand, Loki was a *damn good negotiator*. Tony was glad he was drafting his own deal because the idea of Thor or Steve trying to act on the Avengers behalf was both laughable and terrifying. Tony doubted, of course, that they would ever trust Loki enough to start an alliance - but reading the final product of whatever contract Loki twisted out of them would have been fabulous and mock worthy.

He was sure Loki had tricked Thor into some idiotic ventures in their youth and Tony had to wonder if he could worm some of the details out of the mage. Hell, hearing any event on that planet that was unclouded by Thor's ego would be a nice change.

But, all of that aside, Tony had still been surprised that Loki hadn't detested having someone pick at his wording or catch Loki out when he tried to make the deal swing more in his favour. It had taken a few hours before Tony realised Loki enjoyed the way they tried to outwit each other. It seemed to be something of a game to the demi-god and he adored Tony for both playing along and matching him step for step.

Loki was, simply putting it, testing him. He wanted to see how good a deal Tony could craft and Tony wasn't about to disappoint him. It took the better part of a week but in the end and after the third read through without any changes (there had been arguments, but neither could persuade the other out of anything else or present a compromise they were both happy with) they were willing to sign.

“Blood? Really?” Tony asked with a grimace as Loki ran a sharp dagger over the palm of his hand.

Loki gave him a flat look. “Can you think of a more individually binding component?”

“Yes,” Tony answered before he could think, “a more pleasurable one too.”

Loki’s eyebrows shot up and he even looked Tony over; uncomprehending at first, but with a smirk curling his lips by the end. “How unexpected, but,” he turned back to the parchment, “implausible. It would affect the nature of the binding.”

“Oh?” Tony couldn’t let that go. “What does it do?”

Loki turned his attention back to him. “You’re speaking of your own seed, yes?”

“Semen, Loki,” Tony corrected just to be annoying, he then paused and added for extra fun, “Or jizz. Sperm. Ejac-”

“I quite get the picture you are painting. I did not need a Midgardian dictionary of terms.” Tony smirked but Loki looked unfazed, if mildly exasperated. Tony would bet it was just a front for hiding his amusement. “The *suggestion* you have made will influence the intent.”

Tony pursed his lips and eyed the contract. “It’ll make it come off more sexual in nature?”

“Quite,” Loki agreed. “It wouldn’t dictate our actions but should another review the contract-”

“That likely to happen?” Tony cut in.

Loki pursed his lips in thought as he stared into the distance; his eyes were flicking around slightly and over the last few days Tony had learnt that meant he was circling through scenarios. Tony had discovered a lot about the God of Chaos during their short acquaintance. Chief of which was that, short of Bruce, he was the first person in recent years Tony had instantly gotten along with.

Sure, there was some posturing, some growling, and some very barbed comments intended to cut and bleed and see what could be found - but Tony also gave as good as he got. It was only once they’d stopped acting like two spitting vipers that the grounds of their alliance had begun to form. It was now shaping up to be dangerously perfect; and oh, Tony could just *taste* the Avengers reaction to that. He went to bed every night grinning about it.

He didn’t even feel like he was giving something up, he was only receiving benefits.

When Loki needed a place to stay where he could recuperate with protection; Tony could provide that. When Tony needed up-to-date information on Thanos that he *wouldn’t* ask Thor for, Loki just had to share what he was already planning to gain.

If Loki was interested in Tony creating or getting things for him then he could exchange it for lessons or books on magic. There were numerous other examples that had fleshed out the

body of the contract as they outlined what they would give, how much they would be willing to assist the other and in what circumstances they wouldn't.

It was a good deal and it also had something Tony was in sore need of lately; specifics. They both knew what they wanted from each other, what they were being offered and what they could expect. They couldn't betray each other without it instantly being made known to the other party. They also couldn't cut the contract short without mutual agreement.

Tony knew exactly what Loki required from him - had a God damn *list* for reference - and everything else he did wasn't going to affect Tony and was therefore *unnecessary* information. This wasn't friendship, it was just business.

Tony still couldn't stop himself from poking at some of those boundaries for the fun of it though, and much to his delight, Loki did the same.

He was brought from his wandering thoughts, when Loki answered his earlier question. "No, Thor would be the only one on Midgard who might ask to see the contract but he has no right to." He paused and his mouth pitched downwards. "The Allfather is a different matter, but he is unlikely to care for my affairs if they are not causing him political disaster."

Tony chuckled bitterly. "Sounds like my Dad."

"Hmm," Loki hummed but otherwise ignored the remark to continue, "There is also something unappealing to having those substances on documentation." His perfect little nose was scrunched with distaste. "Blood is a more respected method."

Tony actually agreed with him on that, especially now that he was visualising it happening. He'd rather have someone see his *blood* on a signature than his *seed* - not that anyone on Earth would be surprised to hear he'd closed a deal by getting one off. He still had to tease Loki though. "That's a bit prudish. Don't you get it on your hand and your bed often enough? What's wrong with a little parchment?"

Loki shot him an unimpressed look and didn't rise to the bait, sadly. "And you would enjoy your parental figure potentially seeing a contract of that making?"

The idea made Tony wince on instinct. "Well, it would be amusing - after the shouting."

Loki smirked but didn't comment beyond the one word, "Quite."

He turned away after that and waved his hand through the air. A quill appeared and Tony doubted the feather - elegant; in beautiful greens and silver - was from a bird that could be found on Earth. Loki pressed the tip against the welling blood, collecting enough for the task before signing underneath the Norse Ruins on the contract.

Loki had explained that while the text of the document would change depending on the reader's native language, their names and signatures would remain fixed in the dialect they were taught to read and write with. It was an impressive system and Tony was already itching to try and recreate it with SI Technology.

When the stylish flicks and sharp lines that made up his name were penned, Loki slid the parchment across the bench so that it was before Tony. He then turned the dagger and offered it handle-tipped to Tony who eyed it suspiciously. “Any blood-related diseases I should worry about?”

“My body purges me of any such ailments,” Loki answered easily before asking with false innocence. “Does yours not?”

“Yeah, yeah, puny mortals,” Tony took the knife, careful not to slice Loki with the action - not that he thought the other would ever allow it.

Holding the blade above his left hand, he eyed the document one more time. Was he really doing this? Aligning himself to the God of Mischief to take down an enemy that had already hung Loki out wet? Was he really taking the giant step that put him beside a man that most of Earth thought was a war criminal?

He found himself flicking his attention to the mage. Loki was watching him closely, his eyes slightly narrowed but his expression mostly unreadable. It took Tony a moment to realise one important thing; *he's expecting me to back out.*

The thought filled Tony with a sudden *need* to prove him wrong - but he wasn't stupid enough to be dared into this. He knew the risks, knew the payoff. He also needed backup coming into a war with the Mad Titan, and there was no one on Earth he was willing to give his time and loyalty to anymore. He had a choice, and Loki was standing there like a whole new league of bad decisions and interesting possibilities.

Tony had been stabbed in the back by the heroes, betrayed on the home front; the least he could do was give his former enemy a go. He'd be half-anticipating it to turn to shit that way anyway.

He drew the dagger in a line against his hand before he could think about it, wincing at the pain but pulling back to admire the skill of the craftsmanship. Loki had barely had to press the blade down in order to break skin so he'd taken caution and was glad for it. Tony was fairly sure with a decent push he could have skewered himself to the table.

“So,” Tony began while reaching out and taking the quill Loki proffered. “We both agreed the Avengers need to live.”

“Yes,” Loki's mouth twitched like he was trying not to laugh.

Tony could still remember it too, the delighted sound he'd let out when he realised Tony's idea of vengeance was just as bloody as Loki's. The laughter had been startling and odd but it had passed quickly. It had also led Tony to explain that the only reason he *wasn't* enacting that desire was because it wasn't feasible, now, or even when Thanos was destroyed. Loki had understood that and accepted it too.

Loki still queried him. “Are you changing your mind already?”

Tony shook his head. “No. It wouldn't work without them and you know that.”

“So to where do you intend to lead this conversation?”

Shaking his head at the wording, Tony told the other. “We need to work on relaxing you.”

“You are not an ally as of yet.”

Tony raised his eyebrows. “Was that a prompt?”

Loki’s eyes moved slowly over the contract, up Tony’s hand that was still poised, past his arm, and finally rested on Tony face. Their eyes caught and held. The whole examination had felt weighted, making Tony feel overly aware of his skin and actions. What Loki intended to gain from it though, Tony wasn’t able to guess. “I am not the instigator of this alliance.”

“Well,” the words tumbled out without much thought, “I hope you remember that when this turns out *brilliant* and people are singing our praises and you're thinking about taking the credit.” Loki’s mouth had become a flat line and his eyes were equally unimpressed, but Tony continued anyway; irking Loki was really half the fun. “I’m going to be holding that admittance over you with *glee*.”

He punctuated the end of his prediction with a flourish of his signature. Their blood flared white before fading rapidly to look like day old ink - but that was only in the right light, if Tony shifted his angle slightly then it shined a very obvious red. Loki held out his hand and the quill and parchment relocated to it, leaving Tony grasping nothing.

The demi-god stood smoothly, his eyes flicking over the contract as he moved. When he was happy, he vanished both items to his storage dimension but Tony wasn’t bothered. He had a copy of the contract on FRIDAY’s hard drive and if Loki was to be believed, all copies of their deal would automatically gain signatures after the original was signed. He was going to double-check it as soon as Loki was gone, of course, but he did like the way the system prevented forgeries.

While Tony had half-expected Loki would disappear the second they’d scribbled their parts, he actually seemed to be lingering. He did flick his fingers and absently heal both of their cuts though and Tony really wanted to ask about that. He might also want to rub and examine his hand for a while, but Loki always looked exceedingly amused when he did something like that and acted ‘*so incredibly mortal*’.

Besides, Tony knew Loki would rather dance around his magic questions than answer them, especially when he probably had plans he needed to check up on. Loki had also alluded that once the deal was official he was unlikely to be back on Earth for another fortnight. It made Tony wonder where he was going.

“Off to Asgard?” he guessed.

“Hardly,” Loki answered, but it was less of a sneer and more of a general response, there was an ease that hadn’t been there before. It looked like he was definitely more open to discussion now that they were intrinsically tied. Good to know. “Vanaheim,” Loki admitted, “I have some items I need to collect.”

Tony would have toasted Loki goodbye if he had a glass, but Loki was even more vicious than Pepper and JARVIS combined on his drinking habits. It had initially had him snapping defensively, but Loki took even less of his crap than Pepper and was more forceful than his former AI. The first time his scotch had turned into - what he later found out was Bilgesnipe piss - hadn't been pretty for either of them. They'd included his drinking *and* Loki's ability to tamper with his shit into the contract not long after that. It was a wonder the document wasn't as long as a bus considering everything they'd haggled over. How a discussion on Tony's ability to fight outside the armor had moved from dancing and then on to what poisons Loki was allowed to create in Stark Tower would always be mindboggling. Fascinating and intriguing, but still extremely confusing.

Shaking off the memory of some of their more bemusing conversations and arguments, Tony replied to the Loki. "How do I contact you if anything comes up?"

"There should be no need."

"And if there is?"

Loki's immaculate left eyebrow went up. "You have managed well enough on your own so far, have you not?"

Tony gestured between them. "I thought we just established this isn't an 'alone' thing anymore?" He narrowed his gaze. "And what if *you* get into trouble?"

"We will simply need to avoid it for now," Loki dismissed. "My preparations for us aren't yet complete."

Tony was mildly taken aback at the answer but felt something pleasant blossom in him too. *He really is throwing himself into this* and Tony didn't know what to do with that but try to fight off a grin.

He also refused to let the wave of bitterness that crashed over him take control - but fuck it all, here was Loki the so-called *villain* making plans and creating solutions. Tony had always been the one throwing things for the others to catch; Avengers Tower, upgraded equipment, SI technology tailor made, *anything they needed*. They never attempted anything back, never offered, never said *thank you* - like he was a continual resource that wouldn't dry up or need encouragement.

Loki hadn't proven himself any different yet and his preparations might not be anything like Tony's, but this was still looking promising. Tony knew his own mind had been whirring since the moment Loki had begun the proceedings with a handshake. He wanted to make solutions, meet and break down hurdles, and Loki, it seemed, was doing the same. He might even turn out like a fucking *ally* and not cement in Tony's damn shoes.

"Well," and Tony couldn't wipe the pleased curl of his lip away despite his trying. "I'm still working on that inter-realm cell phone so I guess we will just have to wait."

Loki looked instantly intrigued and Tony wondered if he wasn't the only one feeling something warm and flattered. "Are you now?"

“Oh, yeah,” Tony’s smile broke out fully. “Next time you’re here for a while, I’ll show you. I bet magic would help and I’ll need a tester who doesn’t short-circuit almost everything he touches. Oh, and understands what the fuck I’m talking about.”

“Thor is not as oblivious as he paints himself,” Loki warned but it seemed half-hearted, like his energy wasn’t really in the defence. “He is no prized intellect, but he is an Aesir.”

“As opposed to a mortal?” Tony guessed feeling irritated and vaguely insulted.

Loki waved a hand dismissively. “We have many years more education and start at a more advanced level. It’s natural.”

*So, not an insult.* Tony still wanted to protest a little, but when he considered the standard intellect of most humans and the times that Thor had actually come up with something impressive, Tony had to grudgingly admit that there was a probably a fair point in what Loki had said.

“Whatever,” Tony shelved the discussion for a later date. “If you’re gone longer than a month I’m assuming you’ve played dead again.”

Loki’s smile was full of teeth. “At least you’re not fooled. This arrangement may yet succeed.”

“Babe, I told you I’m not about to disappoint you.”

It took the space of a blink for Loki to appear an inch from his face and Tony startled, barely catching his *fuck* before it slipped out. He was still getting used to teleporting, as well as Loki’s tendency to disregard personal space in an attempt to unbalance him. Loki inched a little closer and while the angle was all wrong, it was still a closeness he’d only ever achieved with someone he was yelling at or planned to kiss. Loki was looking much nearer to the second for Tony’s comfort.

“Well, *darling*,” Loki purred, all mockery layered underneath blatantly false desire. “We must make sure you survive then.”

Tony was very carefully not holding his breath, trying to calculate every micro-expression on the other’s face. He was so focused on Loki’s eyes that he didn’t notice the movement of the mage’s hand until fingers were touching the back of his palm. It wasn’t the touch that startled him, but rather the feeling that came a split-second later and felt not unlike hitting your funny bone as it spasmed up Tony’s arm.

“*Fuck!*” he yelped, not even trying to hold that one in as he jumped back, clutching his hand to his chest even while the ache rapidly faded. Loki was laughing like the sadistic fucker he was. “That better have been *really fucking important!*”

Loki’s mouth was still twitching as he answered demurely, “A ward not unlike your heart-monitors; should you be in true peril over these next few weeks, I will know and attempt to return.”



“Attempt?” Tony asked mulishly while rubbing his hand.

“Should you be near death so short into this arrangement, I’m not certain you would be an ally worth investing in.”

“That is just damn insulting. I’m a fantastic catch, thank you.”

“I suggest then,” Loki told him solemnly and Tony knew the tone that had entered his voice; imperial and final, the little shit. “That you endeavour to survive.”

Tony didn’t even try to open his mouth. He’d discovered early on that trying to keep a teleporter in a conversation he didn’t want to have was impossible; Loki was already turning into sparkles by the time he’d said his last word.

He really hoped Loki had a better communication system planned for them instead of jabbing him with unauthorised magic. He needed to be able to send an irate text or a witty comeback no matter what distant speck of the galaxy Loki had materialised on.

Still, in the grand scheme of things, and of all the irritants that he could have been discovering with a new ally, it was nothing on the Avengers. And maybe he’d just learnt how to deal with people better after spending so long fitting himself in with the Avengers over the years. Because if it wasn't that, it meant that out of all the people in the universe, he naturally fit better with Loki than anyone else he’d ever met on Earth.

## Chapter End Notes

So, basically, Loki is an annoying little shit who finds this whole thing a strange, amusing bonus and he's going to enjoy himself thoroughly.

(I've also vaguely planned the next chapter for Loki's POV too. So that will be fun. XD)

# Chapter 3

## Chapter Notes

Hello! No, I haven't disappeared! I *have* gone back to work though so my time has been constricted. I'm also still trying to finish the (many times mentioned but still not completed FI story I'm working on) *but*, luckily for all you readers, I was inspired to pen the next bit of this!

I'm discovering this story has short chapters. I hope you don't mind, but these guys just seem to like their snapshots. I'll hopefully have another part up... in a while? No promises until my other story is finished and can start being posted. I also have an AU oneshot to finish. It's all just busy, busy.

Anyway, hope you like this part!

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

Loki found the whole thing hilarious.

He'd been happy to rearrange his plans to include the strange mortal's proposition, but despite his own agreement to ally with the Midgardian he hadn't truly believed the other man would actually *sign* the contract. He was pleasantly surprised to discover the many layers that made up Anthony Stark.

He was angry, vengeful, *betrayed*. Oh, yes. Loki was more than willing to facilitate and encourage Stark's bitter actions.

When he'd had the Hawk under his control, Loki had examined each of the Avengers purely for practicality, but it was only without the influence of Thanos and after his escape from Asgard that he'd given them a closer inspection. Stark had quickly become a source of amusement and curiosity to Loki; he was intelligent, brash and preened like the prettiest peacock. He was also crippled by anxiety, insecurities and the weight of his past mistakes. Oddly, it didn't make him weak among others but instead he became strong and confident even while becoming extremely guarded.

Loki found it even more intriguing to experience in person.

Yet despite this, and despite the benefits the partnership could bring to him, Loki's favourite and most desired outcome of the whole alliance was to watch the faces of Thor and his Midgardian heroes as they witnessed their former friend and all his precious technology being signed over to *Loki*.

Oh, it was enough to overlook Stark's mortal status for that alone.

Not that Loki had ever disliked mortals the way Thor (and therefore, most other people he associated with) seemed to think he did. He had just never seen the use of allying or giving time to a race that had such a short period for which they were useful. The Avengers had served a purpose by eradicating Loki's enemies - but now there was Stark.

He was fast becoming far more useful and interesting as a *person* to be so easily discarded. The mortal was almost mad, brilliantly creative and delicious dark. His proposition had also contained enough merit that Loki had been willing to spend the next few months visiting Stark and dissecting his strange little mind. He might even prove worthy enough that Loki would assist him in discarding his mortality. Of course, Stark needed to live long enough to participate in the fight against Thanos. He also needed to impress Loki sufficiently, and that was why Loki had come to Vanaheim.

There was a woman who lived there and made beautiful and intricate jewellery. She was well known for creative show pieces, but few bothered to realise that she was a mage who was extremely skilled at protective wards. She charged a large sum, but Loki had spent many centuries trialling her work and had never found it wanting. Loki had been happy to part with some pilfered gold as well as a spellbook he'd long since memorised to gain matching cuffs that he'd had her design.

She knew better than to speculate or to talk about his purchase with another, so he saw no need to bind her to silence - especially when many of the *specific* uses of the cuffs would be created by himself.

It still took him the better part of a week in hiding and trials before he was ready to return and gift one of them to Stark. Loki was actually looking forward to it. The mortal was always delightful to appear before; he startled more often than not and cursed foully. Loki didn't doubt Stark would grow used to his teleporting soon enough, so he made sure to enjoy it while he could.

The spell he'd placed on Stark, while working as a means of keeping an eye on his health, also allowed him to pinpoint exactly where the mortal was on Midgard. When drafting the contract they had agreed after each meeting on a rough time for him to visit next so that no one would see them and that Stark would be home. He'd taken pleasure in arriving early or late (anything to draw a reaction from the Engineer) and he was hoping that his sudden arrival - sooner than anticipated - would give him something entertaining.

He was quick to narrow his focus on the hum that the spell on the mortal gave off. Loki made certain there was no one around him before concentrating his magic and attention on a point just to the left of Stark's shoulder. He then slid his way through the realms until he could appear beside the unsuspecting man.

He emerged in what he took to be Stark's laboratory, finding the mortal bent over a metal contraption that didn't seem to be a part of his suit. Loki was planning to lean forward, brush the mortal's side with his hand and whisper in his ear, but the other murmured first, "Hello, Loki."

Loki frowned, feeling thoroughly put out as he took a step back so the mortal could turn and smirk smugly at him. "How did you anticipate me?"

Stark pointed at a screen. “It’s faint, but there’s a small spike of power a few seconds before you arrive.” His grin got even wider. “I’ve coded it to let out a very specific sound to warn me you’re about to do your little ‘rabbit from a hat’ trick.”

Leaning close to the figures running across the screen, Loki examined it. He was impressed, privately, but there was no reason to inform the mortal of that. “It took you some time.”

“Pssh,” Tony hissed, “I’m hot shit and you know it!”

Loki made a noncommittal hum while turning away and observing the rest of the room. It was the most *honest* piece of his home that Loki had seen yet. It practically glowed with the man’s energy and passions. A depiction of his mind laid bare in all its chaotic glory for Loki to catalogue. It reminded Loki faintly of his old rooms back on Asgard.

He turned back to the mortal. “Have you spoken with the Avengers in my absence?”

Stark’s smile was sly. “S.H.I.E.L.D.’s tried but I think they’re finally getting the hint that I *let* them hack me before, not anymore.”

“But not your former cohorts?”

“They know better.”

*Ah*, there was the tone he liked to hear; full of dark menace and promise. It had more power and ruthless fury to it than the words that had been levelled at Loki during his invasion of Midgard. *This, Mr Stark, is you **truly** threatening.*

“Good. I had hoped they would not visit you until we had a…” he searched for the appropriate word, “*grander* form of communication.”

Stark’s eyebrows rose. “Planning another performance?”

“We both know they will seek you out soon. They have deigned to give you a period in which to be ‘selfishly angry!’” Stark gritted his teeth. “I propose we introduce our alliance to them when they do return.”

Letting out a laugh and uncoiling, Stark leant back against his desk and observed Loki. “Is that why you’re back early? Vanaheim business finished?”

“The majority was not spent on that realm. I merely needed time to perfect a purchase from there.”

“Oh?” The mortal’s eyes were bright with interest and enthusiasm. “Did you bring me back a souvenir?”

“I have brought you back something far more useful than that.” He raised his hands and twisted them in opposite directions until the two bracelets appeared. One of them maintained its original shape; a gold cuff that twisted elegantly and had carefully laid engravings infused with magic. The second was Stark’s and had been cloaked with an illusion to present one of the leather woven bracelets Midgardian’s found fashionable. “These are identical but for a

spell I've used to make yours appear to be from your world." Stark was bent close, inspecting the jewellery that was floating above the mage's palms with fascination. "This should defuse any questions from your media and other mortals you come in contact with."

"Can a magic user detect it?" Stark asked.

Loki shook his head. "The magic is mostly dormant, they *might* sense something from the illusion but it is likely they'll simply believe it to be a light protection charm."

"So what else does it do?" Stark asked, reaching out and when he wasn't stopped, plucking the two items from the air. "Is the shape of mine just an illusion to the senses or has it actually changed forms? Is it still different underneath?"

"It is different," Loki answered and his eye wanted to twitch and display the discomfort he always felt when he talked about illusions that altered appearances. He had learnt to quell it and he also refused to let Stark see that weakness, nor learn of what inspired it. Odin might have made it difficult and infuriating to work those spells - *how could he have been so blind* - but he refused to let it restrict his magic.

"Can I scan it? Will the original version show up underneath?" Stark seemed to be talking more to himself as his voice dropped and his mutters became inaudible. He also began fiddling with nearby machinery.

Loki let him, but continued explaining the bracelets, expecting the man would be able to work on his devices while listening, "These will allow us to assist the other should we be in any danger-"

"Oh, yeah?" The mortal interrupted, "How am I supposed to help if you're off in the land of the God-Complex?"

Loki's lips thinned, but any glare was lost on Stark who had his back to him. "Should you be in trouble, I will learn of it and teleport to you. Should *I* be in need of assistance this will either let you know and allow you to find me or if I request it, you will be able to activate the magic in these cuffs to teleport me to wherever you reside."

Stark actually turned his head to eye Loki. "It'll teleport you from wherever you are? Even if your magic's bound?"

"I have taken considerable care to make that possible, yes. As long as I activate it and am still among the nine realms; it will bring me to you."

"Huh," Stark hummed. "That's pretty impressive."

Loki smirked. "You may continue to praise me, mortal."

Stark rolled his eyes and muttered under his breath, "*God-complex.*"

"I am a God," Loki intoned with a significant level of warning.

Snorting, Stark answered, “Demi-God, *maybe*, and that’s at a real stretch. I’m talking bungee cord about to break kind of stretching.” He sent Loki a look. “And I’m only giving you that because of the thousands of years of life and hard to kill thing.”

“So would you consider your dear *soldier* a demi-god too?” Loki sniped.

Stark glared at him. “He hasn't been around that long and jury’s out on whether or not he can be *killed*. I’m sure if we shot him in the head or just flat out decapitated him he wouldn’t get back up.”

“Ah,” Loki moved closer so he could lean his back against the metal table, “such a thing would still kill an Aesir and he has not yet been given the chance to learn the length of his life. So does he not deserve that status as well?”

“He’s an exalted human at best,” the mortal snapped. “He’s not anything *godly*.” He looked Loki up and down and admitted, “I’d give *you* that title before I’d give it to him.” Loki was going to press the obvious raw spot further when the Engineer changed the subject. “So what else do these things do?”

Loki shrugged, willing to allow the shift for now. “Not a large amount. They will send a message that one wishes to speak to the other as well as the response from the correspondent.” Sliding nearer, Loki plucked his cuff from Stark. “They will only work when used by one of us and can only be removed by those who put them on. That way,” Loki swiftly removed the leather band from the mortal's hold and with deft fingers attached it to Stark’s wrist, “it cannot be pulled free by anyone who might have captured one of us.”

Stark played with the device with his freehand before Loki covered it. He masked the smirk that wanted to break free as he stroked the bracelet and with it, Stark’s skin, curious to see the mortal’s reaction. Stark went rigid while Loki gently cupped the other’s wrist in a parody of an embrace. “The various functions all have a different series of strokes,” he ran his finger over Stark’s inner-wrist, “and pressure,” he lightly curled a finger under the band and scraped it across skin, “that you will need to memorize.”

“Really?” Stark breathed before his light-fingers were removing the gold cuff from Loki’s hand and snapping it onto Loki’s right wrist. Loki flicked his eyes down to the bracelet and where the mortal was dancing fingers over Loki’s own arm, searching inside the sleeve of his jacket and making small circles against any skin he found. “And how are you going to show me, Loki?” He shuffled closer until they were almost sharing the same breath, “Practical demonstration, I hope?”

Loki couldn’t help his small smile. “My, my, Stark; always so facilitating.”

“You’re about to give me an *intimate* presentation, right?” Stark purred. “So why don’t you call me, *Tony*?” Loki was about to respond when Stark traced the cuff a certain way and the markings Loki had engraved lit up under his touch. “Oooh,” he bent down so he was almost going cross-eyed as he scrutinized the metal. “What did it do?”

“Accepted your touch,” at Stark’s puzzled look, he elaborated; “You placed it on me so it’s prepared to be removed or have the wards inspected.”

Pushing down Loki's sleeve, Tony held his arm up in the air, his eyes bright with the prospect of new knowledge and uncontainable curiosity. Loki had his hand jerked from side to side due to Stark's childish glee while the mortal stood utterly oblivious to the person attached to what had caught his attention. Normally, Loki would have ripped his hand away and verbally eviscerated or violently spelled the person who had dared have the audacity to manhandle him, but somehow Loki found himself staying his hand.

Stark was his ally and couldn't actually harm him - but that wasn't what made Loki resist his instincts. Stark was rambling and theorizing and otherwise babbling ecstatically over something *Loki* had found, manipulated and gifted him with.

Whether he knew it or not, Stark was praising him and whether Loki admitted it to the other or not, he was relishing in it. Loki was willing to allow it to continue, for that.

Stark remained fixated on the cuffs for the next twenty minutes or so, demanding his computer scan both versions and pulling out his tools to tap at them. He brought up holograms and Loki soon found himself wandering the lab and examining everything inquisitively. He would only stop when Stark would come back to his side, taking the cuff on and off as he saw fit.

The bracelet was back on his wrist and Loki was skimming through strategic information Stark's technology had recorded about how the Avenger's fought and trained, when the mortal finally seemed to remember there was a person attached to the cuff. "So how will we know when the other wants us?"

The corner of Loki's mouth quirked into a smile. "I took the liberty of mimicking the preferred Midgardian method." When silence greeted him, he flicked his eyes from the screen to see Stark's confused expression. Dropping his hand to the cuff on his wrist, he played the needed sequence and watched Stark's eyes clear with realisation as he looked down. Loki still elaborated, "It vibrates."

"Hah," Stark laughed, bringing his wrist up to his face. "One of the beads has a green light?"

"Yes," Loki agreed, "for you there are three symbols and the shine will be invisible to any eye but your own and mine. The one that is currently lit up means I wish to speak with you. I will show you how to respond and inform me that you are alone and I may arrive. The one beside it, in the middle, means I am in trouble but do not yet need your assistance. The final one requests that you bring me to you."

"Like an S.O.S texting service?" Stark nodded with thought, not even trying to hide his impressed smile. "That's fucking cool."

"I'm glad you approve," Loki drawled, keeping his own thrill hidden. *How many Aesir would find such a gift enjoyable? How many would scoff and deem it useless and unmanly? Fools. The lot of them.* "Now, I believe you mentioned your own form of communication?"

Stark grinned widely before ducking around a desk and digging in a draw. "I was about ready to throw the whole thing against the wall, but I think I'm starting to work it out; the bracelets have given me another idea to incorporate."

Coming back, Stark put down two phones on the table and Loki didn't try to stifle his chuckle as he picked up the black one that possessed green highlights. Stark's own was as red as his armour with accentuations of gold. Loki was grateful Stark had used some sense of subtlety with his version. "You mentioned wishing to use magic?"

"That's where you're coming in, Gandalf," he gestured Loki over. "Pull up a chair. I think you're going to love this."

Loki was sceptical as he magicked something more comfortable than what Stark possessed into existence - gaining a groan and an '*I didn't mean literally*' from the mortal - but as the Engineer broke open the device and brought up all his current tests and previous models, Loki *did* become interested.

An hour became two became five and despite many arguments, barely any sustenance and his demand for Stark to be awake in eight hours when he returned so that they may finish the items - Stark's assessment had been accurate.

He *had* liked it.

When Loki materialized in his safe house that evening, he spent some time pensively wondering how wise it was that he was so quickly being charmed by someone as short-lived as Anthony Stark, and a former enemy as well. His guard was hardly *down*, he would kill Stark in a moment if the mortal betrayed him... but should the man show himself to be a beneficial ally? Someone who was loyal and appreciative of Loki's talents with magic, words and mischief?

Well. That was something to consider.

Loki always planned for the future, for centuries ahead and with many alternative courses just in case. It might be that Stark could be of use for longer than the battle with Thanos. It was just possible Stark had sustainability.

*Perhaps*, he thought. *I should take some care with this one.*

## Chapter End Notes

I told you this part was feeling like a Loki POV. The story is likely to be predominately Tony's POV but I'll alternate when it feels right. I just wanted to give you a bit of an idea of Loki's headspace as well as his thoughts on Tony and the alliance. I hope you enjoyed! I would love to hear what you think :)



# Chapter 4

## Chapter Notes

Sorry this took a bit longer than I expected to get it posted! I was busy finishing off my next Frostiron story that - with any luck -should have it's first chapter up next Friday! So thanks for being patient with this one!

I have to say that Loki was *such* fun to write in this chapter as was his banter with Tony, I hope you all like it as much as I did :)

Loki was in and out over the next few weeks. They managed to perfect the cell phones and while Tony had spent a lot of time straightening out bugs and marvelling at the pictures and snarky videos he managed to convince Loki to take while he was off world, Loki had also seemed to enjoy it. Sure, he always rolled his eyes and complained about doing it when he got back, but Tony knew he was a fucking liar so he wasn't concerned. Besides, they spent too much time discussing the things Loki let Tony see as well as all the new gadgets and materials that Loki brought back for Tony that he really couldn't take it to heart.

It was a pretty enjoyable system they had going; Loki didn't live with him and refused to stay the night even when Tony offered. Loki was the archetypal stray cat and Tony was more than happy sharing space with someone who was hardly there.

If he maybe got drunk one night and started designing a floor for Loki to stay in and another for his magic use and experiments, well, no one had to know about that other than FRIDAY and himself. If he'd also gone back to it while sober and made further improvements it was just because he was a bit of a perfectionist and didn't like leaving a job unfinished. It wasn't because he wanted to surprise Loki with it when he finally wheedled the prickly demi-god into resting at the tower for a night.

He hadn't even started the construction yet; it was just an amusing pastime, nothing more.

"Boss," FRIDAY called as he fiddled with the blueprints, "I have detected an approaching aircraft."

"*What?*" Tony shifted from his sprawled position on the couch and made his way towards the window.

"It appears to belong to the Avengers."

Tony glared at the approaching black dot. "Do they think they can just *land* on my fucking roof?"

"Shall I deploy countermeasures?"

Tony was tempted, but not only would it be unprovoked fire in a civilian airspace, but he knew that they wouldn't allow him to avoid them forever. "No, let them land; but make my displeasure at their *unannounced* arrival known."

"Yes, Boss."

Turning away from the window, Tony made his way to the bar where he poured himself a small glass of the first bottle he found on hand. He lightly brushed his fingers around Loki's bracelet and let out a huff of amusement at the complete reversal of the situation; different item on his wrist, different enemy at his door.

He made himself move away from the bar with the drink held tight in his grasp. He waited in the centre of the room and in a place FRIDAY could easily protect him from. While he didn't expect a firefight, he definitely anticipated an argument. A part of him was honestly preparing to relish in it.

Tony didn't take a sip of his drink as he watched them land and climb out of the craft. He stayed still and silent with only a small smirk when FRIDAY activated the guns on the roof and pointed them at the unwelcome Avengers.

Rogers spoke a couple of times and so did Romanoff before the guns withdrew and they were allowed to pass. Barton and Thor were also with them but Tony was gratified to see Bruce was still in the wind. Tony had taken great care to keep anyone, especially Fury, from finding his friend. Hell, Bruce was possibly his *only* friend left on Earth and that physically pained him.

He didn't know if Bruce would have sided with the Avengers and he honestly didn't want to find out; both Pepper and Rhodey, in their way, had taken a side that wasn't Tony's. They hadn't done the initial deed but they had 'seen sense in' and 'understood' the decision.

They hadn't seen that treachery was the same taste no matter how you cut it and that admitting their opinion had meant Tony was forced to paint them with the same brush. It meant that had they been in the same place, making the same decision, they *wouldn't* have favoured Tony. The thought made his teeth clench but he forced them open to take his first mouthful of alcohol. Whisky, fabulous.

The doors to the landing pad slid open and Rogers stepped inside, followed dutifully by his little soldiers.

"If it isn't the uninvited guests," Tony greeted them with fake enthusiasm. "I thought I told them to blow up your keys to the place."

He wasn't lying; there was a self-destruct chip in every keycard that was given out for his tower. He'd given FRIDAY the command not long after he'd discovered their duplicity. The small glare from Barton made him think there might have been a few singed feathers at the time. *Good.*

"We know you're upset, Tony," Rogers began, "and we've apologised—"

“No,” Tony cut in, “you’ve *explained your reasoning*. That’s not the same thing; it’s also not a motive I agree with. You made your choice and now you’re not happy with the consequences; tough shit.”

“Stark, you’re behaving like a spoiled child,” Romanoff snapped. “A decision had to be reached and it was the best one for the situation.”

“And deciding not to tell me?”

She shrugged. “You would have opposed from the start and we couldn’t afford the waste of time. This would have occurred whether you were present or not.”

“No,” he stated, “the second I knew I would have made sure it *couldn’t* happen.” He eyed her unflinching countenance. “And you knew it.” He shook his head, a bitter smile on his lips. “Do you think barging in here and lying some more is going to make me *less* inclined to hate you?”

“Tony,” Rogers tried but his voice was quickly drowned out by Thor who stepped forward.

“Friend Tony, it was indeed wrong to keep such matters from you, but it was done with an intention for the greater good.”

“Well,” Tony considered, “I buy that more than anything the spies and soldier have spat out.” Tony paused just long enough to raise Thor and Rogers’ hopes. “*But*, I still don’t care. It doesn’t change a thing. I’m not forgiving any of you.”

He took the steps needed to put his glass on the bar’s counter. It put more space between him and *them* and he was happy with that. When he turned back, he crossed his arms and caught each of their eyes one by one.

“I don’t trust you; I can’t and I won’t. Iron Man will protect the world and if that means fighting on the same part of the battlefield as you, I’ll deal with it, but if you want what we had? You want me as an *Avenger*? Then you’re wasting everyone’s time and especially mine - it’s far more valuable than any of yours.”

“Oh, come on, Tony,” Barton spoke up for the first time, “shit happens, people fuck up. We didn’t set out with a *design* to hurt you and we’re trying to fix it.”

Tony let out a rough laugh. “What makes you think that once isn’t enough? You only need to *die* once for it to stick. You fucked me over and I don’t forgive in the frivolously way you seem to think I do.”

“We made a *mistake*,” Rogers acknowledged, “but the sake of the world is bigger than us.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “I don’t think you actually need to *like* someone to protect the world with them.” He reached out so he could take another mouthful of whisky, this time keeping the glass in hand. “I actually think I can hate you and still save your life too. I’m not unaware that all of you are important to the safety of Earth, I just don’t choose to align myself with traitors.”

“Stark,” Romanoff growled, “this might be a difficult concept but learn to *get over yourself*.” Rogers placed a hand on her shoulder, probably to try and reel her in, but she shoved him off. “I’m sick of your pathetic attempt to appease him, Steve. He can grow up and recognise that the world can’t crumble at his every will.” She turned her dark glare on Tony. “You’ve licked your over-sensitive wounds enough, now deflate your ego and do what’s best for the world you’re so determined to protect.”

He barely kept his response from coming out between gritted teeth. “I can do that just fine from where I am.”

“There is an enemy stronger than anything we’ve ever faced coming. You need allies, Stark. The world, the *universe* needs to be at its strongest; not fighting amongst itself just because you’re unhappy with us.”

“You know,” Tony told them, his voice nothing but anger, “just because stabbing people in their soft and squishy backs has never bothered *you*, doesn’t mean it’s a casual experience for the rest of us.”

The little emotion on her face disappeared and Barton looked between them with a concerned gaze.

“I’ve destroyed more than my share of people; Stark,” Romanoff told him coldly, “what we did to you is *nothing* in comparison.”

“Oh? So you’re telling me there are all new things to look forward to if I come back?”

Rogers groaned. “That’s *not* what we’re saying.” This time Romanoff didn’t shove the Captain’s calming touch away. “What we did can’t be taken back, but we would if we could.”

Romanoff looked away from him and Barton snorted under his breath and Tony knew that even if Rogers’ was telling the truth, the spies sure weren’t budging on their opinion. Thor at least just looked upset about the fracturing team around him. He wasn’t spewing truthless words or trying to explain why he made his decision.

He’d probably never had to do it often on Asgard as the Crown Prince. He probably only ever got the cold shoulder from Loki, so it made sense he’d know that lies or justifications wouldn’t sway his brother. He likely figured the same principle applied to Tony. Loki did say he wasn’t a *complete* imbecile. He’d likely just always expected problems to resolve themselves with minimal effort on his part, and from what Tony had heard, Loki had mostly let it occur that way on Asgard, even if his bitterness had festered underneath Thor’s obliviousness.

Loki had taken out his anger with ever increasing malicious mischief. Tony was more inclined to simply refuse forgiveness in the first place.

Rogers must have taken his silence as some kind of consideration rather than continued irritation as he implored, “We need to work together on this to beat Thanos, Tony. We all need allies.”

He knew they were meant to wait, that it wasn't on the cards to reveal even the slightest ace yet, but the Avengers had shown up earlier than anticipated - and not only was Tony impulsive but he was *extremely* pissed off. "I already have an ally."

Rogers sighed like he was humouring him and Tony's eye twitched. "FRIDAY doesn't count, Tony."

"Or your other metal extensions," Barton added; referring to the Iron Legion that FRIDAY now controlled. "You need a *person*."

"You need someone who can't be taken out at the same time as you," Romanoff muttered before Rogers chimed in with, "You need a *team*."

"I don't want a *team*," Tony hissed. "I have the only person worth having on my side. Why would I *downgrade* and take *you* back?"

Thor took a step forward, believing him while the other's still seemed sceptical. "Who is this ally? Who would you give such favour to?"

Tony finally felt something other than seething fury in their presence; he felt *enjoyment* as he lifted his arm so it was in front of him. He then brought his hand to the bracelet, holding their confused expressions as he pressed the rune he needed.

He wondered, briefly, if Loki would take the time to respond to the call - he sometimes didn't - but it either seemed luck was on his side or Loki wasn't as oblivious to what was happening around Tony as he sometimes made out. Tony knew he'd had an eye on the Avengers; he'd probably been waiting for Tony's request the entire time.

When he appeared it was in the ostentatious green and gold lightshow he preferred. He was leaning back comfortably on the couch and although he was facing the Avengers his head was turned to give Tony his attention. Tony doubted much of it was away from the others though.

"You called?" he enquired.

"*Loki!*" Thor shouted at the same moment Barton and Romanoff raised their weapons.

Tony felt *great* satisfaction when his defence systems sprung from the ground and threatened the Avengers at close range without him even prompting it; allies got protected in *his* tower.

Tony didn't even try to hide his smile or the smugness from his voice as he asked Loki, "Drink?"

"Yes, thank you, Anthony."

"What the *fuck* is going on?" Barton demanded.

Tony looked up from where he'd been grabbing things from behind the bar. "Loki, former allies," he gestured in a vague parody of introduction, "Former allies, Loki; my current ally."

“*Him?!?*” Barton growled, staring past the machine gun that was an inch from his nose to glare at Tony who just shrugged.

“He’s cleared from most of his charges.” Tony made his way over to Loki and handed him the glass, taking a seat beside the demi-god who was radiating amusement. “He’s also *very* upfront about what he thinks about me and my decisions.” He glanced between the fuming and shocked Avengers and the arrogant bastard beside him. “Yeah, I’m not shopping for any more allies. I already have the best version.”

“Oh, do go on, Anthony,” Loki purred, “I greatly enjoy being superior to Thor. I always have been, of course, but it’s nice to be recognized for this fact.”

“Leagues ahead,” Tony agreed. “Magic, intelligence, mischief *and* anti back-stabbing; what more could you want?”

Rogers didn’t seem to agree. “Have you lost your *mind*, Stark? This is *Loki*.”

“Yes, I’m aware.” Tony took a drink and grinned around the glass when Loki matched the gesture. “Did you know he actually came to convince me to join back with you?”

“Oh, yes,” Loki agreed, “I must truly thank you, Avengers, for whatever action caused such displeasure in Anthony. I had not known my appearance here could make his mind turn in such a delicious way.”

“You suggested the partnership,” Romanoff discerned, watching Tony like she wished she had a clear shot for shooting him.

Tony nodded. “You were right about one thing I *did* need allies.” He turned to Loki and raised his glass in a toast that Loki happily accepted, his eyes dancing with mischief and laughter. He turned back to the Avengers. “Now I have the *one* person in the universe that’s outsmarted Thanos, the guy who knows or can find out all the possible secrets I could want about him and his movements. Yeah, I definitely needed a *good* ally.”

“And I am sure Anthony will use the gifts I have bestowed on him with the *best* thought to your planet in mind,” Loki added and Tony could just *see* the worry and possibilities flooding their minds.

“Why would you do this, brother?” Thor commanded. “Why ally yourself to such a mortal?”

Loki raised his eyebrows. “Was he not a man you coveted to have returned? Do you dismiss him so easily now that you know he is mine?”

“That is not what I say!” Thor argued.

“No,” Loki’s eyes turned cold. “You ask questions of us that you have no right to know.” His voice suddenly altered, echoing around the room as his eyes glowed the green of his magic. “But you may tell the realms Thor, and the Allfather himself, that Anthony Stark has chosen to be my ally and I have accepted the terms thus laid out.”

Thor’s eyes had progressively widened. “He convinced you to sign this?”

Loki laughed, loud and wicked and with his head thrown back; he radiated self-satisfaction and Tony knew he wasn't doing much better. "The line of those who have practiced disloyalty against us is far too long to list. Why do you think Thor that I would find such an intelligent mortal beneath my time? He stopped my campaign on this world, *he* supported your pitiful band and now he supports and fights for *me*." He grinned like the slightly crazed man he still was. "I have won the prize you dared to lose. I do not intend to be so careless with my winnings."

"He's a *person* not a *crown*," Rogers snapped, missing so much of the point it was laughable.

"Oh, don't try and stand up for me now," Tony still warned, a hint of irritation having formed, "we're way past that."

"So you're just going to sit there and let him talk about you like an *object*?"

Tony shrugged. "A valued item in his collection is better than a trampled one in yours."

"And I would hardly call him an object, Captain Rogers," Loki replied, "such a thing implies a limited or even scenic use; but I see why you might come to such a conclusion, using him how you have." Rogers spluttered with outrage and it was a beautiful thing to see. "I intend to work with Anthony Stark as one should when they wish to get the benefits of his loyalty."

Romanoff took the bait and asked the question he'd obviously paused to inspire. "What do you plan to do?"

Loki's cunning green eyes flicked to Tony and he took it as the cue it was. "That, Agent Romanoff, is not something you have any right to ask me anymore. We're not allies, we're not friends; consider this a formal warning; *we* don't take well to trespassers."

They hadn't planned it, but fuck was it *gorgeous* that with a wave of Loki's hand he sent them and their jet away in a swirl of magic; evicting them from the tower and making it quite clear once and for all that Tony Stark wasn't crawling back into their clutches.

Tony Stark had found a new person to line up beside and Loki wasn't the kind to let *anyone* tell him what he or his ally, should or shouldn't do.

"Oh, that was *perfect*," Tony praised him, shifting on the couch to face Loki directly.

The mage was smirking and glowing with the pleasure of a production well done. "Yes, I do believe it was."

"Oh, this calls for a celebration; ever had champagne and pasta? I can order us the best stuff and then we'll eat it while we watch their reactions again. FRIDAY you better have recorded that."

"Yes, Boss," she answered him and Tony turned back to Loki.

"Well? What do you say? Dinner and a show?"

Loki chuckled again, his eyes bright with the same glee that was on Tony's face. "I believe I would enjoy that."

"Excellent," Tony answered, feeling the kind of light-headed giddiness that usually came after he'd finished another breakthrough invention.

It was the kind of rush that came from free-falling in the suit or spinning out a car and stopping himself just before he crashed. It was adrenaline-fuelled victory and Tony couldn't believe how much better it felt with an equally devilish partner by his side, loving every second of it with him.



# Chapter 5

## Chapter Notes

I am not going to lie, I *struggled* with this chapter. It kept stalling and being difficult to get out. I was hoping to post this on Sunday but it took me three extra days to actually wrap up the damn thing, lol. If it's any consolation though, this ended up much longer than the previous chapters. They're usually about 3K and this ended up around 5K, so there is that.

But I'm still sorry for the wait! I'm going to try and get a chapter up every two weeks or so from now on. So wish me luck with that :|

But thank you for everyone who comments, leaves kudos and bookmarks/subscribes to this story; you keep me inspired to create more! You're all fabulous creatures!

It didn't take very long for word to get around that Tony had a new ally; the fact that it took Pepper only three hours to show up was a little surprising even to him. Tony had sworn she was in Tokyo the last time he'd checked.

Well, not that he was following her movements too closely anymore. He only really cared when FRIDAY saw her cavorting with S.H.I.E.L.D. or planning to burst into the tower to talk to him.

Whenever that happened it meant that he'd have to prepare for another argument on the Avengers behalf. It meant grinding his teeth and trying not to yell at her and strain their fracturing friendship any further. Tony didn't want to lose her. She'd represented so much good in his life and had been beside him for almost as long as Rhodey. Tony still loved her even if he wasn't *in* love with her.

It was that desperate desire to have her understand his side and *not theirs*, the longing to keep her in his life, and the hope that the rift could be mended between them that kept Tony from withdrawing her unquestioned access to Stark Tower.

He was somewhat regretting that now.

Tony had spent the last few hours introducing Loki to champagne as they watched the playback of the Avengers shock from multiple angles. It had soon divulged into the differences between recordings on Earth and the ways that a mage had to watch others.

The theory behind it had been fascinating and the practical applications of combining the two just as intriguing. They'd ended up leaning over a table that Loki had transfigured out of his sofa; the champagne bottle sitting by their feet and being levitated up by Loki when they

wanted refills. Tony had already made five jokes about his overuse of magic, two about being thrown through the glass behind them on their first encounter and one about his alcohol tolerance.

Loki, in return, was making impressively subtle jabs about Tony's tower, his overcompensation and his limited sexual prowess. He'd offered to flash Loki proof that he was more than capable in that arena, but the demi-god had turned him down. Pity, really. The shock on his face at the suggestion had been nice though.

Tony had been in the process of making a recommendation to their design and complaining about Loki's insistence to write in *Norse fucking Runes* - Tony had needed FRIDAY to project a screen so that he had a continual source for translation, much to Loki's amusement - when the elevator had opened. Tony hadn't heard it initially but Loki had tensed and turned to look in the direction. He'd been starting to ask what was wrong when familiar heels on the floor were followed by Pepper's furious voice. "*Anthony Edward Stark!*"

It was long engrained for Tony to wince at hearing Pepper raise her voice like that, but it *wasn't* in him at the moment to try and make her happy. He pushed up from his half-sprawl on the table and shifted his feet slightly so that he had a better range of movement for when she rounded the corner.

She froze when she did and her eyes instantly focused on Loki who was watching her and Tony curiously.

Pepper's hand went to her chest and to the necklace that Tony had made her a few years ago. It was oblong in shape and looked like nothing more than a white gold pendant incrustated with diamonds - which it *was* but it was also detachable and possessed a small but powerful laser. He'd wanted her to have something that could protect her if she was ever in trouble. It actually made Tony wonder how well the device would work against Loki's skin and armour. He wasn't planning to put Pepper in a position where she was inclined to find out, but he'd have to run the test by Loki later.

"Pepper," Tony greeted her, shifting carefully so that he was covering Loki a little more, "I thought you weren't visiting me again? I'm sure you shouted about not coming back until I was ready to listen to your latest Avenger-based plea."

Tony knew Loki's magic shields would be far more effective than an unarmoured mortal at stopping the weapon, but Loki didn't know what the necklace could do. Pepper did and Tony could see her eyes crinkling with frustration and worry at no longer having a direct line to her target. Of course, it could have also been the fact he was with Loki, period.

"Can I speak with you in private, Tony?" Pepper requested, her voice clipped and carefully controlled despite the obvious terror in her eyes about Loki's presence.

Tony just shook his head. "Nah, you can talk in front of Loki. He's going to be the subject of conversation, isn't he? Do you want a drink?" Tony pointed at their feet and Loki hovered the champagne into view. "We were celebrating. Maybe a beverage will relax you? I don't like colleagues injuring each other in my house, you know."

He looked pointedly at her necklace but she didn't remove her hand from it. "Natasha told me you'd allied yourself to Loki. I didn't believe it. I know you do a lot of outrageous things Tony, but *this*?"

She hissed the last word, showing everything negative in her tone but nothing in an outright accusation that Loki could rebut against. Not that Tony doubted he understood *exactly* what she wasn't saying. It didn't take years of knowing the slightest warble in a voice or the smallest facial tic to be able to tell how *blatantly* she disapproved of the demi-god. It was also fairly obvious she had doubts to Tony's mental health, but, then again, if you asked most people that had always been in question.

"What's wrong with partnering up with him?" Tony questioned, gesturing grandly at the other. If you were going to sell an obscure idea, it was best to do it with flair and confidence. Pepper could see right through him if he was lying, so it was a good thing he actually *believed* in his alliance with Loki. "He's no more likely to go insane than any of the super-powered humans I was teaming up with before."

"Tony," she hissed.

Loki even chimed in with a smirk. "I don't believe you're making a good case for yourself." Looking over his shoulder, Tony found the Mischief God with his champagne flute an inch from his entertained smile. "I believe your friend would contest that I have already lost my sanity."

"Eh," Tony waved his hand dismissively. "You misplaced it, you got it back. You're more likely to have a firmer grip of it now than, oh say, the man out of time?" Loki's grin deepened in a way that Tony knew meant he was holding in a laugh. Tony turned back to Pepper who was noticeably fuming. "Pep, where's the faith?"

Pepper's eyes cut to Loki and her words were a biting, beautiful, backhanded insult. Tony was almost tempted to give her a golf clap. "I don't believe the overinflated exaggerations from an alien's misspent past actually forms a worthwhile candidate for *divine pledging*."

Loki actually laughed. "How interesting and oh so very bold." He was watching her like a hawk despite his teasing demeanour. "You must of course realise that not all faith is blind or based on scripture?"

"Yes," her gaze flew back to Tony, hurt and confused and with every intention of trying to form guilty wounds in Tony's chest. Thankfully, all it did was make him feel regret that they were so close, but so estranged. "Some is based on *trust*."

"Trust," Tony cleared his throat. "Right." He also picked up his glass and finished the last of the alcohol in it. He wasn't unaware of Loki taking note of that reaction, but he pretended to ignore it. "Like the kind of trust you *obviously* have for me? What with siding with the Avengers, not believing my anger was justified, and trying to change my decision? Not to mention your certainty, *again*, that I'm in the wrong for siding with Loki?"

"You're siding with the man who led the Invasion of New York!" Pepper argued, "I'm supposed to hear this and believe you have everything well in hand? That you're of sound

mind?”

“I’m sorry; did you or did you not welcome Bucky Barnes into the group with open arms?”

“That’s different.”

“FRIDAY, play me the appropriate gameshow buzzer?” Pepper sent him a withering look when his A.I. complied. Tony didn’t give a fuck. “That would be a wrong answer, by the way.” He held out one hand, “Coerced, forced and a confused puppet.” He raised the other and also wiggled his fingers in Loki’s direction. “Coerced, forced and a pissed off puppet.” He made the up and down gestures of a scale. “I’m not seeing a *whole* lot of differences. Also, both have been cleared of their charges towards Earth.”

“What about *other* worlds,” Pepper demanded, and god damn Romanoff and Thor for ever hinting about his past anywhere near Pepper. “This isn’t the only world that he-”

“Yeah, no,” Tony interrupted quickly. “We don’t talk about that.”

While he was personally curious to find out more about the whole shit-storm that was Thor’s coronation, the Jotun thing and any other 'other world' stories, Tony also knew that if you wanted Loki to stonewall a conversation that was the best way to do it. He also didn't trust Thor to be impartial in his story telling.

“You can’t just-”

“Such topics,” Loki insisted, much more politely than Tony had expected, “have no bearing on your world. My contract with Anthony has been drafted to defend the universe, and more specifically, your pocket of it. If Anthony has no objections to my, at times, disreputable past, I do not believe you have a right to contest them. *I* am not allying with *you*.”

Pepper actually stepped forward and her hands were back at her sides and away from the pendant. Her eyes were clear of emotion and had the narrowed focus that made her such a good CEO. “I want to see this contract.”

Loki’s eyebrows shot up but Tony wasn’t surprised, it had really only been a matter of time.

“I thought you would be getting bored of paperwork by now,” Tony drawled while watching Pepper’s eyes as they skimmed the information on the table. Her movements had placed her near enough to make out the words but they didn’t seem to be comforting to her. She was probably reading all kinds of world domination plans in Loki’s perfectly scrawled Norse Runes. Tony exchanged a glance with Loki, well aware that the demi-god was only humouring Pepper’s presence for his benefit.

When he turned back to her, Tony had to call for her attention sharply, “*Pepper.*”

She jerked her head up, but to her credit, Pepper didn’t hesitate, she just insisted again. “I want to see that contract.”

“Pep-”

“You’re still contractually bound to Stark Industries. I am within my rights to see if-”

“*Pepper*,” Tony sighed. “Are you really going to play that game? With me? We’ve really moved *that* far apart?”

She pursed her lips, but her eyes told a different story; her mouth was trying to remain angry and stern, but her eyes were just as upset and helpless as Tony felt. There was a divide between them that neither quite knew how to surmount. All they seemed to be doing was making the gulf grow even bigger.

Tony sighed. “FRIDAY, bring up the document.”

“Anthony-” Loki warned, but Tony didn’t look away from Pepper.

“You can read this on one condition.”

“Which is?”

“You won’t be able to speak of or discuss the contents of it in any way, shape or form unless with myself or Loki. You won’t be able to intentionally or accidentally divulge any details to anyone or anything.”

Pepper wasn’t dumb; she’d have never lasted with him if she was. “He’s going to do something to me.”

Loki had relaxed again and was refilling his glass with a casual display of magic. “A simple spell; you will feel little more than a slight humming underneath your skin.”

“You expect me to trust him?” Pepper demanded.

“Not really. I’m mostly asking you to trust *me*.” Tony shrugged, but there was a bitterness to his voice that he couldn’t hide. “Hard to do, I know. But what’s worse? Knowing or not knowing? It’s your choice, Pep, and it’s the only chance you’ll get.”

Pepper was silent as she considered. She eyed Tony for a good minute before giving Loki the same treatment. She then moved her gaze over the room. It made him wonder what she was thinking; there were the empty plates from their late lunch, the champagne they were still using, and a level of comfort between the two of them that Pepper would know was uncommon for him. He didn’t let a lot of people into his space, and it was even rarer for it to be so quickly. Yet there was Loki.

Tony knew that the examination, the account from Natasha and her own history with Tony was going to create all kinds of conclusions. She’d probably half expected to find them both naked. He didn’t know if the fact they *weren’t* having sex would be in his favour or not. He’d been wrong the first time about who she’d choose to side with and now Tony had no idea where to place a bet. He didn’t even know *which* option he wanted her to take; there were too many motives, too many outside forces. Pepper could read the contract so that she could try and pass on a message to the Avengers. She could also read it because she cared about him

and wanted to make sure he was safe. A refusal was just as rife with possibilities, because one way or another *he* couldn't trust *her* anymore.

That knowledge only made a place in his heart grow that little bit colder.

But he was drawn back from it; from the ache in his chest and the memory of her betrayal by a hand on his wrist. He startled slightly and looked down at where Loki had placed his fingers; they were just over the bracelet and lightly brushing his skin. He was leaning over the table to take Tony's empty glass and Tony watched with a small furrow to his brow as Loki *manually* poured him more champagne. The bottle had been almost empty before but it seemed Loki had either conjured another or re-filled the current one.

And he'd done that after *deliberately* drawing Tony back from his mind and its darker turns.

"Did you just magic more alcohol into existence?" Tony asked in order to completely ignore the rest of what might have just happened.

"Do you intend to complain?"

Tony grinned. "Hell no." He took the offered flute, hoping his eyes showed his gratitude for the unacknowledged gesture. Loki didn't give any indication it had, completely aloof and focused on his own drink as if the situation around him was inconsequential. He was good at that. Tony hid his smirk and focused back on Pepper who was watching them carefully. "So, what's the verdict, Sophie's Choice?"

She didn't even hesitate and informed him once again, "I want to read the contract."

Reaching out, Tony grabbed the hologram that FRIDAY had created and held it like a tablet. "Loki?"

The demi-god had gone back to writing on the designs with nothing more than the pressure of his finger. It wasn't unlike a touch-screen only it was on *paper* and they glowed green behind him like he was bleeding ink onto the page. Tony both hated all the ways he flaunted his magic and loved all the things he could enquire about and have Loki explain.

Loki kept one hand on his glass while the other stopped writing. He drew it only a few inches from the table and twisted his wrist and fingers in a few complicated gestures that made Tony blink. He also found the memory of it blurry and hard to focus on when he ran it back. Pepper looked equally frustrated by whatever had happened. Loki just brought his hand back down and resumed writing. "It's done. She may read it now."

Tony didn't hesitate; he just passed over the hologram. Pepper practically snatched it from him and began devouring the contract. He knew she was a fast reader - especially when it came to legal documents - but the damn thing was *long* and had a lot of trick-phrases in it that meant more than one thing. He didn't think she'd take less than half an hour to be happy with her understanding of it.

He decided to leave her to it and turned to Loki instead. Leaning his hip on the table, he asked, "So fess up. How come I can't remember exactly what you did?" Tony saw Loki's

mouth twitch and when Loki moved his hand and scratched out another serious of runes, Tony knew enough already to be able to read the word. *Mischief*. “You are such an asshole,” Tony told him. “But,” because damn it all, it only made him *more* curious. “*How?*”

Loki shifted to better face him. “Sleight of hand, Anthony. Surely your Midgardian magicians are fond of this practice?”

“Oh, please,” Tony scoffed. “This isn’t just slipping a card up your sleeve; this is the warping of memory. Or are you going to pull ‘magicians don’t reveal their secrets’ on me?”

“Well, one doesn’t want another to know how to anticipate their spells.” He made a small motion that made Tony glance at Pepper who was still reading; completely oblivious to their conversation. “Subterfuge is well used by mages across all the realms.”

Tony was tempted to shout and see if Pepper reacted. He refrained but he was *definitely* going to ask about that silencing spell later. For now. “I don’t buy for a *second* that you consider back alley wand wavers of Earth as *your* level of mage.”

Loki chuckled softly. “No, but I am always fond of Tricksters; magically gifted or not.”

“You’re re-routing my question.”

“How observant.”

“So you’re not going to tell me?”

Loki raised his eyebrows. “Did you not already come to the correct conclusion?”

It took Tony a second to twig to it and when he did, he groaned a little. “Magicians don’t reveal their secrets? *Really?*”

“You are only my ally for a limited time, Anthony. Do you truly think me ignorant of the knowledge that we will *both* withhold information from the other?”

“We can’t betray each other,” Tony pointed out.

Loki hummed. “Until the contract ends, you’re quite right. We will, however, retain all knowledge gained during it.” He shot Tony a careful look. “How much can you expect me to entrust? How much will *you*? I spent millennia as the dutiful brother of Thor and even *he* only knows what I have allowed him to see.”

Tony frowned, noticing for the first time just what the contract had left them open to. He hadn’t truly considered it to be a threat when drafting their alliance. They were going to be working in close quarters and sharing information was going to be natural. They couldn’t betray each other and if they *did* decide to render the agreement void, just how likely were they to go back to being enemies?

It was only the early days but Tony couldn’t see himself using what he’d learnt about Loki against him. It would be a smack in the face of everything he despised. It would be no better than what the Avengers had done to him.

Loki though, had probably had people spit in his face like that all his life. How was he going to trust Tony's word on the subject? Frankly, he couldn't.

"That makes sense," Tony agreed and Loki turned back to the plans, obviously dismissing the conversation but Tony wasn't done. "Bind us like you did Pepper." Loki snapped his head around and just stared at Tony. "What? Did I stop speaking English?"

Loki shook his head slowly. "It would not affect me if you had."

"Really?" Tony was instantly intrigued. "Is there anything that doesn't work on?"

But Loki waved his hand, ignoring the question. "You would let me bind you as I did your companion?"

"Bind *us*." Tony corrected, "Yeah. Why not? It's a pretty foolproof system, right?"

"It is."

Tony could hear the unspoken word and put down his champagne. He drew attention to that hesitation by saying what they were both hearing. "*But?*"

"No," Loki disagreed, "there is no true downside. I cannot betray you by crafting a spell that does something other than what you believe or by excluding myself. The spell will be what you requested and will function as it does on your associate."

Tony could still see something niggling at Loki. He looked almost *unnerved* by the very idea. "Okay, so what's the issue? Come to think of it, why didn't you bring it up before? Why not make it part of the contract?"

Loki's face went carefully blank. "People aren't known to agree to it."

"Why?" Tony didn't even try to hide his incredulity. "Who wouldn't want further safeguards?"

"Those who do not trust each other?" Loki suggested, smirking a little self-deprecating. "Even those who trust a contract won't necessarily trust *me*. They will keep their own counsel rather than accept another layer that ties them to myself."

"So they'll just shut up about the important things and wait for the day when they assume they'll need to fight you?"

"Can you honestly say, Anthony, that it's not a plan you have in the back of your mind? That you are not already preparing yourself for our eventual opposition?" Loki shook his head. "We, of all people, do not give our trust implicitly."

Tony snorted, he couldn't help it. "I think you're forgetting a really important part." Loki's eyebrows rose; his expression was openly daring Tony to prove him wrong. "Loki, I'm going to be dead in fifty years." The demi-god blinked. "Anything I could *possibly* gain on you will be useless once I'm dust and bones. You bind me in this and you eliminate anyone finding out anything I could conceivably discover about you and share. I personally don't see myself



siding against you even when the contract's over." Tony grinned. "You're far too powerful for me to ever want to piss off."

"And what if I anger *you*?" Loki questioned, but it seemed like a token protest. He was already re-evaluating, Tony could tell; he'd straightened up and his eyes had narrowed, flickering with each possibility he was envisioning.

"You could just avoid doing something that would antagonise me? Dust and bones, Loki. You're a patient guy. What's a few decades to an almost immortal?" The expression Loki made could only be described as '*huh*'. The surprised realisation coming off him was almost palpable. "So what do you say?" Tony made a gesture with his fingers. "Let's set this confidentiality agreement up."

Loki's mouth spread into a small grin before his fingers did the same dance as before and Tony felt the humming sensation Loki had warned Pepper of. "The same now applies as what you spoke of with," he nodded, "her."

Tony glanced over his shoulder following Loki's gesture towards Pepper and FRIDAY helpfully displayed a page counter behind her head without his prompting. She was almost finished the document and Tony knew they'd have to wrap up what they were talking about if they wanted to avoid her finding out about the latest negotiation between them.

He turned back to speak to the other but stalled when he saw Loki writing again. It wasn't the action it was the *lack* of blurred remembrance. "You let me keep it."

Loki's smile wasn't quite hidden by the curve of his neck. "Come now, Anthony. How can I perform my show if my ally does not know at least *some* of my repertoire?"

The flare of warmth at the trust overtook him suddenly, but Tony didn't even try to shove it aside. It was *nice*. It was fucking *rare*. Tony was going to damn well enjoy it.

Well, he would have, if the feeling wasn't drowned out by Pepper calling him. The sound of it made him flinch; it was like someone had just popped a bubble that had enclosed him and Loki. Tony felt overwhelmingly *irritated* at having their conversation end prematurely.

"I still don't like this," she told him first and foremost and Tony was about to reply, '*I didn't exactly ask your opinion*' but she intercepted him, sounding sad and world-weary and making most of his annoyance drain away. "And I know you don't actually care."

She placed the hologram on the table and Tony felt a twinge. Did she think he wouldn't accept it from her? That she'd been distanced *that* much from him? Tony was actually worried to realise he didn't *know*. He was startled to understand that he accepted items from *Loki* without a thought but he couldn't be sure it would be the same with Pepper.

"Just promise me you'll be careful, Tony?" She flicked her eyes to Loki before coming back to him. "*Promise me.*"

Tony smiled, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. "I learnt to be careful, Pep. That's why I make them sign paperwork now."

Pepper's eyes fell and her mouth was pinched. Tony knew she wanted to argue on the Avengers behalf, but she knew it would fall on deaf ears and end in them yelling at each other - again. "I'll leave you to your alliance." She didn't meet his gaze when she looked up. "I require at least one week's warning before this is broken to the public, Mr Stark."

"I'll do my best, Miss Potts." She *did* look at him then but he halted any protests. "Life and death battles, Pepper. I don't know when he's going to need to teleport in to save my life."

Pepper grimaced; worry, frustration, and the falling of the company's stocks on her mind. "As much advanced warning as possible, Tony. He's still a public enemy."

"Yeah," Tony shifted his attention, looking Loki up and down. "I'm going to work on that."

Loki shot him an intrigued glance. "That should be an interesting endeavour."

"Oh, you'll be plenty involved in it."

"*Warning*," Pepper interjected. "FRIDAY, please ensure it happens."

"Mr Stark?" His A.I. sought confirmation and Tony tried not to notice the way Pepper closed her eyes in pain.

Tony nodded. "Sure. Remind me to do that."

"Keep me updated," Pepper told him, all business and with any hurt locked up tight behind her professionalism. "I'm going to discuss this with you in more depth at a more suitable time."

*When Loki isn't here and I can shout at you more*, Tony translated. He knew it was too good to be true that she'd just read the contract and leave it alone. She didn't wait for anything further from him though as she turned on her heel and left.

They stayed silent until her heels were no longer audible and the elevator had departed. Loki was the one to break it. "She is close to you."

What was the point of avoiding it?

"Ex-assistant, now CEO, ex-girlfriend. now strained friendship."

"Hmm," Loki pushed away from the table. "I should be leaving."

Tony narrowed his eyes. "Is that your attempt at running away from an awkward moment?"

"I remained so she could not speak as candidly as she wished to. I should have left many hours ago. There are things I must attend to now that Thor and Asgard are aware of our alliance."

"The voice thing." Loki had mentioned it to him during their second re-watch of the confrontation. The words he'd recited had apparently echoed into the ears of the 'all-seeing-one' and now everyone and his brother was going to know about what they'd done.

Loki's mouth curved as if he knew what Tony was thinking – or maybe he was just remembering some of the commentary Tony had given at the time. "I am shrouded again but your tower will only remain as such while I am present."

"Oooh so I can enjoy the biggest voyeur in the Galaxy peaking in once you're gone?"

"I'm sure he will lose interest when he knows I'm no longer here."

Tony's eyebrows went up. "Got a crush on you, has he?"

"A grudge," Loki corrected, but the scrunch of his nose showed the disgust he felt at the suggestion.

Taking his champagne, Tony had another drink. "I'm guessing there are a lot of people who have one of those for you."

"Innumerable."

"Oh good, I'd hate for this alliance to only have boring baggage."

Loki smirk was barely containing his delight at the banter. "I have enjoyed our afternoon. Do try to keep alive in my absence, mortal."

"Oi!" Tony attempted to protest by the mage was disappearing with light chuckles that echoed long after he'd departed. Tony was shaking his head at the empty space. He was tempted to text something back at Loki, but that would mean looking harder at the other's response. It wasn't good to stare at it and come up with descriptions like 'fond' and 'teasing' and maybe even a little bit of concern for Tony's wellbeing.

After all, Tony knew they were both suspicious assholes who didn't care about anyone except themselves.

That was why he was designing Loki two floors to call his own at Stark Tower. Because who wanted a space voyeur looking in? Who *didn't* want their firepower living close by?

Friendship? Affection? Trust?

The reason that they got along so well was because neither of them believed in those things anymore.

# Chapter 6

## Chapter Notes

I have a wif-fi hotspot! Fuck yes, glorious internet via laptop, how I *adore* you. I also adore posting gay fanfic in public ;)

But hehe, on another note, we have a second Loki POV chapter! I'm very interested to see what you guys think, buuuut as I have only limited time, I better make this quick. Enjoy!

Oh, but **warning for some Homophobia and mentions of past homophobic actions.**

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

Loki had used the initial teleportation to arrive just outside his latest abode. It was simple but it was hidden, and that was the most important thing to him at the moment. Thanos was still after his head and there were numerous other beings he'd agitated over the years that would gladly kill him if given the chance. The security of Asgard - even just their golden prisons - was lost to him now. He didn't even have the convenient shroud of death, what with Odin having announced his life to the universe. Loki had been left with little to do but mask himself in shadows and shift his location frequently.

It was a frustrating situation, but it was all he could manage until, at the very least, Thanos was no longer living. It was Anthony Stark's home that provided him with a relaxing alternative to his constant vigilance. He didn't think the mortal had realised how much the defences of his tower and the safety of their contract allowed Loki to unwind. Midgard was also distant from the realms and highly protected. Very few would have the confidence or stupidity to search for him there.

Anthony did him a great service - not that Loki had any intention of letting the other find out. He was still well aware that Anthony wouldn't take long to puzzle the reasons behind it regardless.

The knowledge of the mortal's intellect brought faint exasperation but it also formed the beginning of something *fond*. It had been a long time since Loki had found someone he genuinely *liked* let alone someone he could actually have at his side. There was a part of him that wanted to resist their growing camaraderie. He knew the lifespan of mortals, as well as the time-limit on his contract with this one, yet Loki still hesitated to reign in his growing enjoyment of the other's company.

Afterall, what were lives and deals if not to be extended? Loki would hardly sever a connection before it could fully flourish; it would be a waste of a good opportunity. He had

found his mind turning to that idea more frequently as the days had passed. Loki wasn't convinced enough to act on it, but it did fill his more pensive moments.

Still, it was for another time. He had more important things to focus on currently.

Loki gave the room he was in a onceover, sighing lightly at yet one more useless residence. He made a gesture and activated the spells he'd scratched into the walls, the same magic he carved into any place he resided in for longer than two days. They were very simple in design and sent any items inside their radius to a location designated by the caster - in Loki's case, it sent them to his next nominated safe house.

It took the matter of moments, and once the last of the spell's energies had cleared the room, he did one final sweep until he was satisfied nothing had been missed. When he was finished, Loki threw up an illusion of all the items he'd just removed. He'd been feeling the pull of Heimdall's eye since he'd left Midgard as the Aesir attempted to locate him. Why he continued such a futile effort, Loki didn't know. Stubborn resolve, he supposed, it was unfortunately common to the point of idiocy among Asgard's populace.

Making his way over to what passed as his front door - but was actually a magically formed tear in the rock - Loki pulled down one more of his shields and waited.

It took less than a heartbeat for Heimdall to establish Loki's whereabouts and snap the Bifrost down outside his dwelling. He supposed Thor was more desperate than he thought to have never even left Heimdall's side as Asgard's guardian had searched.

Thor hit the ground running, charging at Loki with a snarl on his face and fury in his eyes. It was really far too easy to let him catapult through an illusion.

The same response he'd delivered on Midgard was on the tip of his tongue, but Thor surprised him. The Aesir shifted halfway through his collision with the clone. It was a pre-planned motion to change his course to the place where Loki was actually hiding. Loki's eyes widened and he barely had enough time to spin to the side and stop Thor pinning him to the wall.

Thor growled at his lack of success. His hands pressed against the stone he'd only just stopped himself from colliding with. He then glared over his shoulder at Loki's relaxed form.

"My, my," Loki commented, "the Midgardians are having such an effect on you. I must wonder, was it Anthony who finally drilled how to look past my illusions into your skull?"

"It is not only *your* mortal who knows such things," Thor refuted.

Loki's eyebrows rose. "*My* mortal? Truly, Thor, how do you keep their regard when you treat them as mere objects?"

"You twist my words!" Thor snapped, facing him directly and grasping Mjolnir. He raised it threateningly and Loki held his hands up innocently. Thor was hardly fooled. "Loki. I come to know your intentions for Anthony Stark."

“My intentions?” Loki was delighted at the turn of phrase. “Are you asking for his honour or for mine? I must confess, I did not anticipate the bride-price to be brokered with *you*.”

“Loki!” Thor sounded horrified, agitated and uncomfortable in equal measure.

Loki was having far too much fun.

He heaved a dramatic sigh. “But I suppose you would be one of the few on Midgard who would know of the old ways.” He twitched his fingers and formed three gold coins between them. “Shall this suffice? His clan has rejected him after all. I should, by rights, take him as either my conquest in battle or accept his own fortune as my payment.”

“This no joking matter,” Thor forced out through gritted teeth. “Stop speaking of Stark this way.”

Loki blinked and waved the gold at Thor. “I believe I may speak of him as I wish. He is mine, is he not?”

“You have already declared he is not *anyone’s* property. Or were the words you spoke at his home no more than another of your lies?”

Loki smirked even if he was privately disappointed that his taunting had to be cut short. “And in that you are right.” He dissolved the coins effortlessly. “He is my ally, and as such any bargaining has been concluded between ourselves.” He let some of the irritation and steel creep into his tone, the kind that always formed around Thor and his *presumptions*. “You have no right to interfere, Thunderer.”

“I have every right!” Thor insisted. “I will not allow you to cause harm to my friend!”

“Oh?” Loki spat, agitation quickly prevailing. “In the way you already have? I do believe Anthony has chosen not to call you *Shield-Brother* any longer. He has given that distinction, that rank to *me*. He has made it well known he is not your concern, but is *mine*.”

Thor took a step forward. “Is that what this is? You take Stark as your ally so that he may no longer be one to me?”

Loki let out a harsh laugh. “You think the universe and my intentions so narrow as to be solely concerned with you? Even when suffering under the role of *devoted brother* did I not bend my entire focus merely to your *golden stature*.”

“Then why do this?” Thor questioned, frustrated confusion in his tone and across his face. “He was your enemy, a *mortal*.” He gestured at Loki, “What merit could *you* see in him to give such devotion?”

Loki narrowed his eyes and observed the other, his mind catching on that final, harsh sentence. It didn’t take him long to understand; there were too many centuries between them for Thor to be hard to read.

“That is your true concern,” Loki announced, “It is not the safety of Anthony, it is not the ludicrous idea that I still pose a threat to Midgard; it’s your *resentment* that I did not make

this alliance with *you*.” Loki couldn’t help it; he let out an incredulous huff of breath. He wasn’t even flattered or pleased that Thor was somehow jealous - no, Loki was actually *irritated*.

“You betray your former ally, you betray *me* and you expect to stand there and receive our loyalty? You expect us to pledge to serve nothing more than an overgrown *child*?” Loki was yelling now, stalking closer and snarling at the other. “You accost me in my home because of your *petulant rage* that you were not chosen? That you could not fix your problem by merely existing and flexing your hammer at it?”

“Loki-” Thor tried, but the Trickster wasn’t stopping.

“You do not *deserve* us,” Loki hissed. “The number of people in this universe I deem worthy of my time has never been high. You received it once through virtue of the lie that once made us *brothers*. You do not possess that any longer and have made no *effort* to gain my good grace. *Why* would I present you with even *half* the allegiance I have given Anthony?”

“I did not *know* your true parentage,” Thor broke in, “nor did I know of the extent it would harm Anthony to do what we did!”

Loki scoffed. “And of the ways you treated me? The constant *disregard* for all I did for you and your pathetic friends?”

And oh, how he wanted to discuss Anthony too. It was on the tip of his tongue, but he forced it down. Anthony had never asked him about the betrayal that had put Loki on the path that led him to Thanos, so nor would he draw the knowledge of what had hurt Anthony from Thor. His curiosity still burnt all the way down.

“How do you expect me to want a life I despised while living it?”

“You would call our youth, our adolescence, such a thing?” Thor demanded, “You would call every joyful moment spent with Mother and I a farce?”

Loki could barely feel his smile even though he knew it was spreading nasty and bitter. “How does it feel, Thor? To find a part of your life a lie? Does it *hurt*? Does it make it hard to trust me? Imagine it and wonder how much *worse* it must be to know that *every part of you* is nothing more than-”

“It is not!” Thor darted a hand out and cupped his neck. Loki tried to flinch away but Thor held him firm. “Nothing we shared was untrue. You *are* my brother. I do not care what was in your blood or mine. You say I have hurt you, I never meant to, believe me, brother. I never knew that I caused you such grief.”

Loki hated Thor. He hated him more than ever when Thor was being earnest and looking at him with such wide, pained eyes. Thor truly didn’t know what he had done, but he was apologetic for it. The sentiment was a pleasant one, but it was the condition that came with it that made any goodwill in Loki fade to fury.

Thor would give this speech to him for the rest of their lives if need be, right until he finally gained Loki's forgiveness for the slight. Loki had experienced it in his youth, when his anger had burned bright and hot and he had taken days to accept Thor's company again. Thor's speech was always honest and he would feel genuinely guilty until Loki finally absolved him of his current transgression. Everything would then return to how it had been before - because *nothing* would change.

Thor wanted to heal the wound, but arrogant, Crown Prince that he was, he never wanted to alter *himself* in order to do it. He would insult and degrade, reverting to the same behaviour again and again. Thor would speak his words like the balm he thought them to be - as he was *taught* to do when he did wrong - but they meant nothing to him. The words were merely a means to the end of receiving what he wanted.

It was that, more than anything else, that would never let Loki forgive him.

Loki could feel that centuries old hurt catching at the edge of his mouth and he clenched his teeth, shoving Thor away to force it down. The movement and his stumble only succeeded because of Thor's surprise.

"We're past the point of your honeyed words, *Odinson*." Loki straightened before forcibly wiping all emotion from his face and voice. "My contract with Anthony stands. We will assist you and your Avengers on any mutual battlefields but we are *not* allies. We-"

"I will not let you and Stark seclude yourselves from us!" Thor vowed.

"You have no *authority* over us," Loki argued back, before clenching his jaw and fists, angry at himself for the escape of his fury.

Thor, in response, threw his shoulders back, and his booming voice seemed to take up the room. It was an act that hardly affected Loki after the many years of mocking Thor in their youth as he'd perfected it. Thor had wished to sound as commanding as Odin and he while did succeed with others, it rarely happened with Loki. "I will not let your plans come to pass. I will not let you drag Tony Stark into your dark deviance!"

It was hardly what Thor had intended to reference, but oh, Loki couldn't resist; mostly for the sake of flustering Thor.

"I hardly need drag *anyone* into my 'dark deviance'. Men come willingly into my bed." Loki's drawled words had the desired effect of making Thor flush red with anger.

"You will not make such allegations against his character!"

"Oh?" Loki questioned. "And if he is truly lying beneath me? If he *does* kneel for me in the privacy of his chambers? What then, Thor?" Loki demanded, "Will it turn your stomach to know your former Shield-Brother could be unmanned by me? That he could *choose* such a position with passion and affection? Or would it be but one more corruption placed to my name?"



“Enough!” Thor bellowed. “I do not wish to hear more of your slanderous words!” He glared at the mage. “They speak for you more than any action could. There is nothing reformed to be found in you.” His mouth turned pensive. “I fear that Stark has made an overhasty decision with you that he will regret. You cannot be trusted.”

Loki’s smile was as sharp and deadly as a knife. “A thousand years beside me and even now you do not know the wisest places to search for honesty.”

“I know it is not with *you*.” The conviction in Thor’s words would have hurt, if Loki hadn’t already anticipated it. Instead, he was merely disappointed. No liar spent their entire life with untruths on their lips; more often than not, it was the falsehoods that were twisted in amongst the truths.

Loki had even tried to make Thor see what had been happening to him during the Invasion, but he had never been acknowledged, believed or *noticed*. Thor couldn’t see past the blinders of his own devising, and Loki should have known better than to keep trying to pull them aside. Yet somehow Loki persisted even now, only to feel foolish with himself when it failed, when his harrowing sentiment for the Thunderer couldn’t be shaken loose.

He forced himself, once again, to put it to the side; just one more grievance to fester in his mind.

“You may disagree all you like, Thor. You may see me as nothing other than fiendish and villainous, but it does not change what has been done and that *I* am the alliance Anthony has chosen.”

Thor scowled at him, his stubborn resolve never shifting from his expression. “I will not allow this to continue,” he lifted his hammer, pointing it at Loki, not in threat but in an attempt to intimidate, “mark my words, Loki.”

“Your words have always been the least sharpened piece of you,” Loki remarked. “They have always been far too easy to overturn.”

“We will see what Stark thinks of such things.”

“You will find his opinion does not differ from mine,” Loki answered, being very careful to keep his tone bland, a complete contrast to the sinking sensation going on in his chest.

It was true; *parts* of what he had spoken of with Thor were accurate and likely to be confirmed by Anthony. But others? They were far less so. And what of the mortal’s conviction to stay aligned with Loki if he learned of Jotunheim? Anthony might still remain his ally, but their camaraderie? Their growing enjoyment of the other’s company? It was all liable to disappear in a flash.

Anthony was too *good*, too utterly *heroic* to be able to ignore those deaths. He was also completely *unyielding* and that would stop any forgiveness at Loki’s transgressions; no matter how mad and lost he’d been at the time.

And Norns forbid Thor brought up Loki's teasing. Anthony, by all accounts Loki had seen, did not engage with people of his own gender. He might have his crude and joking remarks in private, but to be aired publically as a situation Loki was perpetuating? He would deny it; he may even be offended at the slander. An Aesir would be.

*But he is not Aesir.*

It was true, mortals seemed more open to the practice, but how could he know how Anthony would feel?

Of course, he could be lucky and Thor might not dare to bring it up. Asgard frowned so heavily upon it that the commoners were sometimes beaten to death over their indulgence. Loki's status had protected him and caused Thor to merely yell and attempt to smack sense into Loki for engaging in such acts.

Thor could wish to deny the idea would ever be true of Anthony, to believe that it was just one more lie given to antagonise Thor. After all, Anthony had been in a relation with the woman Loki had met earlier. It might yet be enough evidence for Thor to ignore Loki's words.

Loki could only hope.

The matter of his preferences had always caused contention. Fandral had been the only one who hadn't sneered at and demeaned him for it; the swordsman had merely ignored it. That blind eye had been the best he had received until *Anthony* had occurred. He acknowledged homosexual behaviour openly, and Loki *delighted* in it.

It was such a forbidden subject on Asgard that at first Anthony's teasing manner had been strange, startling even, but Loki was growing fond of parrying those remarks back at him. He was having fun worming into Anthony's personal space and watching the other smirk and touch him right back.

He didn't want Thor, the blundering, arrogant *fool*, to ruin things for him. Ruin the *acceptance* of a part of himself Anthony didn't even know he partook in.

*Yet you could learn what Anthony truly thinks of these things - of you*, a part of Loki whispered darkly.

It was a temptation that he found hard to resist.

Thor would need to talk to Anthony after all, and if Loki tried to stop him, he would feel his doubts were only confirmed. The only thing that would appease the Aesir would be if Thor returned to Midgard and spoke to Anthony directly.

Loki could simply... watch undetected by them as they discussed matters.

He knew he could no longer teleport directly into Anthony's house without the mortal being made aware of it by his AI - but arriving outside the tower and using an illusion to pass

through the surveillance? Loki might yet manage it. He would need to leave the moment Thor used the Bifrost, if he wanted to arrive before they truly began conversing.

Thor had been too predictable in seeking Loki out and his actions had been the true reason Loki had left the mortal's home. He hadn't known what Thor might reveal to Anthony's listening ears if he'd remained on Midgard for Thor to find. The Thunderer would have still sought Anthony out regardless, but at least this way he'd provoked Thor into starting the confrontation at a time Loki knew of and could monitor.

Yes, he would have to take advantage of what he could and accept the fallout of whatever occurred during it.

His contemplation had allowed Thor time to stalk back towards the Bifrost site. Loki moved after him, lingering by the door as Thor spun on his heel to face him. "If you have lied to Stark," Thor vowed, "I will not rest until I have broken him from your contract." Loki narrowed his eyes but wasn't given time to reply as Thor shouted, "Heimdall!"

Loki lifted a hand, cloaking himself again before Thor had even left his sight. It would go a long way towards allaying Thor's suspicion that he would be followed back to Stark Tower, if Loki was lost to Heimdall again. Thor would believe Loki was merely changing the location of his residence, he would believe Loki would not dare follow after him.

His arrogance was both astounding and useful.

The second Thor disappeared, Loki didn't hesitate to return to the mortal realm. His traitorous heart was racing, and his mind was filled with worry - with *regret* - as he moved. He hadn't expected his regard for Anthony to happen so fast, and yet he couldn't deny it. He was already invested in maintaining Anthony as an ally.

*As a friend?*

*No.* Loki couldn't believe he was pathetic enough to have allowed himself to depend so quickly on one brilliant mortal's light-hearted affection and acceptance.

*I merely refuse to give Thor the satisfaction of being right.*

## Chapter End Notes

Bonus points! The next chapter is fully written and also from Loki's POV. So I'll post it in about a week because I like being a little shit ;)

Also, I should mention I am **not trying to make Thor a bad guy**. I just tend to subscribe to the idea that the Aesir/Asgard is anti-homosexuals. I like the angst factor it gives Loki and \*shrugs\* I'm not apologizing for it.

# Chapter 7

## Chapter Notes

Right, so. Here's the next chapter I promised because I have Internet again (thank *goodness*). I've edited this chapter but I'm... not sure if I'm happy with it. I might just be too picky? Or it might be that because this story is not pre-planned it's making me feel untethered about what's going on, but, well, nevertheless. (It might also be because it's Loki's POV and I'm used to Tony's in this story.)

BLERGH. I'll let you lovely readers give me your opinions :) I hope it's not *too* terrible.

And wow, this is earlier than I said I'd post it too. Must be the joy of internet making me post-happy, haha.

**Edit 9th December 2016:** I've been going through and editing the chapters of this story with the help of the awesome *DreadPirateWombat* who is utterly, utterly fabulous and has caught so many errors for me. So far, I've edited from the first chapter to this chapter. I'll shuffle this note around as I go. But seriously, give this lovely editor lots and lots of love, they truly deserve it! ♥

Loki made his way into Stark Tower with minimal difficulty, both impressed and frustrated with the improvements Anthony had made at magical detection. He needed to *climb* each flight of stairs and *phase* through the doors in order to remain almost entirely unnoticed. He doubted FRIDAY wasn't still registering minor power spikes, but she was unlikely to be concerned enough to inform Anthony just yet.

Loki knew his own magic would be recognised by her system but that it wouldn't be filed as a threat. He just had to hope that she wouldn't think he was *present* or that she would bring the power fluctuations to Anthony's attention. He wanted to hear Anthony's *honest* opinion of him - not the one that he would fabricate if he was aware of Loki being nearby.

Although, he would still have to speak to Anthony about the fault in his defence system; the fact that Loki had been allowed to enter even this far was dangerous. It would serve Anthony well to more thoroughly ward the Tower in the coming weeks to keep any unwanted magic users out. Loki didn't wish for any of his enemies to slay the mortal because they considered him an easier target than Loki himself.

Well, that was to assume Anthony didn't change his mind about their alliance after speaking with Thor.

He hurried his steps at the thought, and when Loki arrived in the penthouse - with a necessary but unfortunately larger use of magic - it was to find Thor already present. He was clenching

his hammer, standing in front of a pile of glass that had once formed one of Anthony's bay windows.

Anthony's body was tense, but when he spoke, his words were executed with perfect composure, "You know, barging into my home and defacing my property isn't exactly going to endear me towards listening to you."

Loki moved silently to stand a distance away from the two, making sure to still be positioned so that he could see their faces. "I am not in the mood to be blocked by your overhead servant, Stark. We must speak of Loki."

"Oh? Is this the part where 'he's totally a good guy' becomes 'no wait; he's totally a bad guy'? We've done that before you know." Thor seemed confused and so was Loki until Anthony clarified. "Do you not remember the little chat on the helicarrier when Loki first showed up on Earth? Couldn't help but notice you defended him then dropped 'adopted' the second someone mentioned his body count. Nothing like a bit of emotional distancing to lighten the mood-"

"It is not in the way you mean," Thor forced out through gritted teeth.

Anthony's eyebrows rose. "Oh, really? Open floor, Brutus. Give us something acceptable for that."

Loki was certainly hoping Thor could deliver an answer that could stop the seething fury inside of him from bursting out in the form of a vicious curse.

"My brother had been lost," Thor explained. "The knowledge of his true birth did much damage to his mind. I had wished to explain what torment had driven him to such acts."

"Riiight," Anthony drawled. "Only you didn't do that." Anthony's voice dropped, going cold as he continued, "You threw that word out, like I mentioned, to distance yourself from him. You also *completely* missed the huge honking signs he was giving out, saying that it wasn't his idea to invade Earth. Et tu, Brutus? *Et tu?*"

Thor scowled. "I do not understand," and he looked frustrated to admit that, "Who is this Brutus you speak of?"

Anthony rolled his eyes so hard it looked as if it may have pained him to do so. "Forget it. I think I'll give that explanation to Loki."

"You may not wish to start such conversations," Thor warned.

"Oh?" Anthony questioned, his eyebrows raised. "I'm sure this will be good." He crossed his arms and leaned back against the bar. "Wow me with your attempt at wisdom."

Thor's hand clenched against Mjolnir. "This is not a game, Stark! Your similarities with Loki are far-reaching-"

"Yeah, I won't be considering that a *bad* thing," Anthony riposted and Loki grinned, feeling a wave of fondness for the mortal.

“You do not know all the damage he has wrought.” Thor stepped forward, glass crunching under his foot. “Before coming to your world he-”

“Hold up!” Anthony raised a hand. “This little story you’re about to tell me - was it directly or indirectly responsible for what took him to Thanos?”

Thor blinked and Loki clenched his teeth. “It is the beginning of the path he-”

“Yes or no?” Anthony demanded.

“Yes,” Thor finally admitted and Loki held his breath, staring at Anthony with a tight chest.

“Okay, then we’ll skip that one.”

“What?” Thor asked and so did Loki. He was instantly grateful he’d used spells to mask for sound as well as sight as his incredulous word went unnoticed by the others.

Anthony’s smile was all teeth. “I don’t talk betrayal with the betrayers. The version I’m going to get told about that situation? Yeah, it’s not coming from anyone but Loki.”

Loki couldn’t have kept the shock from his face if he’d tried; his jaw had even fallen slightly. Thor was just as astonished. “You would accept his hand and not know of his past? His *true* past?”

“I’ll accept that his account is more likely to be accurate than yours.” There was a small furrow to his brow. “And ‘hand’? Is that a fancy term for alliance in Fairy Land?”

The relief and happiness he might have been feeling at Anthony’s response died a sudden death as Loki’s heart and hopes sank. *Damn you, Thor. Norns, damn you.*

“Ah,” and Thor looked far too pleased with himself, “I had known his allusions must be false.”

“Yeah, how about you give me a little more to work with than that.”

“My brother is ergi.” Loki couldn’t hold back his flinch in time. “He implied you were of a similar nature.” Seeing Anthony’s uncomprehending look, he added, “Lovers. He claimed to have unmanned you.”

Anthony’s face went through a rapid series of emotions even Loki couldn’t catch. When he finally replied his voice was flat, “I take it being gay isn’t too highly thought of where you’re from?”

“It brings great dishonour,” Thor affirmed. “I tried to keep his transgressions from being known for many years. It seems he no longer cares to show discretion in these acts.”

Anthony’s eye twitched and the look on his face was barely contained hostility. “Right, so, I guess it would piss you off to know I’m *totally* letting him fuck me?”

Thor looked like he'd been slapped in the face while Loki was sure he must have heard Anthony wrong. *He couldn't truly...*

"But... you and the Lady Pepper?"

"Yeah, see," Anthony continued, "we aren't all such fucking *assholes* here that we have a problem with alternative sexualities." Anthony's smile was wide and cruel as he purred, "And your brother? Oh man, getting pinned to a wall by him? Getting fucked long and *hard* throughout the night? It just makes the contract *even better* knowing I can take advantage of how attractive and *flexible* he is."

Loki felt his mouth go dry; Anthony's words conjuring image after image of bending the smaller man over in all the ways he'd mentioned and a few that Anthony hadn't. *Oh dear.* Loki suddenly felt too warm as he let his eyes trail over Anthony's smirking form. *Mischievous, lying, brilliant mortal.*

"Did you know," Anthony continued as if he hadn't noticed the way Thor had paled, "when he gets his tongue and-"

"Stop!" Thor got out hoarsely, sounding traumatised and disgusted.

Anthony looked very self-satisfied. "Oh, but you asked all about it."

"And I am wishing I never did," Thor murmured, sounding nauseated. *Good,* Loki thought vindictively. Anthony's expression said he was thinking the same thing.

"If I were you," Anthony warned, "I would go back to SHIELD or Asgard and leave any decisions on our alliance to *us*."

Thor seemed to muster himself again as he told Anthony, "You do not know the man that he is! Whatever spell he has cast over you, I implore you look beyond it and-"

"Spell?" Tony spat. "You think the only good opinion Loki can gain is one he forces from people? News flash, Thor; I like your brother more than you. I like this *duo* more than the Avengers. It's not on account of his magic it's on account of *taste*. Loki is the best thing to ever come out of Asgard, and I'm not about to give him up just because you think I *should*."

Loki's grin was so wide his cheeks hurt. He wanted to reveal himself and gloat, to have Anthony speak those words in Asgard's Golden Halls; to choose *him* above all others and openly display that allegiance. He wanted *more* but he was happy enough to settle for the twisted scowl on Thor's face - for now.

"None who side with Loki do so without regret."

"Yeah, well, none of them have been *me*," Anthony decreed before waving his hand in a perfect mimic of Loki and making his floor defences rise and point at Thor. Loki didn't even try to contain his laughter at the action. "Now get the fuck out of my house, *Odinson*."

"There will come a day when you will see the folly of your ways," Thor warned him. "I hope you will not be left alone on the eve of that comprehension."

“I already told you I’m not *alone* in the evenings.”

Thor grimaced at the implication, but didn’t make another comment. He was already well aware he wasn’t making any of the headway he had intended upon visiting Anthony. It gave Loki the pleasure of watching the Thunderer walk away after having been *rejected* and *refused* in favour of *Loki*. Thor used Mjolnir to depart from the balcony and Loki took the time to relish the moment.

“Great,” Anthony murmured and walked across the room to lightly kick some of the glass. “Now I need to fix the window.”

Loki turned on his heel, planning to leave the mortal’s tower the same way he had entered. He would return again shortly after to visit the other more openly and would fix the damages with a simple spell.

He had barely taken a step when FRIDAY announced, “Boss, I am registering a continual but small amount of energy that you have categorised as Loki Laufeyson’s magical element.”

Loki froze even as Anthony asked, “What? Since when? No, fuck it.” Anthony spun in a slow circle. “You’re here aren’t you? You little sneak! You fucking eavesdropped the entire conversation, didn’t you?”

He contemplated saying nothing, of leaving as he’d initially planned and even denying it when asked in future - but he found he couldn’t bring himself to. He turned back to face Anthony’s darting eyes and removed everything that was keeping him hidden. He was but a metre from Anthony but the other did little more than blink and twitch slightly at his appearance.

“Your technology is quite perceptive,” Loki allowed, nodding towards the ceiling and FRIDAY.

Anthony dismissed his words with a wave of his hand. “How long were you there?”

“Since not long after Thor arrived,” Loki admitted.

Anthony laughed and shook his head, asking with more than a hint of sarcasm, “So you only heard the worst parts then?”

Loki barely refrained from licking his lips, his words coming out softer than he’d intended, “There were some interesting ones,” he held Anthony’s gaze, “and some unexpected ones.”

It didn’t take long for Anthony to recognise what he was referencing and he smiled. “Yeah. Who’d have thought the self-named ‘Golden Realm’ were such intolerant pricks?”

“That doesn’t excuse your answer.”

Anthony raised his eyebrows. “You can’t tell me *you’re* offended? I think promoting me as your mortal boytoy-”



“No,” Loki interrupted, “I did not-” He pressed his lips together and forced himself to regroup. He was giving far too much away to such an observant mortal. “I wished to unnerve Thor. You had no reason to speak as you did. Why did you? You are...” he gritted his teeth, “not that way inclined.”

“Ehh,” Anthony lifted his hand and moved it from side to side in a gesture Loki didn’t understand. “I mostly wanted to piss Thor off like you did. I wasn’t about to let him stand there and talk shit about you for choosing some cute little ass rather than a-”

“Yes,” Loki held up a hand, well aware that Anthony loved to say the crudest things that came to mind just to exasperate him. “Thank you.”

Anthony just grinned widely. “You know, we should hit a gay bar when we’ve dealt with the press.” Anthony looked him up and down contemplatively. “A tailored suit and your little evil smirk and you’d reel them in.” He smirked. “I’m sure you could use a good fuck too.”

Loki’s traitorous mind automatically jumped back to Anthony’s purred words and he had to very quickly keep himself from dragging his eyes over Anthony once again

*You will not entangle yourself any further with this man, Loki told himself. He is far too valuable to ruin things with unwelcome advances or ill-fated dalliances.*

“I would refrain from such thoughts until your world is more amenable to me,” Loki suggested making sure to remain neutral on the entire subject.

Anthony didn’t look deterred in the slightest. “FRIDAY, make a note; help Loki get a good fuck.”

*Oh dear.* Loki stiffened, feeling his body begin to react. *I **have** been far too long without an outlet for this.* He would have to make his own plans to find a suitable person on another planet to relieve his tension with before next returning to Midgard. He also needed to quickly halt Anthony's pursuit of that topic. “I believe you should leave further contemplation of my *bedroom affairs* to another time.”

Or no time at all.

Surprisingly, Anthony actually let it lie, possibly because of the discomfort that had begun filling Loki’s voice and shoulders.

“Fine, fine,” Anthony acquiesced. “But seriously, wasn’t Thor’s face when I told him the most *beautiful* thing you’d ever seen?”

Loki barked out a laugh, “You were impressively descriptive.”

“I’m going to talk about that *every* time I see him from now on.” His eyes were bright with mischievous glee. “Fuck. I would pay to see him say something derogative in front of Rogers or Barnes.” He turned thoughtful. “No, definitely just Barnes. He’d be more likely to punch him in the face with that metal arm.”

Loki couldn't stop the way he stared at Anthony. He felt heady with gratitude that he'd been so easily accepted, that Anthony was already planning to defend and *discomfort* Thor even more - simply for his pleasure and Loki's. *Thank you*, the words rested on his tongue but Loki couldn't bring himself to say them. He couldn't bring himself to make mention of everything it meant to be so utterly acknowledged for his preferences but for Anthony to be just as unconcerned by them. Anthony considered it as he would consider one who enjoyed a woman's company; irrelevant. *He didn't care.*

Loki turned abruptly and focused on the shattered window, using his magic in the easiest form of gratitude he could give by allowing the glass to reform.

"Woah," Anthony murmured, even coming to stand beside him. "That saves on my repair bill."

Loki shot him a look. "I doubt you have much concern for the price of one window."

"True," Anthony agreed, "but I'm not going to sneeze at a literal Repair Wizard." Loki hummed under his breath but otherwise didn't answer. "So you going to stay for dinner?" Loki shifted to face him fully. "I can order in, we can work on your public awareness campaign, and I can poke and prod at your magic some more?"

"It is always my magic with you," Loki grumbled, but it was all a front for the thrill he felt each time Anthony admired him for it.

The mortal, of course, saw right through him. "Damn straight." He tilted his head. "Wait no, damn *gay* now." His eyes were dancing. "Always did prefer the crooked paths to the flat ones."

Loki blinked at the comment but before he could try to interpret more, Anthony was walking away and speaking to a mixture of both his AI and Loki. He was ordering food, offering drinks, pulling up displays and all together showing that once again Loki's sexual desires were nothing to him. It was *'inconsequential data'* as he would say, and it made Loki smile.

He followed after the other, commenting on flaws in his designs and watching the Engineer squawk. He took pleasure in the simple banter, the shoves to his shoulder and the complete ease he was presented with. Loki had come to the tower with a sense of dread, but his fears for the alliance, for their fond association were all unfounded. The evening passed the same as always and Loki left Midgard with a weight having been lifted off his shoulders.

Oh, he was still going to get his revenge on Thor, but Anthony deserved something for his loyalty.

Loki just wasn't sure what.

When he returned to his new residence that evening, Loki spent some time puzzling over it as he re-established himself in his new dwelling. While it wasn't his sole contemplation that night, it still might have accounted for the subject of his mind upon falling asleep. It *might* have been acceptable that his lack of male company and Anthony's *deliciously* painted words

all coalesced into images of the mortal - *images* of Anthony beneath him; writhing, moaning and crying out Loki's name as his nails scrapped down Loki's back.

It did *not* excuse him waking up sweating and unfinished, and *using* Anthony as the object for his completion.

The pleasure was enjoyable while it lasted, but the foul taste it left in his mouth afterwards was less so.

Loki growled and pushed away from the bed, lighting his lamps with a gesture and remaking his bedding with another. *Foolish*, he sneered at himself, *pathetic*. He used a third and final spell to clean himself before he made his way out of the place.

He didn't know where he was going, but he had the sudden urge to force Anthony from his mind - by any means necessary.

# Chapter 8

## Chapter Notes

Hey everyone! New chapter, yay!

I just want to say thank you for all your comments, kudos, bookmarks and subscriptions. It means a lot to me that you're reading and enjoying this, even if it's done silently.

I also wanted to say that I've spent the afternoon plotting this story with my friend. It has *direction* now. Halle-fucking-lujah! It's come a long way from the chapter that started it all and might yet shoot off in directions many of you won't expect. I can only hope you'll like where it ends up going :|

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

It was only just past seven in the morning and Tony was making his way into his kitchen with groggy eyes and nothing but his loose sleep pants on. He would never normally consider getting up at such a *disgustingly early* hour but Rhodey had messaged him the previous evening.

*We're going to talk tomorrow. He'd said. I don't care if I have to break into a children's hospital at eight in the morning. I'll do it.*

Tony had no desire to talk to anyone else about his alliance with Loki or his refusal to side with the Avengers - but not only was Rhodey his oldest friend, he was also the only person who had fucking *asked* to see him.

Sure, he wasn't about to take no for an answer, but he hadn't popped up unannounced and assumed he could order Tony around. Those two things were the only reasons he was letting it happen. He still despised how early it was and was putting it down as another strike against his *former* but, fuck it, he might want to stonewall everyone, he might want to say *fuck you* to Rhodey like he had to the Avengers - but he couldn't.

Rhodey was his best friend, Rhodey still *couldn't be dislodged from his fucking heart* and he still hoped - with the few remaining parts of him that weren't too cynical for it - that Rhodey could prove himself and fix this.

Pepper and Rhodey hadn't been there, they hadn't betrayed him. They *understood* the Avengers, but they hadn't taken the action. Pepper wasn't siding with him; it was painfully obvious that Loki had more or less broken any possible reparations between them, but Rhodey? There was still a chance it wasn't completely destroyed yet and Tony was clinging to it.

He still didn't know if it was just wishful thinking, but he needed a caffeinated elixir if he was going to get through it regardless.

"FRIDAY," he croaked out, "Coffee?"

"It was started upon your removal from your bedding and will finish shortly."

Tony was in the process of grunting a reply, rubbing a hand over his face, and scratching his scalp when he heard the 'ping' that comprised his early teleportation warning. He had just enough time to put his hands back at his sides and frown before Loki was appearing beside the window that Thor had temporarily destroyed.

"Loki?" Tony asked with surprise and around a yawn. "This is early."

Loki's eyes had scanned him before flicking away and around the room, almost as if he was looking for a clock. He looked a little odd too. Tony couldn't quite place it, but there was something *ruffled* about him. "My apologies, Anthony, I was not aware of the time."

Tony shrugged. "Timezones are difficult enough across one planet let alone numerous ones." He heard the sound of the coffee finishing and started walking. "Want some?"

He glanced over his shoulder to see Loki shaking his head. He was standing almost awkwardly and he'd never been like that. Even at the beginning - and before the drafting of their partnership - Loki had been confident and aloof. Once they'd signed the deal he'd become relaxed and mischievous. The only possible cause for the change had to be what Thor had announced with the sole intention of making Tony recoil, and he was still *furious* about that.

Tony hadn't received half the prejudice he could have experienced what with the ability to throw enough money at a problem until it went away. It didn't mean he was oblivious to it or hadn't known people who suffered from it. The idea that Loki had spent over *a thousand years* in that kind of environment made him more than willing to shove Thor's nose in homosexual imagery.

It was a God damn miracle Loki was comfortable with his sexuality even if he was still suspicious of other people accepting it. It also made *so* much more sense why Loki had kept climbing into his personal space when they first started as allies. Loki had needed to know what he would do - needed to make sure he wouldn't be like *Asgard*.

Tony's spoon clanged loudly against his cup from the violent stir he'd just given it, but Tony made himself relax. He couldn't do anything about shitty Aesir and Loki's past, but he could *definitely* make Loki more comfortable here.

When he'd finished with his drink, he turned back around and found Loki had taken a seat at the breakfast bar. He'd also placed a book on the counter and had folded his hands daintily on top of it. Tony took a long sip of his coffee as he observed the tome. Tony couldn't read anything on the leather cover and after squinting for half a minute he eventually just gave in and asked, "So, what you got there?"

Loki very carefully kept his eyes on Tony. “I can wait until you’ve completed your morning ritual.”

Tony glanced down at himself and had to hold down a small smirk. *Not my fault I’m so fucking gorgeous.* Iron Man might have given him a few scars, but he was fucking *fit* for his age. It was nice to know his chest alone could distract a guy like Loki.

Some people might disagree, but Tony didn’t think there was a limit to how many times you could use an ego stroke.

Stretching, Tony made sure to use his muscles to great effect while also keeping his face free of the amusement he was feeling. He dropped his eyes to half-lids, feeling gratified when Loki’s gaze fell so he could quickly, subtly, check him out. *Not bad for a man of, coughcough, sorry, records deleted.*

When Tony had finished moving, Loki’s attention had ended on his stomach and the path of his treasure trail. It wasn’t for long enough that Tony could call him on it. Hell, he probably wouldn’t have even noticed it if he hadn’t been aware of Loki’s sexuality and trying to gain that kind of reaction. It made sense that the guy was good and used to hiding it. Mind you, the awareness of *that* did put a bit of a damper on Tony’s enjoyment of the teasing. *Give the guy a break; you probably shouldn’t be playing with this.*

“I’m pretty awake,” he finally answered Loki. He was already back to eyeing Tony blankly as if he *hadn’t* just been letting his mind wander. Probably in the direction of what Tony looked like without pants. “What’s the book about?”

Loki smirked and for a second he looked like his old self, the same guy he’d been before the revelation of his sexuality had spun him off track. “This is something for you, Anthony.”

Curious, Tony shuffled around the counter so that he could stand next to Loki. The mage didn’t tense or seem to react at all over the lack of distance. His voice was the same flat and slightly pleased tone. “This book is an extensive guide to warding one’s possessions.” He moved the book across the table until it was before Tony. “I have no doubt you will gain mastery of the symbols with ease. I have also placed a spell on it so that it will display in the reader’s native language.”

Tony’s eyebrows rose and he put down his coffee so that he could flick through the *book of spells*. “Fuck, Loki, this is pretty amazing.” There was a whole chapter on *armour alone*. “But I don’t have magic.”

“I’m aware. But you don’t need to possess it to gain its benefits.” There was something *off* in Loki’s voice and Tony tore his attention away from the book. “This will give you understanding,” he tapped the current page, but his eyes weren’t on Tony’s face, “and allow you to make your own choices on what protections you wish to have placed on items you value.”

“I still can’t perform-”

“But *I* can,” Loki interjected. “You can carve these marks with your own intent and understanding and I will bring them to life for you.”

Tony could only stare at Loki, not quite sure he was comprehending it correctly. “You’re giving me the ability to use magic.”

Loki scrunched his nose and made an impervious gesture. “For a given value of ‘use’, yes.”

*Why would you...* Tony didn’t even get a chance to ask the question as his mind filled in the blanks. *This is his thank you.*

It was a nice sentiment, a fucking *awesome* one really, but something still nagged at him. It was one thing to be appreciative; it was another to give Tony the capacity to *understand* magic. It was like opening a door into understanding *Loki*. That didn’t come cheap and he doubted even a lack of homophobia earned him that. *There’s something missing here.* He just had to figure out what it was.

But, he could do that while reading magic scripture too.

Pulling out the seat beside Loki, Tony drew his mug close again while flipping to the first page of the book. Their legs were brushing and while it wasn’t exactly *unusual* for them to be so close, Loki’s leg felt... wrong - stiffer, like he was coiling his muscles. Something was *definitely* going on with him and Tony was determined to work it out.

Tony did his level best not to let suspicion narrow his gaze as he eyed the other. “Got any preferences on where to start?”

“The beginning?” Loki riposted, his voice full of snark.

Tony smirked. “What, no suggestions? No, favourite positions or *illicit* combinations?”

It was the same winding up, the same faux flirting they always played with, but even though Loki went through the motions and played the same mocking game, it didn’t ring true. It was written on his face, but not presented in his eyes. “Oh, there are *many* inventive things I could show you, Anthony.”

“I’d *love* to hear them,” Tony answered back and even though Loki drew him in close so that they could look at the symbols, Tony’s mind was only half on the illustrations.

Their heads were almost touching they were ducked so close together, and maybe that was why it was easier to see the tightness to the demi-god’s eyes. *Had he even slept?* He certainly didn’t look rested, not to someone who was nose to nose with him and looking closely. Tony wouldn’t call him jumpy, exactly, but he’d been discomforted somewhere along the line and...

Tony blinked and then he chuckled and had to look away so he wouldn’t laugh even harder. He only ended up staring at his own chest like an idiot, but oh, it was just too precious.

“Anthony? Have you even bothered to listen to me?”

Tony finally brought his attention back to the other and it was just too perfect. He didn't lean in or rest his chin in his palm like he *really* wanted to - because Loki was skittish enough as it was. Well, as skittish as a dangerously powerful mage who was good with knives could actually be - which was very little and hidden under a fuck tonne of skilful lying.

It was just too bad Tony had grown up surrounded by people who found him fuckable and therefore knew how to recognise it.

"Soooo," he drawled, "dream about me last night?"

Loki didn't react. His face could have been carved from marble for all it didn't move. "What would *possibly* make you believe such a thing?"

*Hah! Not a denial!*

"Oh, I don't know, the way you looked like you wanted to lick my muscles?" Tony teased, only realising a second too late that while *he* was amused as hell and also damn flattered, Loki was more like a cornered animal about to attack.

"I never," Loki ground out between his teeth, "expected you would take *this* line of enquiry after learning what you had."

*Okay, wait, back step.*

"Well, of course," Tony put a hand on Loki's shoulder, ignoring the tension of the muscle and the glare he got. "It makes sense you'd give in to basic impulses, I am *damn* fine." Tony looked Loki up and down pointedly. "So are you, as I told you before. Seriously. What's the issue?" Tony shrugged. "You had a little fun with the material on display." He grinned and pulled back, bringing his arms up to flex. "Tell me, should I do a specific pose?"

He waggled his eyebrows with exaggerated provocation, making himself almost go cross-eyed and *finally* making a small grin crack Loki's bewildered face. "You would find it a joke to know I gained pleasure from your image?"

Tony snorted. "A joke? Loki, half this fucking *planet* gets off to me. That's boring. But a *thousand year old badass space magician* finds me hot? That's something to brag about."

Loki let out a short laugh. "This is your response to a man finding you sexually appealing? Not disgust, not discomfort, but *crowing*?"

"Damn right," Tony agreed, fucking grateful Loki was finally unwinding. "People are attracted to pretty things. I was one of them; *clearly* your dick has good taste."

Loki actually started laughing harder. It wasn't his sniggering or even his giggles it was full-bodied, leaning against the table slightly *guffaws*. Tony was so proud. He also couldn't stop himself from sniggering a little, if only because seeing Loki's hair in front of his slightly reddening cheeks was *hilarious*.

He was holding the recordings of this moment over Loki's head their entire contract. *Give me more magic books or I will release this to Times Square.*



When Loki finally got control of himself and was able to look at Tony without chuckling again, his next smile was small and unbearably fond. “I underestimated you once more. Clearly I did not have true faith in your madness.”

Tony slapped Loki’s shoulder, pleased to find it was loose and comfortable in the Tower and Tony’s presence again. “We’ll get you there eventually.”

“Truly, Anthony,” and Loki’s voice had become serious and heavy. His grin still remained but Tony knew there was a lot more being left unsaid than would ever pass the Trickster’s lips, “thank you.”

He could have shrugged it off, turned it into a joke as he truly preferred to do, but Tony knew how huge an issue this was for Loki. Fuck, he probably only had an *inkling* of what his reaction must have meant to the other. He couldn’t fathom how it must have felt to probably *never* gain that kind of support from anyone. It made Tony sober up and tell Loki simply, “Always.”

...But, he also wouldn’t be Tony Stark without a smartass remark to follow along a few moments later. “Seriously. *Always*. Like especially anytime Thor’s in view. Feel me up, Buttercup. I want to make him *spew*.”

“Thor has a hard stomach,” Loki warned him around a laugh - not quite picking up on the slang Tony was going for there, “but I do feel it is something we can yet achieve.”

“Just not on my flooring, alright?”

Loki’s eyes were sparkling. “I make no promises.”

Tony sighed, somewhat overdramatically, before pointing at the book. “Tell me there’s something about stains in here.”

“There may be,” Loki answered with a twitching mouth that made Tony think it wasn’t going to be as simple as a circle on the floor. Still, he was more than game. He’d wanted to learn about magic from the beginning and now Loki wasn’t just letting him poke and prod at items and Loki’s spells, he was giving him *his own tome*.

It wasn’t an encyclopaedia on how things worked, but it was a start.

Taking his coffee back again, he had a sip while skimming the current page. “Okay, let’s go back to what you were saying, because I’m pretty sure I saw something that looked like an Isotoxal polygon on a bender earlier and I’m not sure I’m ready for that yet.”

Loki just shook his head as if Tony was a great source of humour to him, but he *did* continue with what he’d been saying, even repeated some of the information Tony hadn’t been fully paying attention to earlier. It was that willingness to show him again that let Tony know he was more than just forgiven for it, he had actually *won points*. He hadn’t been trying to; honestly, he’d just wanted to figure out what was wrong with Loki and fix it. So, mission accomplished. Now he could have his mind warped by Science defying bullshit as well as

symbols that didn't even have straight lines but were supposed to be drawn accurately *every time*.

What was *wrong* with magic?

It wasn't that it was hard to understand what Loki was saying, it was just that the context rankled. It defied the laws of physics and science. Tony might have proof that it *worked* but it didn't help him sit back and watch Loki create the same squiggle perfectly *every time* before - just to prove that he could - warding Tony's coffee mug to always remain warm.

Tony had thought that sounded good in theory, until he realised it didn't mean 'always keep your coffee warm' as the nature of the magic didn't read it that way. It made the *cup* radiate a steady source of heat and made a permanent symbol glow in the corner. It wasn't unlike the glow of Tony's bracelet only this one let any mage know what was up. Loki said he could hide the rune with another one, but he didn't see the point. He also offered to remove the incantation, but Tony refused to let him. It was a weird parlour trick now; the never-cooling mug. Loki had just rolled his eyes at him.

He did get out a new mug and was pouring his third cup of coffee when FRIDAY announced, "Colonel Rhodes is arriving, Boss. Shall I delay him while you gain further clothing?"

"Oh, please, he's seen me in worse than this - actually," Tony turned to Loki. "How far-reaching is our gay love affair? If we want Thor to buy it and suffer with the mental imagery my answer is probably: absolutely everyone knows, but what're your thoughts about feeling me up in public?"

Loki's eyebrows rose. "I am not affectionate by nature."

Tony barely stifled his snort. "Yeah, a real *shocker* there."

His patience seemed to be growing thin if Loki's voice was any indication. "So why seek my opinion?"

"I need to know how comfortable you are." Tony shrugged. "I get that this is a pretty hidden part of you. We can't have you flinching at the wrong time."

"Anthony, just because it was not an *encouraged* inclination, it did not mean I *ignored* my desires." Loki smirked. "The publicity will be the only unusual aspect and I assure you, I am well-versed at lying for the sake of another's discomfort."

"Awesome," Tony replied before telling his AI. "Relay his clearance. How's he arriving anyway?"

"His vehicle is approaching the tower," FRIDAY responded.

*Huh*, Tony thought, *no armour*.

"I'm surprised you would allow this man to visit," Loki interjected, "Were you not unwilling to see your former allies?"

Tony's lips were pressed together. "Rhodey's like Pepper."

"A former *lover*?" Loki's eyes had widened ridiculously.

"Hah!" Tony couldn't stop his laugh. "No. *Fuck* no. He's a friend - he *was* my best friend. I've known him for a long time."

"Ah," the mage's face had cleared of incredulity and was back to being simply pensive. "His history stays your hand." He made a gesture over his shoulder, the same way another person would indicate a door. "Shall I depart?"

Tony shook his head. "No. Odds are he's contacting me like everyone else is recently; to yell about you. He might as well get two for the price of one."

He was eyed intently for some time before Loki's summarised, "But you hope he proves you wrong."

Smiling blandly, Tony questioned, "Since when do either of us put much stock in hope?"

The look that entered Loki's eyes answered him in a way the other's words never would. "We know far better than that, Anthony."

"Course we do," Tony answered just as untruthfully.

*Because we're just broken, angry liars, who wish we didn't care.*

## Chapter End Notes

Soooo, I probably surprised a few of you by throwing some tropes and expectations out the door here. I hope you don't mind, but this chapter was about *acceptance* and it was about showing that Tony isn't oblivious to people being attracted to him. He grew up with that, *attraction*, so it doesn't actually mean much to him. Feelings do, but that's not something he notices - or something happening here (for now?).

And Loki? Well, he's never had anyone so *okay* with this part of himself. He's fucking thrilled and relieved and not quite sure how he got so lucky.

I hope most, if not all of that came across in this chapter :)

# Chapter 9

## Chapter Notes

So, hey everyone! New chapter, yay! I'm also going to be shamelessly self-promoting and suggest that if you're enjoying this story, maybe you'd like to check out my other chapter Frostiron work [Fractals of a Criminal Mind](#). It's pre-written, over 100K and gets updated every week! So, hey, maybe you'll like it too?

/end hesitant suggesting and onto chapter 9!

Hope you enjoy :)

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

Tony would never admit to being anxious, and he was too conscious of himself to ever pace - but the way that Loki's eyes followed him as he poured and offered more coffee spoke volumes. Loki accepted, but not any caffeine and after passing the guy some orange juice, Tony was stopped from moving again by a hand on his wrist.

He flicked his attention to Loki who had a small smile on his face. "Well, well, a method to your stalling after all." Tony frowned and the mage elaborated, "Must you bruise my ego so obviously by being more intimidated by a conversation with this man than you were by having one with me?"

The comment made him crack a smile and breathe out a laugh as he remembered. "Didn't help that I broke your glowstick. The window was a nice touch."

"Hmm, I was rather impressed with your ability to recover from that."

Tony smirked. "Not at the time."

"Oh, no, I was rather pleased even then."

Tony's eyebrows rose. "Is this the 'all part of my plan' section of the monologue?"

"I can always refrain from continuing," Loki demurred but Tony wasn't having it.

"No, fess up. Tell me your side of that conversation."

"We don't have a lot of time," Loki pointed out.

Tony glanced at the elevator and FRIDAY informed him, "Approximately three minutes and thirty eight seconds before the Colonel's arrival."

“Cliff notes,” Tony decided and when that got him an eyebrow raise. “Summarise it for me, fast.”

“Ah,” Loki acknowledged before using his orange juice to gesture at where Tony had entered years ago. “You were well documented for your ability to think quickly and escape under pressure. I assumed that you would have a plan and simply needed time to enact it.” He shrugged. “As you are able to fly in your armour I assumed a fall would have a reasonable chance of being countered.”

“You could have been wrong,” Tony pointed out.

Loki conceded it with a nod of his head. “I had reasonable grounds to believe otherwise, but yes, I may have misjudged you.”

“What would that have meant for your plans?”

“They would have been more difficult, but not impossible.” Loki’s mouth formed a thin line. “Until your forces decided to attack their own city. No, without you Anthony Stark, that would have meant a very gruesome end for your planet and for me.”

Tony was honestly shocked to hear that and he knew it showed. “You-”

“Colonel Rhodes will arrive momentarily,” FRIDAY warned quickly and Tony gritted his teeth.

He lifted the hand not held by Loki. It was the one with his coffee mug so his pointed finger might have lost some of its sternness. “We’re not done with this.”

Loki’s smile was all innocence, all amusement and everything that said it was going to be *bucketloads* of fun for Tony to try dragging anymore out of the demi-god.

He attempted to pull away from Loki’s hold but the mage was resistant. Tony looked down at their hands before frowning at the other. “Loki?”

“The world beyond Thor needs to know of our intent, was that not your point?”

Tony blinked. “Huh, guess so.” Tony looked him up and down before smirking. He put down his cup on the bench beside them and reached out to ruffle Loki’s hair. The glare and snarl he got were probably a second away from murdering him before he asked, “You can illusion up some kissed lips and love bites, right? Got to make it look realistic.”

Tony was sure if the elevator hadn’t opened a second later not only would Loki have made his displeasure known, but he also would have made the quick illusion much more of a sparkle show. He’d also, Tony noticed a second later, removed the juice from his hand and possibly the room - fucking asshole hadn’t even taken a *sip* of it. He wanted to ask where it went, but he didn’t have a chance as they were both forced to turn their attention to Rhodey as he entered the penthouse.

The Colonel hadn’t even stalled at seeing them so close and with Tony lacking a top. He was dressed in a simple dress shirt and slacks when Tony had half been expecting the uniform.

Tony didn't try to edge away from Loki or have the other drop his hold, Tony just pivoted to better face Rhodey.

"You should know, I'm not happy about the early morning," Tony told him upfront.

Rhodey's smile was barely visible. "I have a meeting with the Pentagon to discuss the outcome of this conversation. I figured you were already pissed off with me, what was making my scheduling easier going to hurt?"

"Us, it hurt *us*," Tony answered without missing a beat, but he was privately pleased at Rhodey's complete lack of ceremony or deception. He just hoped that Rhodey wasn't going to pick up on *their* lie. "There was no morning sex because of you."

Rhodey had almost reached them but he stopped a careful distance away as he looked them over. "I see it didn't hinder you too badly." His lips thinned a little but he nodded at the mage. "Loki."

Loki's eyebrows rose, but he responded in the same flat tone, "Colonel Rhodes."

His attention moved once the greeting was complete, dismissing Loki from the equation swiftly and obviously. He did it the same way he *always* had to any of Tony's business associates that he'd been forced to make nice with in order to reach Tony. Tony *knew* that was what it was, his posture, his chin, his *gaze*. It said the same thing it had for decades of friendship and his next words only confirmed it. "I'm not here to talk about who you choose to spend your time with. I'm here to talk about the Avengers."

Tony's smile was full of teeth and lacking in emotion as his heart stalled. "Here to try and charm me back?"

"Tony, I haven't been able to change your mind for fucking *years*, what makes you think I'm going to attempt a fool's errand?" Tony blinked. "You've made your choice and I'm not even going to offer my opinion until you want it again." He sighed, his unhappiness leaking through and making his stance soften. "Giving my opinion last time was what got us into this."

*They have a point, Tony. I'm not saying keeping it from you was a good idea, but I can see where they're coming from, can't you?*

The words had hurt. They'd cut into Tony the same way Rhodey had pierced him in the hanger bay back before Iron Man had fully formed. They'd mended that last bridge and God; Tony could only hope they'd do the same this time. "You here to take it back?"

"We differ in how we think about things," Rhodey answered, "and we've pissed each other off a lot over the years. I'm not about to stand down because you don't like it - *but*, I'm not saying I would have done what they did. I can see their perspective; it doesn't mean I'd have done it to you. Your friendship has always been more valuable to me than any kind of advantage."

Tony had the inexplicable urge to reach out and hug his friend. His *friend*; the fucking *last one standing*. Sure, he sort of had Loki who was shaping up to be a new one, but Rhodey had been by his side for multiple *decades*. The idea that he wasn't budging his position even now filled Tony with a wave of relief.

"You've always been a fucking sap," Tony told Rhodey while pointing over his shoulder and going for a refill. "Coffee?"

Tony didn't see the moment it happened as he was facing away for a few seconds, but when he glanced back, there was a noticeable loss of tension to Rhodey as he nodded. "Thanks, Tony."

They all knew there was more to the words than just accepting a beverage, but Tony hid his smile by preparing the drink. Loki was scrutinising Rhodey as if he was a bug under a microscope that wasn't behaving to his satisfaction. Tony was flicking them both quick glances as he worked. Rhodey, instead of rising to the inquisitive nature of the mage's gaze, was very pointedly pretending Loki didn't exist.

"Colonel," Loki purred. *Oh, here we go*, Tony thought and hurriedly spun so he could face them. His movements were so rapid that liquid spilled over the edge of one of the mugs but neither of them noticed it or Tony's darting gaze. "I have some questions, if I may?"

Rhodey's eyes narrowed as his eyes shifted to Loki. He also altered his stance so that he was directly facing the Trickster. It was like watching two predators face off. Tony wasn't sure if he wanted ringside seats or if he should be throwing a white flag between them.

Probably best to let them work it out though. Tony still took a fortifying sip of his drink and wished the coffee was a bit more fortified.

"I have no problem with you *asking*," Rhodey told Loki.

"Ah," Loki quickly realised, "but you may not answer them?"

"I don't remember that being part of the request." Rhodey grinned sharply.

*Yup*, Tony thought, *definitely two animals in a pissing contest*.

Instead of trying to press the point, Loki just dived straight into the inquisition. "I find it interesting that you sided with the Avengers—"

"Recognising two sides of an argument isn't the same as *siding*," Rhodey interjected.

"It was enough to sow the seeds of doubt," Loki riposted.

"And you wouldn't know *anything* about high-stress situations influencing actions and opinions?"

Loki's expression was more of a snarl than a smile. "Perhaps such a situation would have benefited from a *lack* of discussion on the topic?"

“I prefer *honesty* over half-truths and *lies*,” Rhodey snapped back. “I think it’s a far more *solid* structure for a relationship.”

*Rhodey: 1. Loki: 0.* Tony mentally tallied.

Loki’s eyes narrowed, but he didn’t try to deny the accusation, instead he twisted it. “So, of your *myriad* knowledge on the subject, tell me, why would you so casually accept Anthony allying with *me*? Or is the protest in fear of his health still to come, *Colonel*?”

“Tony can make his own decisions,” Rhodey told him, but seeing such a sentence wasn’t holding weight with Loki, he added, “Besides, I *am* a member of the Avengers. I heard the same information everyone else did about your history. Tony might not look it, but he generally knows what he's doing.”

“I’m offended that’s only ‘generally’,” Tony shot out, throwing his hat towards the edge of the ring and hoping he might be noticed before words started cutting harder.

Rhodey didn’t even glance at him to say, “Do you need a citation of every stupid thing you’ve ever done?”

“Do you need an *alternate* list of all the times his intellect has outshone *all* other mortals on this planet?” Loki snapped.

Tony blinked and stared at Loki. He wasn’t the only one; Rhodey looked honestly taken aback at the defence. Loki hadn’t gone so far as to cross his arms, but there was a distinctly mulish curve to his lip that said he wasn’t about to *let Tony get insulted*. If they had of been alone, Tony would have been cooing and making the most *mockingly* eyelash fluttering gestures - as it was, he just pressed his lips together to try and keep his amused smile from showing.

“Well,” Rhodey looked between the two of them, his eyes screaming ‘*Tony, what the fuck did I just witness?*’ as he lost the majority of his edge, “I guess it’s nice to know your magician values you?”

“Oh, but perhaps I am *lying*,” Loki started, but Tony cut him off.

“Oh, cut the crap, Loki.” The mage glared at him, but Tony wasn’t budging. “You’re a Demi-God of Lies; mortals aren’t going to ignore your reputation so learn to live with it.”

“Yeah,” Rhodey nodded at Loki but his words and his attention were directed at Tony, “and it’s because of that status, that it’s not something people expected what with everything’s that been happening.” Tony’s eyebrows rose. “You get betrayed, so you ally to a liar and former villain.” Rhodey paused and frowned. “Actually,” he sighed painfully, “why does that sound *far* too much like something I should have expected?”

“Because you know me!” Tony cheerfully answered before pushing Rhodey’s mug close to his side of the bench. “Your drink’s getting cold.”



“Did you spike it?” Rhodey questioned while coming over. He sounded almost hopeful, bless him.

“No drinking before midday,” Tony recited, causing another of those ‘*what are you on?*’ looks from Rhodey. Tony just shrugged. “Loki instituted it.”

Rhodey swivelled his head and the look he sent Loki probably wasn’t unlike what had caused the whole ‘Norse Religion’ in the first place. Rhodey was staring at Loki like he’d just seen a miracle. It was a little insulting. “Fuck it, you’re officially good for him,” Rhodey announced. “What did you do; electro-shock? Or is that too Thunder God for your tastes?”

The mention of Thor combined with Rhodey’s change of manner didn’t seem to have Loki in much of a mood to respond, so Tony did it for him. “You know that whole water to wine thing?”

“We’re changing religions, but sure.”

“Try alcohol to animal piss and you find a very compelling argument for agreement.”

He’d timed it just as Rhodey had taken a sip of his coffee and was gratified to see him wince around the mug. He still swallowed his drink, but he didn’t look like he enjoyed it. “Okay, remind me to always be cautious if I’m handed a drink around here again.”

“Ah,” Loki murmured, and if Rhodey felt uncomfortable about Loki getting closer, he didn’t show it, “but that is the beauty of the spell. I could change the very liquid in your mouth, should I so choose.”

“*Loki*,” Tony warned, “be nice. We like Rhodey. He’s a friend.”

Rhodey and Loki might have showed different levels of it, but they both had surprise in their expression when they looked at Tony.

“You have accepted him back?” Loki questioned the same time as Rhodey asked with a small smile, “Still haven’t shaken you loose yet?”

“Yes and yes,” Tony replied simply. “Now, in the spirit of making me happy,” Tony grinned a little evilly, “try to be nice. I like seeing my friends getting along.” When nothing happened he suggested. “Small truce? Handshake? A promise not to kill each other for me?”

Rhodey and Loki eyed each other suspiciously, before, with narrowed eyes, they both held out their hands at the same time. Tony barely managed to stifle his laughter at the unhappy scowl to their lips as they both lost the chance to be the ‘bigger man’ who offered first.

They still shook on it and Tony was surprised there weren’t announcements of the Pentagon suddenly catching on fire at the sacrilege of the action. “Hurt him,” Rhodey announced casually, “and I’ll take to heart the fact that you *aren’t* immortal.”

Loki actually smiled. It looked good in theory until paired with his next few words, than it just came off mildly horrifying. “Have you searched out the tales your ancestors published of my youth?”

“Yes,” Rhodey hedged. “A file was formed when you first arrived.”

“Excellent,” Loki answered and the small, discomforted twitch by Rhodey’s eye meant the demi-god was probably increasing the strength of his grip. “Put me in the position and I will make the tales of my punishment seem *pleasant*.” Loki tilted his head. “Do we understand one another?”

Rhodey nodded. “We do.”

Loki copied the gesture and dropped his grip on Rhodey. He turned to Tony afterwards and informed him, “I will leave you with your companion. I will venture back in the evening to finish what we have begun.”

Tony flashed him a flirtatious smile. “What? No kiss goodbye?”

“Consider it your reward at my return,” Loki promised darkly, with a wicked smirk, “among *other* things.”

“I’ll hold you to it, or me. How about you hold me against the wall?” Tony suggested with his own inviting grin.

“Right,” Rhodey interrupted, “you’re going to fuck tonight. Can we speed up the goodbyes before the ‘*no you leave first*’ section?”

Loki, surprisingly enough, chuckled. “Very well, Colonel.”

Tony expected a similar goodbye, but to his shock, Loki’s form flickered before recreating beside Tony. He couldn’t stop his flinch in time, but he doubted Rhodey noticed it with the way Loki crowded him backwards until he hit the fridge. Their bodies were pressed together and the metal and leather was brushing Tony’s chest in a surprisingly enticing way. Loki’s hands came and held his hips while he angled his head, his mouth coming to rest against Tony’s ear. “You have chosen him well. He is loyal, but do not forget that he has not vowed his silence, Anthony.”

“He won’t say anything,” Tony replied back while moving his hands to touch the armour at Loki’s sides.

Loki hummed. “Do not give him the chance.”

Tony knew their positioning was all for show, but he was still slightly surprised when he felt lips brush the shell of his ear on the next whisper. “I will return tonight, but for what it is worth, I am glad there is one mortal on this planet that does not deserve your hatred.”

He didn’t get a chance to respond before Loki was pulling back, his face disintegrating before Tony’s eyes as he teleported away. Tony’s fingers were left tingling from where they’d been pressed against the leather before Loki’s disappearance.

Rhodey had taken a seat while they’d been talking and was watching Tony with a thoughtful expression.

“What?” Tony asked defensively.

“Nothing,” Rhodey took a sip of his drink. “But you’re definitely not fucking him yet.”

“*What?*” Tony squawked.

Rhodey shrugged. “Other people will probably buy it, but I know how you act around people you’re sleeping with.” Rhodey studied him. “You’re definitely happy to let him in, but something’s holding you both back.” Tony opened his mouth but Rhodey waved him off. “Hey, man, whoever you *fake* date is your business. I’m not going to contradict you in public. I’m just calling you on your shit.”

Tony wanted to deny so many things in that statement such as *we don’t want to fuck each other*, or even just *I’m not thinking about him that way* but that meant admitting they were faking their relationship. Tony knew the truth was a slippery slope, you told one person and soon enough *everyone* knew. He didn’t doubt if Rhodey knew *why* they were all up in each other’s space he’d be all for it. He’d probably also pummel Thor into the ground for them in training.

It still didn’t mean he *could* say anything.

“Oh, okay,” Rhodey caught on quickly, “so we’ll just pretend I never realised you’re *not* living up to your playboy reputation. Right. Well. That narrows down the field of conversation. How’s the work on your car going?”

“Which car?”

Rhodey shrugged. “There’s always one, and I’m usually wrong between one visit and the next.”

Tony grinned. “You haven’t seen the latest baby. She just needs a little love.”

“Oh, God, not another one,” Rhodey groaned loudly, but he was already getting out of his seat. “No grease on these clothes, I swear to God Tony, I’m not having another conference call where I can’t stand up without showing a black splatter.”

“Not flying over to meet them?” Tony asked curiously.

“You’re allying with a former threat to national security. They’d be on me the second I left the Tower if they could get away with it.”

Tony came around to meet him as they began walking towards the elevator. “And what’s the verdict on that?”

“What I figured; no, you’re no more insane than usual, no, you’re not about to destroy the world, yes, I tried to stop you but it didn’t work, yes, I’m still technically in a position to try again, no, I didn’t get anything of use.”

“Awwh,” Tony cooed and shoved his friend. “Lying to the government for me, you’re such a pal.”

Rhodey rolled his eyes. “I make a point to *not* lie. Nothing I’m going to say isn’t true. Actually,” his frown reeked of contemplation, “think its possible Loki put a spell on me to monitor what I say?”

“Wouldn’t put it past him.”

“Good,” Rhodey nodded, “I can use that. I can tell them he didn’t do what he did to Pepper, but it’s only a matter of time.”

“You know what happened with Pepper?” Tony asked.

Rhodey’s face dropped a little and he gave Tony a sympathetic look. “She went straight to SHIELD.” Tony knew he couldn’t hide the crumpling of his face and he looked away instead. “The spell held,” Rhodey told him quietly. “They couldn’t get anything, but Thor knew what it was, that’s how they got and shared the information that they did.”

“Well,” Tony remarked after taking a moment to get his head and *heart* around that revelation, “glad we chose well with *that* silencer.”

“I’m sorry, Tony,” Rhodey told him, honestly.

He shrugged. “It’s okay. I’m sure she’s just looking out for me.” *Somehow and in a way that involves running to the very fucking people who betrayed you.*

“Come on,” Rhodey nudged their shoulders, pulling him from his thoughts. “Cars, coffee and old MIT days; I’m sure that’ll keep us so occupied I miss the first two conference calls.”

“Oh, that’s just what I need; half the government thinking I’ve killed you and buried the body.”

“Nah, they’d definitely be leaning towards conversion.” He smirked. “That way I still have the ability to crack under interrogation. You can’t get anything out of the dead.”

Tony smirked. “Rhodey, I think you just made millions of coroners fear for their jobs.”

“I’m sure they could use a bit more *life*.”

Tony made a pained noise while Rhodey just grinned smugly. “Oh God, you *didn’t*?”

“Hey, man, just because you didn’t think of it first-”

“I didn’t think of it because I have intelligence and *class*-”

“Well, that’s debatable.”

Tony could only send Rhodey an exasperated look, but it was hard to keep it up when he just felt fucking *giddy*. It hurt that Pepper had done what she had on top of everything else, but the blow was softened by Rhodey standing beside him, unchanged, unmoving and *unwilling to be shaken off*.

Rhodey hadn't come in spouting apologies or begging for forgiveness. He'd walked in and downright declared they were different people so deal with it and let's be friends again. He'd also *accepted Loki*. Well, grudgingly, and Tony was sure there would be comments later - but that didn't matter, because he was *here for there to be a later*.

Reaching out, Tony clapped a hand on Rhodey's shoulder, squeezing it and showing in all the ways he couldn't do verbally how much he appreciated and was grateful for his friend. Rhodey didn't say or do anything that said he knew what was being left unstated, but it didn't matter. *They* both knew and that was the important thing.

Tony might not have anyone else on Earth, but he had Rhodey and even the God of fucking *Lies* had accepted Rhodey's intentions about their friendship as *truthful*.

"Loki isn't as bad as people think he is," the words escaped before Tony even knew they were there. Rhodey looked surprised too. "I like him and I think you might too."

Rhodey eyed him. "You know, it doesn't really matter if I like him or not. You do and you trust him. I'm not in a position to tell you it's a bad idea."

"You always are," Tony contradicted. "You can always tell me what you think. I just-"

"Might not take it, I know," Rhodey nodded, but he was smiling. "Look, I don't know him. I have other people's *opinions* and so far none of them reflect well on him. It took Asgard to admit he was tortured by Thanos through their *teeth* and I don't like what *that* says either. You might have made a rash decision, but you also do that a lot only it's not rash but thought out and *we* just haven't caught up yet."

Tony was watching Rhodey carefully and listening to his words intently. "So what does that mean about Loki?"

"It means I'm reserving judgment. I just hope to hell you know what you're doing."

Tony grinned brightly. "Rhodey, trust me, I have a *really* good feeling about Loki."

Rhodey pointedly raised his eyebrows and dropped his gaze down. "I just hope that feeling isn't in your crotch." He brought his attention back to Tony's unimpressed face. "Because if it is, you're not selling that *feeling* to me."

"Diversity is the spice of life, Rhodey."

"Thanks," Rhodey answered dryly, "but I already have a full jar of Stark tipped in and you're only supposed to take that in small doses."

"You know," Tony commented, "Loki asked if we were past lovers."

Rhodey choked on air. It was stupidly gratifying. "What the fuck gave him *that* impression?" Tony pouted and reached out to touch Rhodey's face, getting batted away in the process. "Stop it."

"Never," Tony denied while continuing to try and push into Rhodey's space.

Rhodey sighed loudly before suddenly reaching out. He startled Tony who was drawn into a gruff and uncomfortable hug. “Nothing changes the fact we’re fucking friends, okay?”

Tony stayed quiet for a few moments, closing his eyes and breathing the other in. Rhodey had always been his rock, the one person in the world who didn’t care about who he was. Rhodey had been *real* for almost his entire life. There had been other people but they all *came and went* but Rhodey remained unwavering in his loyalty.

He may have lost the Avengers in a painful, backstabbing way that was enough to destroy any ability Tony had left to trust - but it didn’t, because as long as Tony still had Rhodey, he’d be okay.

Tony let out a soft, happy sigh, before his lips twitched and he couldn’t help mumbling against Rhodey’s shoulder. “I thought we *weren’t* friends who fucked?”

He got shoved away for it, but it didn’t matter because even though it was only for a few seconds, that hug had tied the last of their fracturing friendship back together.

“I don’t know how I put up with you,” Rhodey grumbled.

Which was fine too, because of all the lies he could hear, Tony didn’t mind when it was something like that.

## Chapter End Notes

HAVE ALL THE FRIENDSHIP FEELS. Because, yes, Rhodey is still a good bro and Tony isn't as alone as he thought. How that might change in the future though, well, we'll just have to wait and see ;)

Also, yes, I'm plugging another story in this chapter, but if you like this story and want more Loki and Tony teaming up? **Keep your eyes peeled** because one of my absolute favourite people [HalcyonFrost](#) is going to be posting her own. Hers is even working to be Civil War compliant! I've read the first two chapters and they hit me in the fucking *guts*. I'll link it here or in the next chapter of *Sharpen Your Teeth* when she posts it. But my goodness, keep an eye out and scream praise at her.

**EDIT:** IT HAS BEEN POSTED. Go read [Only A Heartbeat](#) *now* and adore the shit out of it. You won't be disappointed!!

# Chapter 10

## Chapter Notes

So I'm not sure if people are going to notice, but I watched Age of Ultron for the second time a while back and realised a discrepancy I had with FRIDAY in that she says "Boss" not "Sir". I've updated this in the fic, but thought I should mention it here in case anyone who started reading before the change happened registers the difference from the previous chapters and is confused :)

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

The Colonel's visit marked a change in Anthony's attitude. He didn't act differently around Loki, but he began reconstructing his tower and '*obliterating bad odours*' as he called it. Loki didn't need further information to make the necessary connections. Anthony also revoked Miss Potts' access to the tower and ignored her calls on numerous occasions. The next month saw none of Anthony's former acquaintances visiting the tower or even being mentioned. Rhodes spoke with him through video software as he was no longer in the same country, but Loki was never present for more than the end of those conversations.

He always felt a rush of smugness when Anthony would end his discussions with the Colonel to direct his undivided attention to Loki. The amused look Anthony shot him the first time it happened said that Loki wasn't as subtle about it as he'd thought. He couldn't bring himself to mind when it lifted Anthony's mood; too often lately Anthony was frowning darkly as his mind was forced to focus on the fraying relationships he had with the other mortals. Anthony's absent remarks over the weeks had also made it clear just *what* had happened to seal over his remaining goodwill, especially towards Miss Potts. Loki had made a point of not commenting on it and Tony seemed grateful for the silence.

It didn't mean Loki couldn't *notice* things though - specifically, the hesitation to remove one other Avenger from Anthony's life: Bruce Banner.

The scientist hadn't visited but he *also* hadn't been painted by the same brush as the others. It made Loki *exceedingly* curious as to why he - and a character Loki hadn't yet met called 'Vision' - were spared Anthony's vengeful eviction. Loki would have liked to spend more time discovering the reasons behind Anthony's peculiar reluctance towards them (as well as keep an eye on the returning friendship with James Rhodes) but he simply couldn't spare it.

It was becoming harder to remain hidden from his enemies.

Loki didn't know what had inspired them to make such a *marked* improvement in tracking him, but he was becoming worn by the constant need to change location and hide his dwellings. It was also affecting his plans with Anthony; they were attempting to create a credible and sympathetic persona for the Midgardian masses, but it was difficult when Loki

could be drawn away from Midgard at any moment. His sleep was also suffering as his wards were strained. He was being constantly awoken in the night by them scratching at him, warning him of approaching threats.

He was trying to keep his restlessness and weary countenance from Anthony, but he doubted he was succeeding. Anthony had been looking at him suspiciously for days. Loki knew it had gone beyond avoidance when he arrived at the tower with nothing like his usual finesse.

He'd forgone the typical grandiose lights and colours; expending nothing but the minimum amount in order to arrive safely, and even then he stumbled slightly.

Anthony, unfortunately, managed to have him in sight when it occurred.

"Okay, I'm actually starting to worry now," Anthony told him bluntly. "You know the Walking Dead is a fad not a goal, right?"

"I do not know what you're referring," Loki answered tiredly, long past pretending Anthony's references were something he understood.

"You look like shit," Anthony reiterated. "And 'walking dead' should be pretty universal, even if the show isn't."

Loki sighed and eyed the couch for no more than a moment before giving in to comfort over dignity. He sent away his armour with a gesture, resorting to the leather pants and linen shirt he wore underneath as he made his way to the plush furniture. He fell into it, resting the back of his head on the arm and closing his eyes blissfully.

"I feel much like it," he finally answered Anthony once he'd had a moment to simply rest. "Do you have tea, perchance?"

"Uh." Loki cracked open an eye to witness Anthony's flummoxed expression. "Yeah? What kind?"

Loki didn't raise his arm, merely flicked his fingers and hoped it gave the same level of imperious dismissal. "It matters little, any will be fine."

He might have actually dozed as what seemed but a moment after his response, Anthony was calling his name. Blinking his eyes open, he found Anthony sitting on the coffee table beside him and holding out the steaming beverage.

"It's herbal," Anthony noted unnecessarily and Loki took it gratefully. He made himself sit up so he could take a sip of the drink, already mourning the change of position. "So, you going to tell me what's going on?" Anthony asked, making Loki raise his eyebrows at the mortal. "You shed your armour which you never actually do," Tony explained, even lifting fingers for emphasis in his counting, "you fell asleep - I had FRIDAY check just to make sure you weren't actually faking it - and you didn't magic your usual space brew into existence. Also, there was stumbling when you arrived. I'm not going crazy because I had her check that too-"



“Anthony,” Loki quietly interjected, making the other stop, “I am merely worn. I have not had much peace when away from your realm.”

“Oh? Why not?” The harsh frown to Anthony’s brow made Loki hide a small smile against his mug. The calculation that had entered his eyes gave Loki the distinct impression that had he merely asked, Anthony would have donned his armour and taken a place at his side in any battle that Loki might have been fighting. It was a nice sentiment, and one he hadn’t experienced from others often.

It was unfortunate he didn’t get to enjoy it for long.

Something shifted in Anthony gaze before his eyes trailed over Loki’s form, something sly and teasing reshaping his expression. “Or has your bedroom activity finally picked up? Has the horizontal tango messed with your sleep schedule? Who’s the cute new boytoy?”

Loki shook his head, but his annoyance was token at best. “Must everything revolve around intercourse, with you?”

“Dunno, it’s certainly a fun way to pass the time.” Anthony’s good humour and light tone, however, quickly fled. “And if it’s not that than it means something’s wrong. So what’s the problem, Loki?”

“You really need not concern-”

“Uh, uh!” Tony interrupted. “Allies. Friends. What part of ‘*here to help*’ don’t you get?”

*The part where it exists at all*, Loki didn’t say the words, if only because Anthony's face would turn to a mixture of hurt and fury. While Loki usually liked watching him pace and rage and defend on his behalf, he truly didn’t have the energy for it.

“I am merely tired, Anthony. My enemies are unusually relentless in their pursuit of me and it makes rest hard to come by - safe locations even more so.” Loki nodded in Anthony’s direction. “Your tower is peculiarly situated as to give unusual protection. Can you blame me for wishing to take some small measure of advantage?”

Anthony didn’t look concerned about him anymore, which Loki had expected, rather, he looked *annoyed*. “Um, I’m sorry, *how* many times have I offered you a place to crash for the night?”

Loki gave a small smile. “I appreciate the proposal but it’s not plausible.”

“Why not?” Anthony demanded, “What’s wrong with my place?”

“I have told you, there is nothing wrong with your Tower-”

“So *what’s* the problem then?”

Loki sighed tiredly and leant back against the armrest, holding the tea on his stomach. “Anthony, can you refrain from interrupting me?” Anthony frowned, obviously unhappy with the idea, but he stilled his tongue. “Staying here for an evening will not protect my few

belongings. I would need to bring them to your Tower so that I could encompass myself and them under one ward. I would otherwise need to split my attention between the two which would be just as tiring as returning.”

Anthony scowl had only deepened, his eyes running through calculations. “You’ve told me your wards don’t need to be as strong when you’re here, right?”

“Yes,” Loki agreed. “My presence here is expected and your world distant enough that few could reach Midgard without gaining Asgard’s attention and encouraging their attack. Midgard is a highly protected world,” a brief smirk twitched his lips, “and as much as they must *despise* it, my existence on this planet means their defence of it extends to *me*.”

“Okay, so I *definitely* don’t understand it now. Staying here means you piss off Asgard while *also* forcing them to look after your ass when they’d rather be skewering it. You get to spend time with *yours truly*,” he flashed a smugly arrogant smile that Loki just rolled his eyes at, “*and* you get to recharge your magic. Everything’s a win-win. So what’s the issue?”

Loki found it hard to articulate in a way Anthony would understand. It wasn’t that there was a *negative* connotation to him remaining it was just... *he will grow to regret asking you*. The thought slipped through before he could stop it and Loki took a sip of tea to keep any reaction from becoming visible to Anthony.

*He’s not asking you to remain though, it would merely be temporary*. But Loki didn’t know how to reside with another. His chambers in the palace on Asgard certainly allowed him his privacy and those who disliked him were forced to accept his presence. Still, he supposed he could accept the constant company for a few days and take a deal of care to not agitate Anthony overly. He certainly liked Anthony more than any other in his acquaintance. A peaceful sleep in Anthony’s - no doubt high-standard - Midgardian comforts had also been listed as part of their alliance. He just hadn’t anticipated he would be using them so soon and for such an... unrelated reason.

It had nothing to do with preparations for Thanos, yet, Anthony was offering.

*Friends*. It still felt hard to believe, but somehow, he couldn’t disagree with the term and what had somehow forged between them.

“Are you falling asleep again?” Anthony questioned with his eyebrows raised as he leant forward and waved a hand in front of Loki’s eyes.

Glaring, Loki slapped the hand away. “I am contemplating the plausibility of the suggestion.”

“Oh, come on, what could *possibly* be an issue?”

“My *belongings*,” Loki snapped. “I would need to bring them here, to your Tower, if I wished to fully relax myself and leave my defence to your home and this realm.”

Anthony shrugged as if his words meant nothing. “Then bring them.”

“You cannot simply ‘*bring*’ the kind of items I am speaking of,” Loki replied, barely resisting the urge to pinch his nose. “They are not all *small*.”

A look came over Anthony’s face that Loki couldn’t interpret before he asked, “Loki, will you stay here a couple of days to recuperate?”

Loki tensed slightly, eyeing Anthony and his unusually phrased request. It wasn’t like before; it wasn’t with a wheedling intent to make him remain or an argument against his decision to leave. It was a genuine, friendly request. Loki tried to understand *why* he would change the method of his delivery, but he couldn’t pinpoint anything.

He knew he should have continued to argue or question Anthony further, but Loki was *tired* and he found himself oddly inclined to give into Anthony’s concern. He still let out a sigh and made a show of accepting. He doubted Anthony would expect anything else.

“You will pester me until I give in, won’t you?” Anthony’s mouth twitched into a small grin, but he didn’t say anything. Loki had to forcibly quell his own smile. “Very well.”

“Awesome,” Anthony abruptly pushed to his feet. “Come on. Let me show you your room. FRIDAY, air the place out a little, yeah?”

“Yes, Boss.”

Making his way from the coffee table after hearing the AI’s response, Anthony hovered a few steps away until Loki was forced to push to his feet and follow after the excited mortal. Anthony was containing himself well but there was a certain giddiness to his movements that bemused Loki as much as it entertained him.

Loki kept sipping his tea as they reached the elevator. He was slightly surprised as he knew Anthony had a guest room on his own floor, he actually felt something almost *disappointed* that Anthony was relocating him. He didn’t know why, he should have *preferred* the distance and the space, yet something scratched at Loki. He forced himself to ignore it - he was obviously just overtired. The reaction made accepting Anthony the obvious and correct choice if this was the state he was in. The last thing he needed was to be captured and forced to call on Anthony through their cuffs. He would only end up back in the Tower anyway while hearing a plethora of ‘*I told you so*’.

They stepped inside and Anthony hit one of the buttons for the lower floors. Loki was initially amused to note that the light for it was green, which he knew wasn’t usual, but he was soon distracted by recognition. “You are relocating me to a place where your *former* compatriots resided?”

His voice had a bite to it Loki didn’t even attempt to hide. Anthony didn’t seem bothered as he merely shrugged. “It’s been cleared out and scrubbed down. I’m also not putting you on the floor Thor had.”

“Oh,” Loki asked, “I am merely getting *mortal leftovers*.”

Anthony shot him an unimpressed look. “I only have a *limited* amount of Tower, okay?”

“You have a guest room on your floor,” Loki couldn’t keep himself from snapping. “You have allowed others to stay there but not me?”

*Do you not trust me?* It was on the tip of his tongue, but Loki swallowed it down. He knew trust was not a concern between them. He also knew that if he asked and Anthony informed him it was *not* the case it simply meant Anthony did not want him sleeping on the same floor. Perhaps he wasn’t as comfortable as he presented about the dream and Loki's *inclinations*.

Loki clenched his free hand and took a sip of tea to distract and calm himself. *A separate floor will be fine*, he told himself while lowering the mug, *it is already better than you could have expec...*

Loki trailed off as the doors opened. His eyes widened at what was before him while his mouth dropped open and his shock became written plainly across his face. He simply stared in astonishment at *his floor*.

There was no other way to describe it. The interior had been designed with *his* comfort in mind. Gone was the modern, Midgardian decor Anthony favoured and in its place was beautifully treated and carved wood. There were also throw cushions and exquisitely made blankets covering an elegant settee, while a beautiful winged armchair sat beside the bay windows.

Loki walked inside in something of a daze as he travelled around the living space. The entire abode was done with dark wooden furniture with all other pieces decorated or accented in green, black and gold. There were bookshelves empty of all but a few volumes and a smile twitched at Loki’s mouth as he recognised them. They were all stories Anthony had demanded he read at some point during their discussions. He kept looking around, placing his cup on the kitchen counter and finding a collection of tea’s sitting happily nearby for his consumption. He also noted a mug beside them and he reached out for it. The item had been personalised with Loki’s name in runes on one side while displaying on the other side - in Midgardian lettering and looping scrawl was; ‘*Wanna see a magic trick?*’ Loki had to try very hard to contain his chuckle as he turned back to the room.

His eyes caught an actual *armour stand* in the corner and Loki’s fingers twitched to send his items there just to see how they looked.

“The kitchen’s not stocked,” Anthony explained, sounding almost hesitant as he came to stand beside Loki, “just, you know, some non-perishables you tend to eat. I think there’s some dried fruit in the fridge. You liked apricots, right? Anyway. I get that you probably have your own furniture so I can return a bunch of this. Your other floor is completely empty though so-”

“My other floor?” Loki interrupted slowly - *disbelievingly* - while dragging his eyes over to Anthony’s twitching figure.

“Well, yeah. I figured you’d want a magic room? A place you can ward the fuck out of and practice shit? There’s also technically a few other empty levels if you wanted to bring your stuff over for storage or whatever. I mean-”

“Anthony,” Loki swallowed thickly, his fingers itching to touch *everything*, to touch *Anthony* just to prove such an astonishing mortal was real. “Do you intend for me to *live* here?”

Anthony’s eyes wouldn’t quite meet his even as he admitted, “I was hoping you wouldn’t notice until you were kind of already moved in.” He pulled up a smirk that actually looked genuine even if Loki doubted it was all he felt. “I figured having a powerhouse at my door protecting it could only work well for me.”

Loki was struck with the realisation, suddenly and abruptly as he looked at Anthony: *there is no other ally like him.*

He had known he was fortunate in securing the partnership for some time, but it was only now becoming obvious *how much*. The mortal was intelligent, brilliant, accepting and mischievous. He was also *generous*; he gave to his allies, gave to *everyone* with a heart people mistook him for not having. It was buried under arrogance and self-serving gestures, but it was all just one smokescreen to hide the vulnerable man underneath who *wanted* friends, *wanted* allies and would do anything to hold onto and protect them when he found them.

Loki found himself staring at the cup again before surveying the room one more time. *He has done all of this for me. He has considered and hunted and **chosen** each item based off his knowledge of me.*

“Well?” Anthony wondered and Loki blinked his attention back to the mortal whose eyes were betraying his anxiety. “Too much?”

“No,” Loki spoke quickly, “no, it’s not.” He let himself smile. “Thank you, Anthony.” He made a gesture at the room with his free hand. “No one’s shown me such consideration since Asgard and never so genuinely, save my mother.” He could see the pleasure Anthony felt quickly begin to fight with his awkwardness at being praised. It only made Loki’s mouth twitch fondly. “You did well, these all fit my preferences.”

Anthony snorted, quickly taking the lighter route. “Hah! You wear your *preferences* on your sleeve. Literally. All I needed was green, gold and *medieval* and I knew I’d be alright.”

“Oh?” Loki motioned with the mug. “And what category does *this* fall into?”

Anthony smiled brightly. “Apartment warming present, obviously.”

Loki couldn’t hold in his chuckle. “*Obviously.*”

“I mean, you don’t have to keep it.” Anthony reached out to take it and Loki quickly drew it against his chest. It made Anthony smile with such *smug triumph* that it was almost unbecoming. Loki only let it go without comment or reprisal because his sheer *happiness* over the other’s gestures was still overwhelming him. “So,” Anthony’s face had settled back into something softer as he flicked his gaze around the room before drawing back to Loki, “you going to stay?”

*Of course*, Loki thought. He also found himself uninclined to leave *at all*. The rooms made him feel *at home* the way nothing had since he'd discovered his heritage. Asgard had long since lost its appeal and had also become unliveable after the loss of Frigga. He hadn't expected to find somewhere acceptable to stay for a long time - yet Anthony somehow flooded Loki with a sense of contentment and *comfort*. It had only been five minutes in his offered apartment and Loki already didn't want to leave.

"It doesn't have to be forever or anything," Anthony began to ramble, obviously taking his silence as either rejection or uncertainty, "I mean, it can just be until you feel better or whenever you need to chill out. You don't *have* to spend time here; it's just an option. It was just going to waste so, I thought, '*why not make it a place for, Loki?*', it's not--"

"Anthony," Loki broke into the other's babbling. "Thank you. It would be my pleasure to reside here."

Anthony blinked, taking a moment to register his acceptance. The moment he did, he brightened before steamrolling past his previous words as if he'd never been uncertain of Loki's agreement. "Awesome. FRIDAY, you hear that? Let's make a shopping list; Loki's going to need this place stocked. You've got his favourites stored someone; I expect a full kitchen by morning. Don't let me down now!"

"Yes, Boss," his AI chimed in while Loki just shook his head at the mortal.

"I am capable of using your personal food stores for a day."

"Yeah, but why should you?" Anthony answered simply with the kind of finality that stated *only the best for you*. Loki knew it wasn't *just* him, he knew Anthony showered all his friends with the same kind of extravagance and perfection but it still *felt* like he was the sole focus, because in a way, he *was*.

Anthony didn't have the Avengers in his Tower, his life or on his team. *Loki* was the entire focus of Anthony Stark's intense attention and Loki *revelled* in it. He'd spent so many centuries on Asgard being second-best, second-chosen, *Second Prince*. He was always *second* and now to Anthony he was *first*. It made him want to lavish Anthony with just as much affection, but what could he give the mortal? He truly only had one thing to offer. He briefly glanced down at the cup: *wanna see a magic trick?*

"Take me to this other floor," Loki told Anthony, "and I will show you how I manoeuvre the items in my possession from place to place."

Anthony's eyes lit up with the thrill of new knowledge and he happily moved back to the elevator. Loki put down his cup before quickly finishing the last of his tea. He was still weary and knew he wouldn't be able to show Anthony many things today, but he could explain the necessary tasks needed to relocate to the Tower as he preformed them.

It certainly made him hum with pleasure, watching the way the mortal practically bounced around the room examining everything he brought over. He would also exclaim and question with such honest enthusiasm and glee at every new thing he saw. It didn't take Loki long to finish, perhaps an hour, before he had completed everything and was forced to retire.

Anthony had eyed Loki's things mournfully but had still torn himself away. He told Loki he'd be in his lab for the next twenty-four hours experimenting and theorising and to come down when he'd woken up. Loki had appreciated the withdrawal from the floor and his silent promise to respect Loki's privacy by not being among his belongings while Loki was away. He'd smiled and agreed to join the mortal once he'd slept.

In hindsight, he probably should have expected it. Loki had been busy and hadn't made good on his promise to himself. Anthony had also been charming, wonderful and far too full of energy throughout the day. He'd also gifted him with such precious things that it shouldn't have come as a shock.

It still was.

When Loki woke up from his *second* dream about the other he was only marginally less guilty than the first time. He knew now that Anthony didn't find his body's reaction offensive, but it still *infuriated* Loki that it had happened at all. Loki ran a hand across his face, trying to turn his mind from his body's state and to keep himself from using Anthony's image like he had the last time.

When FRIDAY spoke, the AI's voice almost made Loki conjure a dagger he was so startled. "Sir?"

Loki forced himself to calm down before he answered. "Yes?"

"Mr Stark placed a request into my system that should you wake in such a manner that I was to offer pictures of himself for your assistance. Will you be requiring them?" Loki was completely stunned for a good moment before he burst into laughter. He fell back against the bed and covered his face with his hand. *This ridiculous mortal*, he thought with aching affection. "Sir?"

"No, FRIDAY," Loki eventually replied once he had himself under control and had relaxed back against the bedding. His arousal had also, thankfully, faded during his amusement. "That will not be necessary."

"Very good, Sir."

"FRIDAY," he added after a moment, "is Mr Stark aware of what just occurred?"

"No, Sir," she replied. "He also stipulated he should not be informed of the situation or your choice unless you specified it."

Loki found himself grinning far too widely, but not willing to stop himself when alone in the darkness. "Keep it from Anthony for now, please. I will inform you in the future if that changes."

"Of course, Sir."

Chuckling softly, Loki stared at the ceiling for a long moment, imagining the mortal's smirking face as he'd prepared and gave that peculiar recommendation to his AI. Loki could

also see the gesture for what it was; Anthony's attempt at stopping any awkwardness between them by showing his *continued* acceptance of the kind of man Loki was. It had already diffused Loki's anger at himself by making him oddly *glad* his dream had occurred. He might have imagined bedding Anthony again - of paying Anthony back for the rooms by laying him on this very bed and using his mouth and hands to show his *appreciation*; and, oh, Anthony had made the most *delicious* sounds in response- but because of that, he'd been able to learn what Anthony had done for him.

Anthony had told him, *again*, that everything was fine between them. He'd shown his complete *arrogance* at believing himself the source of any sexual dream Loki had, while also turning around and offering *material* should it be the case.

*Be careful, Anthony*, Loki thought with a smirk, *or I may just find myself accepting that offer.*

Somehow, the idea didn't seem half as horrible as it had even ten minutes ago.

*Perhaps*, he added with a small frown and a hint of unease, *he is not the only one who should be careful.*

## Chapter End Notes

More Loki POV! And his own floor in the Tower. And Tony being a little (accepting!) shit. All good things in my book ;)

Hope you enjoyed!



# Chapter 11

## Chapter Notes

This chapter was a pain. Like. The beginning steamed along. Then I ran out of coal. And it was very, very hard to pick back up again. Then I stopped and started a bit. Then I finally had a few good runs today. Which is fucking *great* since I like to try and update this every two weeks annnnd I'm about on that or a little over since it was updated two Saturdays ago, heh. So I'm counting it as a sort of win? And I like the chapter, which for I while there I wasn't sure I would. So just. Whatever. I'm rambling. *There is a chapter* and that is the most important part! Oh, and hoping you lovely readers like it, of course. So. \*fingers crossed\*

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

Tony's evil plan had worked.

Well, if you substituted '*plan*' with '*suggestion*' and '*evil*' with '*hopeful*', but either way, it got Loki living in the tower.

Sure, Loki had put in a last ditch effort after the first three days by telling Tony he was recovered and would start looking for a suitable off-world hideout. Tony liked to think he got his point across when he'd had FRIDAY spring weaponry from the walls and threaten to shoot him if he left. Loki had just rolled his eyes and pushed the guns away, but it *had* ended the discussion of him moving out, so Tony was counting it as a victory.

It had now been almost two months and Loki hadn't left except to purchase things off world or look for information on Thanos. The rest of the time he was in the Tower practising his magic, lingering in Tony's lab while discussing the nature of the universe, creating the weird and wonderful things that came from those conversations, or just relaxing with him.

Tony got the distinct impression that Loki hadn't spent a lot of time *hanging out* with someone before. He was genuinely delighted to sit down and watch a movie or just *read in each other's space*. Loki also had a tendency to switch between being as quiet as a mouse and abhorring company one day to demanding all of Tony's attention and making snarky remarks about everything the next.

It was kind of fun. Loki was unpredictable and amusing. He was also damn smart so Tony never minded being bothered by him. Loki always had something interesting to add to whatever he was doing and if Tony was *truly* engrossed and couldn't afford interruptions, Loki always heeded FRIDAY's warnings. FRIDAY had even taken to doing the same thing for Loki; if the mage was meditating or doing a complex spell and couldn't be disturbed than Tony would have her pass on a message for later.

It was just *easy*.

Loki was also the first real roommate he'd had. The Avengers had lived their own lives in their own apartments. Bruce had been a bit different, but apart from him everyone else had only stayed over *occasionally*. Loki had taken his offer and put down roots and Tony *loved* it. The Tower was great, but it suddenly felt more like a *home* knowing that he had someone a floor away he could go and bug. Someone he could show a complex scientific problem to and have Loki tilt his head and start *trying to help him*.

Bruce had been his Science Bro and had stayed for long swathes of time - which had been fabulous, don't get Tony wrong - but there was just something *more* with Loki. He couldn't explain it. Maybe it was because ever since Ultron things had changed; Bruce had disappeared, JARVIS had turned into Vision and he'd broken up with Pepper. He'd just, he'd been *lonely*. The team had fallen apart and so had every other relationship in his life except for Rhodey.

And then there was Loki. The demi-god had walked in and aligned with him. He was angry, powerful and as broken as Tony was. They *understood* each other and Tony didn't want him to leave.

He knew it was stupid and that they had a contract but... *everybody leaves*.

Rhodey was the only one who went '*screw that, I'm not going anywhere*' and Tony would never stop appreciating that, but he wanted more than one person in his entire life who stuck around. He wanted Loki: the crazy, insecure, space-magician, *smartass*.

He also wanted to be able to *show him off*. Loki was still considered a war-criminal, not by S.H.I.E.L.D. and not by the government but by the *public*. No one wanted to wade into the messy waters of explaining what had happened and show that Loki was a victim.

It was too much effort, it was too *terrifying* to think that someone had been more powerful than Loki and had forced him to invade Earth. The public didn't want to hear that, which was damn unfortunate, because *they were going to*.

Tony wasn't about to let Loki get caught in the middle of a smear campaign because no one wanted to talk about or *admit the truth*. Granted, Loki had done some serious damage but he'd also *done his best to help them win*. If the public could learn to forgive Bucky Barnes, they could damn well learn to forgive Loki too.

But, they were still working on that.

They'd been distracted at first by Loki having issues off world and then there was the fun of moving in and learning to live together. The few teething problems they'd had were fixed pretty easily and Rhodey and Loki had even managed a couple more conversations together.

Watching them circle like two pissed off lions over a carcass would never not be funny - even when he was the rotting remains they were fighting over. Okay, so it was a bad metaphor. It was still amusing. It was *also* fun to explain to Loki that Rhodey hadn't been taken in by their *romance*. He'd looked somewhere between pissed off and disappointed. Tony knew he'd

liked the idea of having one over Rhodey. It was almost sweet how possessive Loki became of their friendship when Rhodey was around.

*Don't touch my stuff*, Tony had said once, but Loki was the one more inclined to make good on that threat. He might appreciate that Rhodey was still loyal to Tony and a good friend, but it didn't seem Loki had to be happy with it.

The best part was that Rhodey had a pinched mouth when he saw Loki that said he felt the same thing. Tony wasn't *quite* suicidal enough to tell them that they had a lot in common, but it was a near thing. He was already making plans to lock them in a magic proof room one day and see what happened. Until then, he had to suffice with his imagination.

"You have that look." Tony blinked out of his thoughts to glance over at Loki. He had lowered his book and was staring at Tony with narrowed eyes.

"What look?"

Tony couldn't hear Loki's sigh, but he could see it by the rise and fall of his chest as he shut the novel. "When is the Colonel due to arrive?"

"Uh, he's not coming today."

Loki's tilted his head, seeming puzzled. "Oh? You have the particular expression-"

"You know my *specific expressions*?"

"-that indicates you are envisioning some kind of territorial battle."

Tony blinked. "Wait, did you just admit that's what you guys are doing? Fighting over me?"

"No," Loki answered, his tone as flat as his gaze. "I'm stating that is what *you* visualise."

"Well, you both do get a kind of '*I've got the bigger dick*' conversation going on sometimes."

Loki looked like he'd bitten into an onion. "*Charming.*"

"We could have a measuring, you know," Tony smirked, "to remove all doubt."

*Well*, Tony thought, *maybe it's not so weird*. He certainly knew that the angle of Loki's mouth and the pinch to his eyes meant Loki was a moment away from holding the bridge of his nose in order to ward off an approaching headache. *So, specific expressions are a thing for us both now.*

"Aside from the fact I could win that competition with magic alone-" Loki began.

"*Woah*," Tony held up his hands and turned to directly face Loki. He'd been sitting by the breakfast bar working on a tablet and had only been looking at Loki in profile. He wasn't about to continue this with Loki even slightly out of view. "You can magically enlarge your dick?"

This time Loki's sigh was audible. "Yes, Anthony. I am a mage and a shape shifter. It really is one of the more *juvenile* tricks in my repertoire, however."

Tony shook his head, still a little incredulous. "Seriously, you are underestimating how much of a hit you'd be at a gay bar, at *any bar*. You can cater your own dick. I'm kind of jealous."

"Oh?" Loki wondered, sounding genuinely curious. "Of the talent or of the individual you're imagining I take to my chambers?"

Tony tilted his head and gave it some thought. "Not sure. A little of both, probably."

A small grin curved Loki's mouth and his eyes shone with fond amusement. "Neither are necessary, it's an impractical illusion to maintain and rather more complicated to achieve arousal and completion when altering that part of my form." Tony's eyebrows rose, hearing more than just theorising but *practical experience* in that explanation. Loki ignored his silent prompting for more information about *that* though. "The ability aside," he smirked, "it is not something I am in *need* of enhancing, I assure you."

"Why, Loki!" Tony exclaimed, putting on an air of false scandal. "Are you telling me you have a huge cock all on your own?"

Loki chuckled. "This is a subject you should be well-versed in, shouldn't you?" He opened his book again and turned his attention to it. "We are lovers, are we not?"

"But there's something to be said for practical knowledge, right?"

Loki didn't even glance up. "No."

"How can you, a man of magic and experiments-"

"You are not seeing me without clothing merely to satisfy your curiosity."

Tony scowled, but made a last ditch effort. "What if it wasn't just curiosity?"

Loki turned a page, remaining unswayed. "It isn't."

Letting out a sigh, Tony didn't try to poke Loki further; he just swivelled back in his chair and opened up the document he'd been fiddling with on his tablet, but it wasn't holding his attention well. Pepper had sent him some paperwork he needed to sign and he was automatically shying from it. While it was needed for the company, the deadline for it wasn't for a few days and Tony found himself unwilling to go out of his way to assist her lately.

It wasn't a good position to be in with his CEO, but Tony couldn't see another option. He didn't have a replacement and while his skin still crawled a little at extending his trust to her, Tony knew there was no one else he was willing to put in her place. *Better the devil you know*. He still had FRIDAY keep a *careful* eye on everything that crossed her desk. He was also toying with making an updated contract of employment with a little help from the magic tome Loki had gifted him.

He didn't want Pepper to turn into another Obadiah, hell, his heart couldn't quite accept it was possible - but he hadn't thought she'd *run straight to SHIELD*. Who was he to say what she would or wouldn't do?

"Anthony." Jumping slightly at the sharp call of his name, he turned to Loki who was pointing at the couch he was laying on. "I require you here."

"Huh?" Loki shifted, pulling his feet back so he was sitting cross-legged and resting against the arm. "What?"

"I require you here," Loki repeated before wrinkling his nose. "Bring your device if you must."

Tony, too inquisitive for his own damn good, picked up the tablet and made his way to the opposite side, mirroring the demi-god. "Okay, what?"

"Are you suitably concentrated on me?"

Tony rolled his eyes but agreed. "Yes, Loki, you *have my attention*."

"Good." Loki dropped his eyes and went back to his book.

Tony stared, waiting for something more to happen than *being ignored*. "That's it? You dragged me over here for, what, a physical presence beside you?"

The look Loki shot him informed Tony quietly plainly that the mage had doubts to his intelligence. "No, I made you relocate so that your focus and attention would be given to something else."

"Yeah, on yo-" Tony fell silent as he caught up with what the other had done. "*Oh*."

Loki - once he was suitably assured his point had been made - picked up his place in the novel again. Tony let a slow, pleasantly surprised smile slip across his face. His legs had also been drawn up on the couch but he spread one out so he could nudge Loki's foot with his own. Loki's eyes flicked to his and Tony let him see the quiet gratitude. Loki didn't say anything, but his mouth had twitched up into a tiny grin by the time he turned back to his novel.

Taking the silent advice from Loki to change tracks, Tony pulled up a schematic on the tablet and happily worked on that. He didn't notice time passing as they stayed where they were without interruption, but when FRIDAY called for his attention, Tony was surprised to find two hours had gone by. "Boss?"

He also made the unexpected discovery, upon blinking back to the room, that his and Loki's legs had spread out and tangled together. They both shared an amused look, but didn't try to pull their sprawled legs back.

"Yeah, FRIDAY?" Tony asked, tilting his neck back against his shoulders.

"Colonel Rhodes is on the line."

Tony frowned. “Woah, were his ears burning earlier or something? Yeah, put him through.”

“Apologies, Boss, he has now ended the call. He wished to inform you that he is arriving at the tower. He wants to speak with you both.” She paused. “He is parking his vehicle presently.”

Tony shared a bewildered glance with Loki before telling FRIDAY, “Well, send him straight up.”

“Something has occurred to draw him here,” Loki summarised, his eyes narrowing suspiciously. Tony didn’t like the idea that Loki was right, but he couldn’t deny it. He went to stand up, but he stilled when a hand fell over his ankle. “Remain. Pacing will not alter the situation.”

“It’ll burn off some of the tension,” Tony rebutted but still settled back into the couch.

“Whatever occurs you have myself and the Colonel on your side, Anthony,” Loki assured. “We, all of us, are formidable men.”

Tony cracked a smile. “I’m going to tell Rhodey you complimented him.”

Loki huffed an unimpressed breath. “Contrary to your ridiculous belief, I do not *dislike* your associate. I merely prefer-”

“To have me *all to yourself*,” Tony couldn’t resist purring as he leant forward, lowering his eyelashes and offering his best bedroom smirk.

He was *damn* gratified to see Loki’s eyes dilate slightly before he blinked it away with the power of a fucking *Saint*. There were very few people who could handle one of *those* Tony Stark smirks with such ease. “I merely *prefer* to leave you to enjoy the company of your friend without my presence.”

“Loki,” Tony shook his head, faintly baffled at some of his ideas. “You *can stay*, you know. I actually like my friends to get to know each other.”

Loki gave a dismissive shrug. “Your friend is not comfortable in my presence. I am well used to leaving others to their preferred companions.”

*Fucking Asgardians*, Tony hissed internally, instantly realising where that need to make himself scarce had come from. How many times had Thor probably *asked* him to go away so that his friends would be more at ease? How many times would Thor have been oblivious to the discomfort and insults until Loki had just up and left?

“Yeah, okay,” Tony told him, trying to keep the anger from his voice. “But Rhodey isn’t going to *get* comfortable if you aren’t *around*. So, how about you hang with us sometime and we get you used to one another?”

Loki tilted his head, eyeing Tony with bemusement. “You are rather adamant on this.”

Laying the tablet flat on his lap, Tony leaned forward to make it easier to match the other by grabbing and squeezing Loki's ankle. Loki's eyes flicked down and focused on the touch. "Loki, I'd add this into the contract if we were still waging war over it."

The comment made Loki laugh softly and catch Tony's eyes. Amusement and warmth was rife in that green gaze as he answered, "If you insist, I suppose I can make time for *one* more mortal in my schedule."

"Pfft," Tony scoffed. "You don't have a *schedule* any more than I do."

When it came to the two of them, they had too many things in common to ever bother with a list, but *doing what they want* was definitely a big, blaring, neon one they shared. It was also why Tony knew if Loki *didn't* want to associate with Rhodey; wild horses wouldn't get them in a room together. Loki's agreement to try was just that, his *agreement*.

Tony knew Loki had a reputation as liar - and yeah, he was a damn fine wordsmith, negotiator and actor when he wanted to be - but Tony didn't think he lied half as much as he simply *bent* the truth. Loki knew how to play with words, but he could also be honest, and the core of what he'd just said had been that; Loki would put in the effort to get to know Rhodey.

Smiling, Tony nudged Loki's leg again in a quiet show of appreciation and despite having the opportunity, Loki never commented on it. He didn't pick up his book either, he just questioned FRIDAY, "There has been no activity in the channels Anthony has been observing?"

"No, Sir," FRIDAY answered. "There have been no further considerations concerning you as individuals or as regards to your partnership."

Tony smiled darkly. "Ultron taught everybody that even the best technology isn't foolproof."

"I would believe it is not a fool whom they wish to keep out."

More genuine amusement cracked through Tony's expression, but before he could respond the elevator chimed and FRIDAY informed them, "Colonel Rhodes, Boss."

Tony twisted in his seat so that he could see Rhodey as he made his way down to them. His shoulders were tight with tension and his mouth was a thin line. Tony tried not to let it show how much that pensive, angry expression worried him. "If you're here about Billy Ray Cyrus in the Pentagon sound system, I'm serious about that not being my idea."

"I can hardly be responsible for the musical artist," Loki remarked absently, "I merely suggested that they might enjoy an alternative working condition."

"Thank you," Rhodey told them, coming to stand beside the couch, "I now have confirmation over who I need kill."

"Oh, come on," Tony argued, "I timed it. You couldn't have been subjected to it for more than an hour."

“You know you only need to hear it once,” Rhodey intoned but with a look that gave it all the horror it probably deserved. Hell, no one had even dropped ‘*achy-breaky*’ and Tony could already see a mullet and hear that haunting twang.

He shuddered theatrically but conceded, “Point.”

“Colonel Rhodes,” Loki was watching him carefully, unswayed by the lighter topic. “This is not what you came to discuss. What has brought you here?”

“You’re not a small talk kind of guy, are you?” Rhodey theorised, not seeming surprised in the slightest.

Loki’s eyebrows rose. “Knowing the bureaucratic system you are confined to, I thought you might relish such a direct method?”

“Okay,” Rhodey allowed and after checking to make sure the coffee table was clear, he sat down opposite them. Resting his hands between his knees, he told them simply, “I want you to bind me to silence like you did Pepper.”

Tony didn’t know what to say for a good few seconds. The room was dead silent and even when he forced out a reply, he still felt like floundering. “You want us to *what?*”

“I’m being questioned,” Rhodey continued, discussing the heart of his confusion even if Tony hadn’t specified it. “They’re going to expect more from me sooner or later. There’s been a grace period but people are already trying to figure out what’s going on. I don’t want something to come out by accident or through interrogation.”

Loki was nodding slowly. “You wish to defend against betrayals.” There was a new appreciation to Loki’s gaze that said he’d been impressed. “Do you also wish to read the contract Miss Potts reviewed?”

“I’m not a contracts man,” Rhodey answered, “I’m also not doing this to gain more information with the hope of circumventing your spell.”

“You would have little luck if you tried,” Loki told him simply, yet with a dismissive edge that implied he didn’t believe Rhodey would attempt it. He was merely stating a fact. “That still doesn’t mean the option isn’t allowed to you. Do you wish to read our contract?”

Rhodey didn’t even glance between them. “I trust Tony to know what he’s doing.” His eyes narrowed as he held Loki’s gaze. “And I trust *you* to recognise the deal you have.”

Loki blinked before a surprisingly *satisfied* smile curved the mage’s lips. Tony was a little nervous watching the way an understanding seemed to have been silently brokered between them. “True friends seem difficult to gain in any realm,” Loki remarked. “Anthony has certainly been lucky to stumble into your favour.”

“Hey!” Tony protested, even if it was said with teasing him in mind. Rhodey also noticed the light-hearted tone and sighed loudly before playing along with Loki, “Some parasites are harder to shake off than others.”



Loki chuckled, not seeming bothered when Tony kicked him slightly for it. Hell, Loki probably barely felt it considering a bullet was lucky enough to *scratch* him. “Well, Colonel, do you need information on the process?”

Loki began pulling away from Tony, and he couldn't help feeling disappointed when Loki was sitting with his feet on the floor and his attention on Rhodey. He'd *liked* their tangled mess of limbs. Tony was a physical guy; he liked to touch his friends and soak up the comfort they provided him. Loki seemed to like it too. *Not affectionate by nature*, Tony's ass. Loki obviously hadn't been in a position where he could just laze around with someone. He took to it like a moth to a flame. Granted, sometimes Loki wanted to be alone, but when he was around Tony? He had no problem breaking personal boundaries.

Still, he knew Loki needed to concentrate and discuss the spell with Rhodey, but couldn't he do that on the couch with Tony? *Spells aren't exactly easy*, he reminded himself - but it didn't mean he couldn't take advantage of the new position, right?

Tony eyed Loki's lap with a speculative gaze before wiggling his way down the couch slightly. Loki and Rhodey were discussing the same things they'd run by Pepper and that Tony had picked apart in the past. He only listened with half an ear as he got into a slumped position and very carefully edged his ankles onto Loki's leg.

It took all of a second for Loki's head to drop to eye Tony's feet with incredulity. He literally stopped mid-sentence. Rhodey was looking between his wiggling toes and Tony's face with eyebrows near his hairline.

“Anthony,” Loki said with an overly casual tone, “*what* are you doing?”

*In for a penny*. Pushing further down the couch, Tony put his feet fully in the demi-god's lap. *In for a pound*. “Relaxing.”

Loki hadn't yet moved his attention from the unexpected weight on his legs and Tony idly wondered if the action had broken the guy. He saw Loki's fingers twitch and Tony realised he was probably close to gaining tentacles for feet. He still didn't move away.

“And you need my lap to do this, why?”

A surprisingly logical question, too bad Tony was going to be entirely unhelpful. He even rubbed his ankles against Loki's left thigh, getting himself comfortable. “Why not?”

He could see Loki about to rebut but Rhodey broke in. “Forget it, Loki. Personal space is not a concept Tony understands when it comes to his friends.”

The words dragged Loki's attention to the other. His expression was still one of perplexity. “He does this to you often?”

Rhodey snorted. “He once climbed into my bed and hugged me like a teddy bear because he was cold.”

“Hey!” Tony complained. “Conserving body heat, totally acceptable reasoning.”

“It was California in the middle of summer!”

“The air-conditioner was too low,” Tony protested.

“You *controlled* the temperature,” Rhodey argued the same way he had for the ten years since it had happened.

Tony sniffed. “You didn’t kick me out. You *cuddled me back*. You’re just as responsible as I am.”

“Hey, man, you can’t just kick a squirming Tony Stark out of your bed. It’s not possible. Hell, Pentagon meetings can be easier.”

Loki was looking between them oddly. “You do not even try to dissuade others from it.”

“From what?” Rhodey questioned, but Tony had an idea where it was going.

“Believing you are lovers.” Loki turned his attention to Tony. “It truly isn’t deplorable on your realm?”

Rhodey stiffened; Tony could see it from the corner of his eye. “Hold up,” his voice had gone slightly cold. “What did I just learn about Asgard?”

“You learnt,” Tony told him very candidly, “why Loki and I are fucking.”

“I think I need a little more background than that, Tony,” Rhodey flicked his eyes between them. “You’re silencing me anyway. Consider this my request over the contract; what’s going on?”

Loki and Tony exchanged a look where Tony raised his eyebrows, letting Loki make the decision. The mage hesitated for a moment before turning back to Rhodey and admitting, “I gave inaccurate implications of our relationship to Thor as a means of discomforting him. When he came to see Anthony-”

“Broke into my fucking tower,” Anthony corrected, earning a brief glare from Loki.

“When he *visited* Anthony, he referenced my inferences in an attempt to repulse Anthony.” For the first time since breaching the subject, a small smile touched Loki’s lips. “It did not work in his favour.”

Tony decided to elaborate further, just to help the flame of anger burning behind Rhodey’s eyes. “Turns out the Aesir see homosexuality as dishonourable, womanly and something you’d probably get beaten up for? Right?”

He glanced at Loki for agreement and instantly wanted to reach out and squeeze Loki’s shoulder in comfort at seeing the tension Tony’s words had unintentionally created.

Loki still answered him, even if a part of Tony wished he hadn’t. He was managing to show very little discomfort, but Tony doubted he was happy about the topic. Loki’s eyes also weren’t on either of them and his voice when he spoke was flat and detached from his

recounting. “One does not merely get ‘beaten up’ for such inclinations, Anthony. Truly, to have that outcome would be considered lucky. If they survived discovery with only minor injuries? Yes, they did quite well. Even Thor was not so kind when he found me with my first lover.”

Tony’s face went blank, a long ingrained response to feeling powerful *fury* and knowing he couldn’t express it. It didn’t stop him from wanting to find Thor and rip him to pieces. Tony was fucking *gratified* to see Rhodey looked just as livid. They met eyes for a moment and Tony knew Rhodey would be on his side. He’d be ready to hold Thor down for Tony to pummel as long as he got a turn as well.

Tony knew he should say something, lighten the mood or generally bolster the conversation, but he knew anything that came out was going to depict how much he wanted to go up to Asgard and blow up the general populace. Loki, however, spoke first and he probably didn’t even realise how much his words did the opposite of what he’d intended.

“Don’t bother yourself with concern, Anthony,” he dismissed, and God, how sad was it he probably thought Rhodey didn’t even care? “I was a youth and we survived the encounter in lieu of my status as a Prince. It is hardly the worse that has befallen me and very rarely was it because I merely slept with a gender they did not like.”

“Yeah,” Rhodey replied, a new glint in his eyes, “but prejudice doesn’t exactly go away once it’s there. You do, say, act, *look* one way and that’s never going to disappear even if you’re the otherwise perfect model of what they want.” His eyes and smile weren’t just sympathetic, they were *empathetic* and Tony saw the moment Loki recognised it. “It’s even worse if you have characteristics they *don’t* want.”

“Yes,” Loki murmured, “quite.”

“I think Tony’s right,” Rhodey announced after they’d eyed each other for a long moment. “I will get along with you.” He held out his hand for Loki. “I just need to take a page from Tony’s book and only accept the opinion of someone I trust.” He smiled. “So far the only people who matter have said you’re a good guy. That’s the only opinion I’m taking on now.”

Loki looked startled, but he still accepted the hand with cautious movements. He didn’t seem to fathom what had just happened. “You know little about me. A small facet of who I am shouldn’t change your opinion so rapidly.”

“It doesn’t,” Rhodey replied, letting go of his palm. “But it tells me that the one feeding us information hasn’t been honest, or if he has, he’s still left out too much context for me to be comfortable with. I don’t like that and I don’t like one-sided stories.” He shrugged. “Your invasion wasn’t yours but everyone played it like it was because it suited them. Asgard wants us to believe them and with only two people to tell a story, you don’t tend to look too closely at the guy who just tried to attack you.”

“But now?”

“But now you’ve not only won over and got the alliance of the single most powerful human on this planet,” Rhodey smiled, “but now you’ve got his friend listening.”

Tony couldn't stop the grin from spreading over his face as he shifted so he could slap Loki on the shoulder. "Now you've got two mortals on your side! We've got your public pardon in the bag! Oooh, speaking of," Tony turned to Rhodey. "You going to help us with that? Always room for one more voice on his team."

Loki was shaking his head, looking vaguely mystified. "The Colonel is a member of your government and an Avenger, he cannot possibly-"

"He can *definitely* be on your side," Rhodey overruled him. "And it's Rhodey, or Rhodes."

Loki brought up a hand to pinch the bridge of his nose. A tic he seemed to have when Tony - or apparently mortals, plural now - confounded or frustrated him. "I appreciate your assistance," his mouth twitched and he paused before deciding on, "Rhodes, but the nature of your position can be compromised due to-"

"Yeah," and Tony was the one interrupting this time. "Rhodey's been my friend for *years*. If you think worrying about career stability is going to shake him off, you don't know him too well yet."

"The concern's nice though," Rhodey chimed in.

Tony gestured at the mage. "See! I told you, he's awesome and *magic*. You have got to see some of the things he can do. Ooh! Did I show you the never cooling cup? And the spell book he gave me?"

Rhodey blinked. "He made a cup that never cools? Wait. He gave *you magic*?"

Tony took his feet off Loki and pushed off the couch. "You have got to see some of the shit in this book. Your inner engineer is going to cry. Did you know I can make something hover just for the sake of hovering with a *squiggle*?"

"Fuck off," Rhodey denied but Tony was already nodding and Rhodey was standing up to join him. Tony turned to Loki who had leant back against the couch and was watching them, his eyes moving between them as if he were at a tennis match.

"Come on, Loki. You can spell Rhodey and then we can show him some of the things you made me rant about. I want to break Rhodey's brain. It'll be fun!" Loki just stared at them and Tony frowned and moved closer. He put his hands on Loki's knees and it made the mage flinch back from him, but their faces were still inches apart. "You in there?"

He was shoved away angrily. "Of course I am!"

"Great," Tony darted out and grabbed the hand that had pushed him. He knew physically dragging Loki off the couch wasn't possible, but he had still made it impracticable for Loki to teleport away now that they were touching. "So, let's go."

Loki opened his mouth before shutting it and gritting his teeth. "Anthony... Anthony this is not. I cannot - you just..."

Anthony squeezed Loki's hand and placed his other palm on Loki's opposite shoulder. He made the frustrated demi-god look him in the eyes as he told him quietly, "We don't care who you were. We only care about who you *are*. You're just Loki. You're my friend and you're a good guy and that's all that matters to me, and in turn, all that matters to Rhodey. You're only ever going to be *Loki* here." Tony pulled back a little. "So come be Loki; the guy with badass magic who's going to play in the lab with us."

Something inside Loki melted at his words; Tony didn't know what it was, but he could see it happening. He could also see the tension bleeding out of him. Loki was still confused and unsure, but he wasn't resisting any longer. Tony tried a tentative pull and Loki let himself be moved off the couch and in the direction of the labs. Tony knew he could let go of Loki's hand at any time as Rhodey had swiftly started questioning Loki on magic to diffuse the tension and any remaining awkwardness. It worked too, and Loki was discussing things with Rhodey animatedly by the time they reached the elevator.

Tony liked it. He liked seeing his friends getting along. He liked knowing that they could talk freely with Rhodey because he'd *asked* to be silenced by the time he left today. He also liked holding Loki's hand, because he liked knowing he was tethering Loki to Earth and keeping Loki firmly placed in the knowledge that Tony wasn't going anywhere.

He liked holding onto Loki, because as long as he had a physical connection to the mage, Tony knew he wouldn't disappear. He knew he wouldn't, *couldn't* leave.

## Chapter End Notes

RHODEY IS A PRECIOUS SUGARMUFFIN. That is literally what I was yelling at my friend through the writing of the second half of this chapter. And Tony is precious too. As is Loki. Just. *Everyone is precious, okay?*

But. Ahem. That's just my opinion... what are yours? ;)

(And yes, this chapter got *long*. Everything I planned didn't even happen. I had to bump parts to chapter 12, haha. Whoops. Too many friendship feels. ~~Not that I'm complaining, mind you.~~)

# Chapter 12

## Chapter Notes

HOLY CRAP. OMG. EVERYONE. YOU'RE SO FUCKING SWEET. 1000+ KUDOS? AAAAAH! I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO SAY OTHER THAN *THANK YOU ALL SO MUCH!!*

I just, wow, I can't even. *Wow*. You guys blow me away with your support, sweetness and the time you put aside to read my stories. Thank you all. I love these boys, but I love each and every one of you for keeping me energized to keep writing. ♥

All my lovely readers and the precious HalcyonFrost, you're the reason these stories keep pushing forward so rapidly. I can only say thank you again. I'm just blown away by all your kindness, kudos and comments. ♥

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

Rhodey stayed for a couple of hours and Tony was suitably pleased by the other's face over some of the things Loki could do. He was *also* happy to see *Loki's* face over Rhodey's reactions. He got this slightly incredulous furrow between his brows, but also this proudly arrogant smirk.

A part of Tony hated bursting Loki's bubble and showing him that Tony wasn't the only person in the universe who could appreciate Loki's magical ability and general intelligence. He *liked* being the sole focus of Loki's appreciation and friendship. But he knew he couldn't be selfish, Loki *deserved* more friends, and who was a better friend to gain than Rhodey?

That was right, absolutely no one.

*Tony* couldn't even claim to be a better friend. He'd let people down over the years and he was certainly shit at *keeping* friends. It was a testament to Rhodey, really. He was the good friend in the equation, not Tony.

So it was only fair that Loki, after a long life of *shit* people, got James Rhodes on his side. Tony wasn't jealous and he *wasn't* having a territorial battle like Rhodey and Loki had. He was happy for them, see? All smiles.

It didn't mean he couldn't breathe a quiet sigh of relief once Rhodey had left - newly silenced - and it became just the two of them again. He didn't know what had bothered him. He liked them getting along he just... there was something to be said for just him and Loki. It was something he'd never shared with anyone else before. What he had with Rhodey and Bruce came close, but it still wasn't the same. Tony just hadn't felt like giving it up yet.

He hadn't *realised* that's what it would feel like, because it hadn't at first.

They'd shown Rhodey some of the tricks and they'd been smirking at each other, sharing in his flabbergasted expression and taking turns answering his questions. But then Rhodey had started discussing magic directly with Loki. Tony could have chimed in but they were answers he already had, they were queries he wasn't interested in. There was no reason to get involved, but he'd *wanted* to. He's wanted to dive into the middle and get his friends' attention. It was only his awareness of the complete *ridiculousness* of the urge that made him stop, turn and concentrate on something else.

He still got pulled back into the conversation or interjected into it himself when it was relevant but the urge still persisted even then, hovering under his skin like a bad itch. It only faded once they'd said their goodbyes to Rhodey and were left in the lab together.

The peace slipped back over him and made him relax. And it was *weird*.

Fuck, maybe he was just overly tense? Maybe it wasn't so much Rhodey as it was what he represented; the Avengers, the government, the outside world? Everything they still had to deal with in order for Loki to be able to walk around freely on Earth.

"Anthony?"

Tony blinked out of his pensive thoughts and looked over at Loki. He was frowning. "You seem... unhappy." He didn't quite shift on his feet, but there was something noticeably uncomfortable about him. "Did you not want the Colonel?"

"Rhodey," Tony automatically corrected as they had been doing all afternoon - much to Loki's bemusement.

"*Rhodes*," Loki allowed, "and I to get along? You seem disappointed that we have."

"What? No!" Tony shook his head. "I'm just a bit tense. It's nothing to do with you guys."

"Oh?" Loki crossed his arms. "Yet you have relaxed the moment your friend has departed."

Tony winced. "Okay, it's *slightly* to do with you guys."

"Oh," Loki requested, "how so?"

And that was the problem, wasn't it? How to articulate it?

Tony ran a hand through his hair and tried to explain. "I want you guys to get along, don't get me wrong."

"But?" Loki prompted when he fell silent.

"But I don't want you to *like each other more*," the words fell out before Tony could stop them, rife with insecurity and the desperate need to keep both of them in his life - to keep both of them as *his*.

Loki took all of a second to understand. "Ah," he nodded slowly. "You worry that the characteristics that drew you to us will make a stronger alliance form between Rhodes and I,

therefore removing you from the equation.”

Tony knew his smile was every bit as bitter and self-deprecating as so many parts of him could be. “You take away my money and my comforts, Loki, and there’s not a whole lot here to recommend. People put up with me, they don’t *choose* me.” He swallowed. “You guys did - for fuck knows what reason, apart from being the last option. But if you have each other and you get along? What the hell do you need me for?”

“Anthony,” Loki said softly into the silence that followed. Taking slow steps closer, he reached out and laid a hand on Tony’s shoulder, telling him quietly. “I am aligned to you. Rhodes is an acceptable companion but I am...” he hesitated before strengthening his resolve and allowing, “*friends* with you. You need not fear me leaving you for another. The contract between us aside, you are a valuable ally and one of the few people I can consider myself genuinely fond of. You will not be eclipsed merely because I can appreciate another.” He narrowed his eyes. “And you have *far* more to offer than material goods. They are a nice addition, yes, but *you* are the important fixture to me in this tower.”

Tony couldn't help the way he'd warmed at hearing Loki call them *friends*. Tony had certainly said it and Loki hadn't been disagreeing but it was another thing entirely to have Loki *confirm* it.

And to hear Loki, a literal *Prince*, dismiss comfort and wealth in favour of Tony, *just Tony*, it made him want to do something stupid like *hug* the other.

It was a fleeting thought and rapidly dismissed, but he still felt a need to touch Loki, to prove he was real - that he wasn't an *illusion*. So he lightly shoved the mage, clearing his throat as he did. Loki didn't even move from the pressure, he just glanced at the spot Tony had touched with raised eyebrows.

"Was that intended to do something?"

Tony huffed out a breath. "It's a Midgardian thing."

"To attempt to push people for no discernible reason?"

"It's more like a means of showing affection without actually showing it." Loki frowned until Tony was forced to elaborate. "It's the way you respond when someone says something sappy and you don't know what to do."

"Ah," Loki nodded, his expression clearing, a hint of something in his eyes and mouth that made Tony think he's just been played. "It is a common feature from Thor. I was merely uncertain of the similarity what with the lack of weight behind the gesture."

Tony abruptly scowled. "Did you just call me *weak*?"

"I would hardly have known you touched me if I did not observe it."

This time when Tony punched him, he used significant strength. The kind of force he'd give a punching bag. Loki's shoulder did move back with the gesture, but he didn't even rub it, he



just chuckled.

"Perhaps we should invest in some means of improving your fighting capacity outside your armour? One wants to leave at least some manner of bruise, don't they?"

"Hey, I made the Hulk loose a tooth, you know!"

Loki's eyebrows rose. "Did you? Without your armour?"

"Er."

"I survived being throttled into your tower by that creature. I would think my durability and success somewhat exceeds yours."

"You call whimpering in a crater on my floor a success?"

"It severed my connection to the ones monitoring me," Loki explained somewhat blandly. "It was not a pain I would seek to experience again, but it was still a welcome end to my torment."

Tony's face twisted into a wince as he reviewed the moment they had ambushed Loki at the tower. *If it's all the same to you, I'll have that drink now.* He'd been amused, even then, at Loki's response. He'd just wished he'd known more at the time and could have *given* him that drink. Loki had deserved it, and a whole boatload of further comforts after the Hell he'd been through.

Tony also knew that he hadn't even heard all of it. He'd learned bits and pieces from Thor and Jane, but Tony *knew* there was more. He was half-afraid to prod that particular hornets' nest though, he wasn't sure if hearing Loki's side would require a fully stocked bar or a fully stocked armoury. He didn't have much tolerance for Asgard and he almost didn't want to know what had thrown Loki over the edge.

Tony also regretted having watched the Hulk's battering of Loki like a comedic gif in the months after New York.

"Anthony?" Loki prompted him. "It was some time ago, I hardly dwell on it."

"I know," Tony sighed and forced himself to shake the other thoughts off. "I'm just in a weird mood."

"I have noticed." He paused before asking, "Tell me, Anthony, what mood were you in when you created my gallery?"

"Gallery?" Tony asked, not making any connections.

Loki smiled, his eyes full of mischief and humour. "The one designed for use in one's chambers."

It took Tony half a second before he laughed. He leant back against the desk and smirked. "Oh, the wankbank. I'd wondered if you'd been told about it yet." He waggled his eyebrows.

"Come on; tell me you've used it. What was your favourite picture?"

Loki shook his head even while he was chuckling. "I find the idea too ludicrous to partake in, Anthony. Truly, I would spend more time amused than amorous."

"Humor is an important part of sex," Tony lightly argued, "at least, it damn well should be."

"Is that so?" Loki stalked closer, a smirk curling his mouth. "And what would you say of *our* sex life then, Anthony?" He stopped in front of Tony and leant close, his hands on the table either side of Tony's hips. "Do you intend to make me laugh as I pin you to a wall?" Tony's crossed arms were brushing Loki's chest. The linen tunic caressing his arms as Loki's teasing smile and dancing eyes stopped inches from his own. "What *do* you intend to do with a God in your bed?"

Tony let a smile slide across his face, full of wicked delight and the promise of satisfaction to come. "How about you gag me, stop any of those jokes from coming out? Shut me up. Tie me down. Make me beg for you to take me. Make me beg for," he leaned close, "*my God.*"

Loki's eyes darkened. "My, my, Anthony. What a surprising mind you have."

"Playboy, babe," Tony answered. "Nothing's going to surprise me."

Loki's eyes flared at his response, something dangerous and thrilling that said *challenge accepted*. Tony felt his skin prickle, having all that focused attention on him. He felt heat lazily crawl through him, and thought; *this is going to be fun*.

He wanted to see what a thousand year old mage had in his repertoire, he wanted to hear all the ways Loki was fucking him in their imagined sex-life, he wanted to see if he could make *Loki's* toes curl with words alone.

He wanted to see what they were *both* capable of.

Loki lifted his hand, his fingertips inches from Tony's face. "*Well,*" he began his voice having dropped lower and become smoother. It sounded like something that should be illegal, especially when he followed it up with his name, "*Anthony.*"

It wasn't quite breathy, but it was *damn* closer and Tony had to do his best not to swallow or shift on his feet. Or rearrange his pants.

He was so caught up in the moment that when alarms suddenly flared overhead he flinched, his shoulders coming up to his ears as Loki pulled back with a deep frown. His voice was back to normal apart from the whip-like demand for an explanation, "Anthony?"

"Fuck," Tony hissed as that particular kind of alert registered and he pushed Loki away so he could move over to the assembling point. "Someone's attacking the city."

"What?" Loki asked, sounding bewildered. "Whom?"

"FRIDAY?" Tony requested.

“I’m uncertain, Boss. The assailant in an unknown woman, but she is emitting a small energy signature.”

“Magic?” Loki demanded.

“No, Sir.”

“Great, backyard Earth energy,” Tony grumbled while FRIDAY began preparing the suit and bringing it to him. “Any other bonuses?”

“There are a variety of animals she seems to be controlling. They do not adhere to the normal sociological and genetic patterns of their species.”

“Make a note that we’re going to have to confirm with PETA that I’m *not* an asshole after this,” Tony informed her as his suit entered the lab and automatically began to assemble around him. “Is Rhodey still in the area?” He let the mask remain open as he turned to face Loki. “Sorry, we’ll have to continue this... later.” Tony had trailed off as he looked at the other. Loki was standing where he’d been before only he’d exchanged his casual clothes for battle-armor. It was the same outfit he’d worn when he’d teleported into Tony’s penthouse and put their whole alliance into motion. “What are you doing?”

Loki lifted his shoulder half-heartedly. “We are allies, are we not? Surely it would be wise to test how well we fight together.”

Tony let out a laugh that was half amusement, half horror. “The public will be more afraid of *you* than whoever the hell this Animal Whisperer is.”

A slight tightening of Loki’s eyes was his only sign of unhappiness at hearing that. But what was Tony meant to do, jump on board without acknowledging the reality of Loki just showing up in the middle of New York?

“True,” Loki allowed, “but they will need to grow used to me eventually.”

“Yeah, but with a bit of warning and a press conference for padding.”

“And that is meant to incur trust?” Loki riposted. “Some scripted words they will be uncertain of in lieu of my namesake as God of *Lies*?” He shook his head. “No. Why not this?” He smirked. “Would not the image of me protecting your city at the side of the great Iron Man,” he made a grand gesture to incorporate Tony and that the Engineer watched sceptically, “a famed and beloved hero, do far more for my reputation among them?”

Tony was grimacing, he couldn’t help it. Yeah, people loved a hero, but Loki was also their first real taste of a villain. He wasn’t sure how well they were going to take to him. Loki let out a frustrated breath. “I will not be *bothered* by their fear of me, Anthony. You are well aware I have spent most of my life defending those who dislike me.” Tony gritted his teeth at the reminder, but Loki didn’t seem to notice it as he pursed his lips slightly. “But if it is *your* reputation you do not wish to-

“Don’t be an idiot, Loki, fucking hell. You’re an *asset*. Just because they’re going to take a bit of time to warm up to you doesn’t mean *I* give a shit about it.” He shrugged as much as he could in the suit. “Well, beyond clearing your name from false charges and getting you the free pass to Earth you deserve.”

It didn’t mean it wasn’t still a damn stupid idea. *But*, Loki was right about actions speaking louder than words. Hell, Tony had always liked doing things with a bang. This might be more of a Jericho fucking missile to the public’s face, but when had he ever shied away from something shocking?

“Well then,” Loki replied, and he was smiling in that way he had that said he was genuinely flattered but trying not to show it. He also held out a hand. “Shall I take us to the latest villain’s location?”

Tony’s expression brightened, all else derailing for a moment. “You’re going to *teleport* me?”

“If you’re not averse?”

“Hell no, I’m not!” Tony took the steps needed to reach him, grabbing a communicator while he did. “Here, stick this in your ear so we can stay in contact.”

Loki eyed it dubiously, but he still applied it. “We will find a more suitable means for transferring our communications.”

Tony just rolled his eyes before asking FRIDAY. “Rhodey?”

A few moments later he heard the other get patched through and answer. “Five minutes away. Where the hell are you, Tony? She’s got a fucking grizzly bear down there ripping into things.”

“How interesting,” Loki murmured, “and you say she has no magic, FRIDAY?”

“No, Sir,” was answered at the same time Rhodey questioned, incredulous, “Loki?”

“Yup. We got magic on our side today, Rhodey.”

Rhodey let out a groan. It conveyed pretty succinctly how well he thought the situation was going to go for them. He didn’t offer any complaints or try to change their minds though, bless him. He simply told them both. “Fuck, okay, but hurry up.”

“I can wear an illusion,” Loki suggested quietly, his attention focused on Tony’s face. “It does not have to be *me* beside you.”

Tony tilted his head, holding Loki’s gaze and seeing the willingness to do what he was suggesting and the age old resignation of knowing he wasn’t what somebody wanted. Tony had already been leaning heavily towards one answer, but this just tipped him fully over the edge.

Letting a wide smile spread across his face, Tony told FRIDAY. “Give Pepper that five minute warning. The world’s in for a treat; Tony Stark officially has a God on his side.” He

slid down the mask and took Loki's hand. They couldn't link their fingers with the suit in the way, but he squeezed it lightly. "Let's go show the universe just who my new ally is."

Loki's eyes blazed with magic and his smile could have darkened the sun. Loki was blinding in his confidence and his wicked pleasure and that feeling flowed out and over Tony making him feel utter power and elation.

*Yes, he thought, this is the Loki I'm aligned with. **This** is the Loki that the world needs to see. This is the guy you are all going to wish you had fighting with you.*

## Chapter End Notes

I know, I know, it's a short chapter, I'm sorry! But in order to have the ~battle in the next chapter, well, this happened. I'll do my best to update quicker in recompense but well, no promises. I have to get it written first, heh :|

# Chapter 13

## Chapter Notes

Sorry this is a little later than usual! It's coming into a busy time of my year so while I'm still going to try and keep to my "an update within two weeks" deadline, it might fluctuate a bit :) But don't worry! I have no plans on giving up on this story.

Anyway, I hope you like the chapter!

**Oh, but possible warning:** A giant, mutated animal dies in this? Um. I'm not sure if I should warn people just in case for that? To me, it falls into a similar category to the Leviathan's from the Avenger movies? But, idk. Better safe than sorry :|

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

Loki gripped his gauntlet tightly and moved in closer. Their chests were almost touching and Tony raised his eyebrows below the armour. "Loki?"

"Merely confirming our *closeness* with the world, Anthony."

Tony snorted out a laugh while Loki twisted his free hand and the lab dissolved from around them.

They appeared on a rooftop in an area of New York that Tony couldn't place instantly, but the sound of destruction and screams certainly was becoming old hat in his life.

He didn't pull his hand from Loki's as he shifted slightly to survey the street. There was a grizzly, a rhino - and was that three Bulls? Great. There was a woman standing on top of a car with knee-high boots, a billowing cape, and whipping hair. She also had a large, maniacal grin. Yup. She was definitely their villain.

"Please, Anthony," Loki was wincing slightly, "tell me I was not so dreadfully dramatic."

"It looked cute on you," Tony answered absently as he analysed the amount of civilians. "We need to minimise casualties."

"Perhaps you and the Colonel would be better tasked rescuing your people?"

"I told you, Loki." Rhodey answered, the sound making them turn to look over their shoulders as he landed beside them on the building. "It's Rhodes."

Loki's mouth curled upward briefly before a minor explosion drew their attention to the street. Rhodey was instantly back in the air as he announced, "I'll take the rhino."

"I'll get the girl," Tony cheerfully declared.

"I'll see if I can make a pet of the remainder then, shall I?" Loki suggested with an alarming amount of intent.

"I am not getting a bear!" Tony shouted after the mage who had quickly disappeared. "Fuck."

Firing up his repulsors, Tony shot through the air and towards their villainess. He chose to ignore the flock of pigeons that tried to re-enact "The Birds" on him. Luckily, he was a damn good flyer.

He landed on the concrete and raised his weapons at the Animal Whisperer. "Party's over. How about we pack up and go home before the mess gets any bigger?"

"Oh no," the woman announced with the kind of *utter crazy* in her tone that said reasoning wasn't a viable option. "I believe we are just getting started."

Disconcerting did not begin to cover the emotion Tony felt at watching a giant worm rip up through the ground behind her and demonstrate very sharp teeth.

He was having sudden, *vivid* flashbacks to Men in Black II. He was regretting liking that subway scene so much now. "Honey, I told you we weren't inviting Jeff."

Tony wasn't sure who he was talking to - it was really more of a general statement - but the woman still smiled and directed, "Eat him."

Tony was in the air and to the side just quick enough to miss that fast head as it launched itself at him, smashing into the concrete and probably causing a minor earthquake. Tony was more concerned with it swivelling around and trying to catch him in its large, tooth-filled mouth.

"Um, guys," Tony called over the comm. "Giant, carnivorous worm. Any," he quickly spun to the side, "*shit*, thoughts?"

"Anthony," Loki answered after a pause and with a slight loss of breath, "the bear is now conducting electricity. While I am *used* to this sort of battle with Thor, I by no means can leave it to terrorise the building of civilians I am currently protecting. Please find your own means of squashing that creature."

Tony almost made the mistake of taking his eyes off the worm to look for Loki. "Electric bear?"

"Yes, yes," Loki grumbled and there was a distinct roar that followed from his side of the communicators. Loki didn't seem overly bothered. "I will be fine."

"Each creature," FRIDAY began informing them as Tony ducked around another swipe of the worm's mouth while trying to lead it away from highly populated areas, "has an abnormal genome that seems to be the cause of their enhanced abilities."

Tony didn't like the sound of that. "Rhodey, what's wrong with the rhinos and bulls?"

"Well," Rhodey answered sardonically, "the bulls can teleport."

"... What?"

"Yeah, that's about what I thought," Rhodey told him. "They don't have a shit tonne of control though. One's currently stuck in a wall and kicking its legs pretty harmlessly in an alleyway."

"And the rhinoceros?" Loki queried.

"Thick armour plating," Rhodey described. "It's like its skin shifted or thickened; nothing's even scratching it. They're also really, *really* angry."

"Yes," Loki responded simply. "Trapped and cornered animals usually behave in violent and irrational ways." He paused, possibly to fight, possibly to breathe before he added, "The confusion of their new abilities is no doubt frightening them as well."

"Yeah, well, I don't know about *you*," Tony spoke, turning a corner sharply and wincing as the worm smashed right through the nearby building headfirst, sending debris to the ground below. "But I'd like to be able to *stop them*. Preferably before I am *eaten*."

There was a brief silence before Loki wondered, "This group for animals that you mentioned, do they protect mutated creatures such as these?"

"No killing," Rhodey interjected hurriedly.

"No, No, kind of on his side here," Tony disagreed, "No one wants a giant, carnivorous worm getting replicated; dead worm, much safer."

"You can hardly claim it is carnivorous, Anthony," Loki criticised calmly, "merely violent."

"It has teeth and it's going for a Tony snack. One way or another it's *trying to eat me*."

"Would you like to swap creatures then?" Loki questioned over something that sounded like static. It was probably the bear doing its Thor impression. "Perhaps before more buildings begin to topple?"

Tony narrowed his eyes. "Was that a slight? You telling me I'm doing a bad job?"

"Certainly not, Anthony, the rubble missed those civilians by some inches."

"Okay, can we *leave* the old married banter until you're back at the tower?" Rhodey requested. "Seriously, Tony, we need to stop these guys."

"I'm not actually just flying around doing *nothing*." He flicked his eyes to his displays, listening to FRIDAY relay the position of any lingering people. "Is someone keeping an eye on Ace Ventura?"

"I seem to be a source of some fascination," Loki informed, having managed to translate his reference. There was a slight strain to his voice though and another roar followed not long



after. "She has been watching me for some time."

Tony felt an irrational surge of annoyance. A rather large amount of concern too. "Why you?"

"I'm not sure," Loki answered, not taking the chance for arrogance - *I am a God, Anthony, why would I not be watched?* - like Tony had honestly expected. "But it is keeping her occupied. Please kindly deal with the worm and draw her attention from me. I wish to put this bear and the other creatures to sleep, but I will need Rhodes to distract them while I do so."

"Right, got it." Tony announced before switching over the comms to ask FRIDAY. "So, think a laser will cut it? Or do we think I'll end up like Hercules?"

"Adhering to worm physiology," FRIDAY answered, "if you cut above the clitellum, it will not be able to re-grow its lower form."

"Right, so, slice it across the neck. Can't be too hard, right?"

FRIDAY was good enough to ignore the fact that he'd spent the entirety of their conversation dodging the creature's mouth. It was persistent and he hadn't wanted to fly too high and make it turn its attention on something or *someone* else. It didn't look like he'd have a choice though, so Tony shot up, watching carefully as the worm tried to follow him but ran out of length.

He'd never heard a worm make a noise before, although, worms never had teeth as far as he knew either. This one bared them at Tony and made a sort of gruff wheeze. It wasn't overtly terrifying and Tony *almost* felt bad about pointing his laser at it.

"How long do you think it will take to chop off the head?"

"Some minutes. May I suggest a more explosive measure?"

"What? Raining worm guts, really?" But Tony was already changing his position as well as his arsenal. The laser was too impractical and torturous and he knew it. The worm also wasn't likely to stand still and was really just a confused and angry animal; Tony didn't want to hurt it anymore than he had to.

"Alright," Tony pointed a missile at the oversized invertebrate. It was crushing cars with its body in its attempts to slither nearer to Tony. "New plan," he told FRIDAY. "Let's make Jeff open wide."

Tony made sure the nearby buildings would remain standing and that there were minimal civilians before he made that mouth try to nab him again - but instead of a crunchy Iron Man appetiser, the poor guy got a Stark Industries welcome basket.

He winced as the weapon had an instant effect. The worm had been forced to grow, but it hadn't become much denser than its smaller counterpart. It blew up like a bad microwave meal and Tony barely avoided being coated by some of the larger pieces.

"Loki," he switched back to the others while moving away from the fiery carcass. "Gonna need you to magic all those guts away somewhere. We can't afford them being experimented with."

There was a brief pause. "You tell me this *now*?"

"Maybe pick up some flowers on your way home too, Honey," Tony suggested while zeroing in on the unhappy woman who'd caused the whole thing.

He heard Loki mutter something unflattering that sounded like it could be an Asgardian curse word, and he had FRIDAY make a note to look it up later. "Rhodey, you good to help Loki with the bear?"

"Sure. I'll just let go of these cars and make the rhino and bulls charge something else, will I?"

It took FRIDAY showing him a video from a nearby camera to understand what Rhodey was doing. There was a mangled blue car and a taxi on either side of him, he was holding them as careful shields between himself and the continually charging animals. Tony was honestly surprised they hadn't buckled yet.

"Maybe set up a red car, yell olé and skip out while they're busy?"

The huff of frustrated amusement through the line made Tony smile, but it didn't last long before he was forced to drop down in front of the unhappy villainess. He hadn't had a chance to physically look for Loki but the sounds of battle nearby and FRIDAY's readings comforted him.

"Don't look at me like that," he told the woman on her throne of mangled vehicles. "I told you to stop letting Jeff eat explosives."

"The way you waste life is *atrocious*. You have no right to inhabit this world."

"Lady," Tony answered, "I didn't unleash the worm in a place it could get people killed."

"You think they deserve life more than my creatures?" She gestured at the nearby buildings. "They, *humans*, are not worth the air they breathe!"

Tony blinked. "Uh, hate to break it to you, but you're just as human as the rest of us."

She glared at him so strongly that Tony was almost worried he might have been wrong about that. After all, what with the amount of super-powered assholes popping up, it would be just his luck that she could shoot something from her eyes.

"There are those beyond this Earth," she told him, "and there are those who perceive the *true* reason for their presence."

It suddenly clicked. "Loki and Thor." He frowned. "Wait. Are you saying you believe they're here for a *higher purpose*?"

She made a rotating gesture with her wrist, but her finger also kept twirling. A pained edge seemed to take over her mouth and her upper lip curled, revealing slightly gritted teeth. Was there *blood* in her mouth? He hadn't thought anyone had touched her.

"They have a right to visit," she told him. "They have a right to *leave*." She smiled but her jaw was shuddering slightly, so was the *rest* of her. She looked like her body wasn't coping with something. Tony could only stare at her with uncertainty. "And you, *you*, Mr Stark, have a right to *die*."

She made a high-pitched sort of shout and thrust her hands at him. Nothing happened at first, but a few moments later every bird in the vicinity started dive bombing him, beaks and claws of multiple species scratching over his armour and making him wince as each scraping noise sounded like nails on a chalkboard.

He was trying to bat the things away while wishing he had some kind of *gas* he could leak from his suit to knock them out (and he made a note to look into that). He was so busy trying to get away from the whirlwind of feathers, that he didn't hear the noise behind him. He didn't *notice* anything until Rhodey shouted, "Tony!"

He jerked his head, trying to look around, but he didn't have the chance to do anything as he was rammed from the side. He gasped and went flying, hitting the ground and skidding. The birds were scattered and he felt like a tank had collided with him rather than a *rhino*. The horn hadn't pierced him, but considering the alterations to the animal's genetic makeup that was probably due to nothing more than fucking *luck*.

*Hello, cracked ribs*, he thought with some small amount of agony as he pushed up onto his knees. It *hurt like fuck*, but there was nothing else to do about it.

The rhino was snorting and didn't even make a threatening scrape of its foot; it simply started charging towards him again. Tony had been prepared to get out of its way when an alert buzzed a moment before a *teleporting bull* hit the ground and hit *him*. It head butted his shoulder, the horns scraping and nearly piercing his armour. He wasn't so likely to avoid the rhino after that.

The creature got him right in the shoulder and sent him down the road to smash into a car and flip over the top of it. "*Fuck*," he shouted, scraping and tumbling across the ground until he could get into an upright position.

It was like getting hit by three Mjölfnir's and Tony could see them setting up to go for him again. He wanted to make a quip, '*guess they found their matador*', but his breath was already affected by the *definite* bruising he was going to be stuck with. He could also feel something bleeding near his wrist. He was fairly sure it was just superficial, but he'd have to be carefully taking the suit off.

He was preparing for the next attack when he heard Loki tell him sharply, "Do *not* move."

It was slightly difficult to do with a bull and rhino heading right for him, but fuck, he *trusted* Loki. He may have squeezed one eye shut in a preparatory wince as they got closer, but the

half-expected impact never came. They got about halfway from him when something green shimmered in the air and they both froze before dropping to the ground like rocks.

He stared at their limp forms with no small shock. “The hell?”

“I said *no killing!*” Rhodey snapped across the comms.

Tony winced as he got to his feet and made his way over to them. “I like not being a pincushion, so thanks, but this still isn’t going to look good for your publicity, Loki.”

Loki made an annoyed sound. “I did not *kill* them.”

Tony’s eyebrows rose even as he both visually and had FRIDAY confirm it. Their chests were rising and falling. “Huh. Sleep spell.” His mind started running away with possibilities. “Does that work on humans too?”

“Yes,” Loki answered, but with slight disappointment, “But I’m afraid our villainess has already dispersed with the use of her remaining bull.”

“Damn it,” Rhodey cursed. “I don’t like knowing she’s out there. FRIDAY, can you try to trace her?”

Tony let FRIDAY and Rhodey worry about the next step as he focused on Loki. “I was actually thinking about insomnia. Or even just a way to sleep tonight.” He brought a hand to his dented armour. “I’m going to need the good painkillers. Or a bottle of scotch. I like the scotch offer bet-”

Tony didn’t quite squeak, but it was close. His body was still half-poised for battle and having Loki *teleport in front of him* wasn’t actually good for making him distinguish friend from foe. He’d half raised his hand and charged the repulsor before realising who was there. “Shit, Loki. You-”

“Where are your injuries?” He demanded.

Tony blinked. “Uh, it’s okay; they’re kind of minor. Look, we have to clean up the worm bits and move the animals. Where are- hey!”

He tried to pull his arm back from where Loki had grabbed it but he only ended up wincing as it pulled his injured side. Loki made a dismissive gesture with his hand and it was *extremely unsettling* to find his armour carefully unlocking and pulling away from his body. Loki only let go of his forearm long enough to let the metal peel away from it before Loki was back to touching him.

“Uh, Loki,” Tony mumbled, but Loki was ignoring his words to eye him critically. His magic was swirling behind his eyes and leaking out of his fingertips. Tony shivered at the feeling and looked down, watching the wisps as they danced over his skin and buried into his wounds. They even hovered over the areas that hadn’t yet discoloured with bruises. Based off the way his body was no longer hurting; *nothing* would have bruises.

He slowly drew his gaze up to the mage, looking at that unfocused gaze as he dedicated himself to *healing Tony*. They were in the middle of a battlefield and Loki had dropped everything to make sure he was okay and it made him smile.

“Tony, you and Loki are on candid camera,” Rhodey told him tiredly, but with a thread of amusement in his voice. “Your alliance is well and truly *publicised*.”

Tony suddenly got an idea, it was probably a stupid as fuck one, but it made him laugh imagining Thor’s face. What was a better way to throw a giant middle finger at a warrior culture?

“Hey Lokes?” Loki blinked a little, coming out of his magic-based trance. Tony smiled, keeping his face relaxed and aiming for something vaguely besotted as he moved in closer. “Thanks for the, what would you call it, boon of healing?”

Loki looked a little uncertain at the minimising distance. “You’re my ally.” He didn’t take his eyes away from Tony, trying to puzzle him out even as he asked, “Rhodes are you-”

“The world’s watching, Loki,” Tony interrupted with a smirk before he pushed up on his toes to murmur, “Let’s give Thor something to be horrified about.”

Loki’s eyes widened minutely. He caught on to what Tony was about to do moments before he pressed their lips together in a soft kiss. He brought his hand up to the back of Loki’s neck and arched himself closer, his laughing smile only widening as Loki’s hand automatically came forward to steady his lower back.

“Oh, fucking, *great*,” he heard Rhodey huff into the comms. “Tony, you make life so much more *difficult* than it needs to be. I can hear the voice messages I am being left by my superiors from *here*.”

Tony pulled back from Loki’s stiff mouth to laugh and tell Rhodey. “I’ve been a hero and saving the day for fucking years; it’s about time I get to kiss a Prince for it.” He smirked at Loki’s carefully masked expression and winked. “Well, publically at least.”

Rhodey just groaned. “Oh god, save your fake relationship for a time when there isn’t worm guts everywhere. People are going to start flocking here soon. Loki, can you *please* clean up the mess? I know it’s probably tempting to play your games with the public but can we do national security first?”

Tony sighed and pouted and gave Loki a smacking kiss on the cheek to finish before dropping back down and letting go of his neck. Loki was still holding his back and eyeing him with an expression the public would see as *wryly amused* but what Tony could look behind and read for the ‘*what the fuck??*’ it actually was.

“We’re dating remember,” Tony clarified, “public displays of affection are kind of meant to be a thing.”

“I did not expect you to *kiss me*,” Loki hissed slightly.

“But just *imagine* Thor’s face when he sees us do it! And after a battle too; the most *sacred* of times,” Tony’s eyes glinted with malicious glee. “Hah! Can you just-”

“Crow. Later,” Rhodey snapped. “The bear is starting to twitch.”

Loki moved away from Tony after hearing Rhodey’s comment. He had moved past his surprise and was back to simply shaking his head at Tony’s antics. He *was* smiling though, so that was a good thing. “Don your armour once more, Anthony.” He looked over his shoulder and swiped a hand through the air, causing the rhino and bull to disappear from sight. “They will reside in your tower, for now.”

“Always wanted a menagerie,” Tony quipped.

He expected a swipe to the head when Loki raised his hand, he did *not* expect Loki’s fingers to slide through the sweaty strands at the back in something not unlike a *caress*. “I shall remember that for the anniversary of our year, shall I, darling?”

Tony blinked, slightly startled at the touch and the pet name, but the single look in those dancing eyes made him relax with understanding. *God of Mischief*. He’d thrown Loki with the kiss, of course he had. Loki wasn’t in the closet, but he was damn well used to hiding there - but now that he was on board? Now that he was *aware* of what Tony would let them do? All bets were off.

Hell, it would probably become like the early stages of their quasi-flirting. It was all about one-upmanship.

But Tony didn’t try to play the game right now, because Rhodey just *might* kill them if they started making out just because they were trying to out-gay the other. He still smiled, letting the edges of it go soft. “I won’t need a gift, I’ll just need you.”

It was sappy, it was *painfully* sappy, but Loki looked reluctantly charmed. He still rolled his eyes, but Tony was *damn* sure the mage had also gained some colour to his cheeks.

He pulled his hand from Tony’s hair and gestured at the suit. “This should not take long. Go join Rhodes; I will be with you both shortly.”

Loki didn’t wait for a reply as he started walking, fading into gold and green as he did. When he stepped back into the suit, FRIDAY informed him of just where and what Loki was doing, but Tony trusted Loki to take care of himself. They’d still need to discuss who the woman was and what to do with the enhanced animals, not to mention work out *how* they were enhanced - but that could come later.

Honestly, he was far more interested in the fifty-four forwarded messages he’d already received about the battle, Loki, the kiss and, oh yeah, *Loki*. There was also a curt voicemail from Pepper explaining that they had a press conference scheduled for tomorrow morning to deal with the fallout of their ‘*impetuous decision to involve Loki*’.

It made him grin and take to the air with an added twist of flare as he began planning their performance. He had to wonder just what it would cost him to get Loki into a suit and tie.

Specifically, into a tie that Tony was *well known* for wearing.

Some magic-ed up love bites high on Tony's neck would be good too.

After all, there was nothing like giving the entirely wrong impression in the utterly best way.

## Chapter End Notes

DOST THINE EYES DECEIVE? DIDST A KISS OCCUR?\*

... Nope. Thine eyes did not deceive ;) Hehehe.

But, ahem. On a different note; a lot of people have been wondering about this, so let me put your mind at ease; 'Animal Whisperer' is not a Marvel/MCU character. I didn't have a firm grasp on the voice/knowledge of any of the typical bad guys/girls so I just made her up. Hope that doesn't put everyone off too much as she's going to be a... *useful* part of this universe, let me tell you ;)

\* I had an inaccuracy (or two) in my original wording, haha. So VictrolaDoll gave me the less scrambled one. I'm always up for people correcting me on my shit. Anyone else note any errors? Hit me up. Thanks! :)

# Chapter 14

## Chapter Notes

Well look at that! I'm actually updating inside my two week deadline, phew! Lol. We'll see if this keeps up in the coming weeks ;)

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

For all that Loki had gotten used to Anthony's ease with his sexuality he still hadn't anticipated and was fairly stunned when the other man had kissed him. Loki hadn't known what to think in those few short moments before Anthony had explained.

His thoughts had been derailed momentarily by the action, sticking and holding onto two thoughts as their mouths remained connected; *his goatee is not unpleasant* and the ever more concerning *he's smiling*. People didn't *smile* when they expressed such affection for Loki. While some of the Elves that he'd bedded had laughed and teased him, they were not forbidden from such passions and so could take a more light-hearted approach. It just... wasn't the same with Anthony. Where they enjoyed their dalliances with any man, Anthony's smile had been an honest, specific thing; Anthony's smile had been for *him*. Anthony had been *happy* to kiss *Loki*.

When Anthony had clarified, it all made sense, of course. The public nature of the decree had been too much for Anthony to resist and he'd been amused at all the scenarios he could see unfolding. Loki should have expected it, he should have known in moments what Anthony had intended and why; because Anthony was fiercely protective of his friends. He was a true mischief maker and prone to overdramatic and visual displays. Loki could understand every nuance of the meaning behind the mortal's actions.

It didn't mean he quite knew how to handle it.

Well, he had continued the ruse. He'd had little choice and he also hadn't wished to throw away such a *delightful* way of revealing their relationship. So he'd run his fingers through Anthony's hair in an affectionate gesture that seemed to bemuse Anthony and further confirmed what the public would now believe.

Loki wasn't offended by what had happened, he merely had trouble accepting it. Anthony was an admired, coveted, *unattached* hero of Midgard who was known for his relations with women and he had kissed Loki; a publically known *war criminal* as well as a man. He'd known Anthony was prepared to portray a homosexual relationship but even he had fostered doubts at the *extent* to which he would perpetrate it.

He'd need to speak to him about that, *in depth*, but Loki knew it wasn't the time. A part of him also wanted to analyse the touch, the moment, the feel of Anthony's back against his



palm - but he had far more important things to focus on. He needed to remove the pieces of the worm as well as the remaining animals. FRIDAY was already relaying the arrival of government bodies and curious onlookers. Loki needed to act quickly and he left Rhodes and Tony in order to do so.

Loki was well used to cleaning up the mess of others and he quickly shifted the location of everything until it was either contained in Anthony's tower or held in his pocket dimension until he knew where it was best to send it. He wasn't sure if Anthony would wish to examine the worm remains and while Loki couldn't sense any magic on it, he knew Anthony had different methods he might wish to explore.

When he was done, Loki intended to burn what was left.

It was peculiar though. When he'd been smoothing over the destruction caused by Thor and his brainless warriors, it always made Loki feel frustration and fury. With Anthony, he only found himself vaguely amused by the other's actions - Rhodes' too. Although there was far less to contend with from the Colonel.

He didn't have long to ponder the difference between the Aesir and the mortals as FRIDAY warned him, somewhat unnecessarily, of the approaching police officers with their weapons raised. He didn't look at them, nor did he linger, he scanned the city, going metres outside the blast radius to be certain, before teleporting himself to Anthony and Rhodes.

"Did you even *think*-" Rhodes stopped mid sentence as Loki appeared beside the bear and made both men turn to stare at him from under their masks. "Loki," Rhodes automatically changed tracks, "the worm's dealt with?"

Loki was intrigued to discover what they'd been discussing and had so abruptly ended (although he could guess), but decided to ask Anthony later if it proved important. "Yes. I've stored it magically for now, but we will either need to discard it on another planet or somewhere in Anthony's tower."

Anthony grimaced. "I vote other planet."

"I vote we *discuss* this back at the tower." Rhodes nodded at some approaching vans. "SHIELD's not going to be happy you kept the carcass from them."

"Of course," Anthony spat, fury sparking to life and coiling low and dangerous under his words. "They'll be pissed we didn't just *give* it to them to fuck with."

Loki slanted his eyes to Anthony's armoured form, but he couldn't see his face and therefore couldn't read anything further into his emotionally growled words. He held his tongue on the subject, but made a note to enquire later. He had sensed a tension between Anthony and SHIELD even during his invasion, he didn't know if it was a long-standing bitterness or something new, something more related to what had severed him from the Avengers. His curiosity was constantly piqued as to what that reason was, but he knew the value of patience. He also knew the value of *Anthony* and he wasn't about to jeopardise their alliance, their *friendship* for the answer to an otherwise irrelevant question.

Anthony would tell him when it became necessary and he would simply wait until then.

Moving his hand through the air, Loki sent the sleeping bear to the tower to join the others. It was the last of the creatures and Loki made his way forward. “Shall we enact a quick departure before they question us?”

He couldn't see Anthony's face but the change in posture indicated that he'd brightened. “Hell yes! Who needs to fly when you can *teleport*?”

Anthony stepped up and close to him, making Loki bit down on the smile that wanted to form at Anthony's enthusiasm. He dragged his eyes away from the other to look at Rhodes. “Will you join us?”

Rhodes let out a chuckle but still walked the suit closer. “When else am I going to get to teleport just for fun?”

He stopped beside Loki and raised a hand, hovering it in the air uncertainly as he asked, “What do you need?”

“Any contact will be fine,” Loki explained and the weight of the suit's gauntlet fell on his shoulder.

He turned to encourage Anthony to do the same but was greeted to the sight of Anthony's hand being revealed as he retracted the suit up to his wrist. He also flipped up the faceplate so that he could grin widely at Loki as his hand grasped Loki's own, linking their fingers before Loki could even blink. He also shuffled closer, almost leaning the suit against Loki's side as he said, “Well, beam us up, honey.”

Loki didn't understand the reference, but he heard Rhodes snort. He forced his eyes to hold Anthony's and not to look down. The heat from Anthony's palm was contrasting with the naturally cool temperature of his own. It was *nice*, but he couldn't let it show.

“‘*Honey*’, Anthony? Must you choose such deplorable descriptions?”

His grin just widened. “I could call you snugglebums?”

“Please,” Loki grimaced, “do *not*.”

Anthony just laughed at his expression and Loki took the moment to send out his magic and twist it around the three of them, sending them swiftly and safely into the sanctity of the penthouse. Anthony let out a sigh when they arrived, his eyes closing as if he'd experienced something blissful. Loki was captivated; he didn't look away even as Rhodes started removing his armour. “You're in trouble now, Loki. He's going to be asking for you to chauffeur him *everywhere*.”

Anthony's eyes flew open only to narrow at Rhodes. “Oh, come on, Rhodey. Don't you feel the way it fucking *covers* you?” He turned to Loki before back to Rhodes, darting his eyes between them as if he wasn't sure who was best to focus on. “The magic, it's just... it *feels nice*, okay? I never really noticed it the other times you did magic on me, but it just...”

Anthony looked like he was struggling for words, Loki on the other hand was torn between surprise and something almost discomfoting. “It’s like the magic is happy? Does that make *any* sense?”

*Far too much*, Loki thought with a nervous dread forming in his stomach.

His magic was a part of him; his magic was an *extension* of him. They were one in the same, but his magic was almost sentient, a manifestation of his subconscious and it had decided it *liked* Anthony. *Of course* it liked Anthony, *Loki* liked Anthony. He already held strong affection for the man for accepting him but Anthony also adored his magic and people who did that were few and far between.

Loki just hoped his magic was as aware of the *fake* nature of their relationship as the rest of Loki was. Otherwise, there could be more complications than Loki wanted to explain, even to someone as forgiving and understanding as Anthony.

“Loki?” Anthony queried, having climbed out of his suit and sent it somewhere for FRIDAY to look after. How long *had* he been thinking? “You’ve got a nice little scowl going there.” He looked a little nervous. “Is the magic doing that to me a *bad* thing?”

“No,” Loki dismissed swiftly. “I was just... surprised. Most people would not notice such a thing.”

“Like me?” Rhodes questioned, sounding vaguely put out, but Loki shook his head.

“It is due to the nature of my alliance with Anthony,” *in a manner of speaking*, “and you will not experience the same things because of this.”

“Oooh,” Anthony looked gleeful, “I’m just *special*-”

“Boss,” FRIDAY interjected, “Miss Potts is insistent she speak to you. She’s instigating every protocol she has access to in a demand to discuss recent events.”

The words made Anthony sigh, as if all the enjoyment had been sucked out of him with that single breath. “Fuck. I better deal with this.” He pointed at them both. “I will be back to discuss the awesome that is your magic crushing on me.”

“It is not *crushing*,” Loki protested fiercely but Anthony was already walking away, he did turn just long enough to flash the most arrogant and amused smirk as well as a *wink* before he entered his bedroom to take the call.

“Infuriating mortal,” Loki grumbled, completely forgetting he wasn’t alone until Rhodes spoke.

“Loki?” He didn’t startle physically, but he did wince slightly before turning to the other. They hadn’t been alone together during their acquaintance, Anthony was always there looking on and interjecting himself. Loki was uncertain of just *what* the other would wish to speak to him about.

Anthony? The alliance? His feats in battle? Rhodes had seemed unconcerned about his sexuality and the ruse Anthony and he were perpetuating - but what else would the man wish to discuss with him? It had been but mere *hours* since Rhodes had learned of the reasons behind their fabricated relationship.

He would have questions, it was unavoidable. Loki just hoped they were ones he could answer and that, if he did, that the Colonel would accept them.

“Yes?” he enquired, somewhat cautiously.

Rhodes gestured vaguely to encompass the tower. “What did you do with animals? You said they were here?”

*Ah, yes.* A man of order and priorities, Loki knew how to speak about such things as that. He conjured the tablet Anthony had gifted him with. “FRIDAY, if you may; a display of the floor used for my magic?” The AI followed his order as he spun the image for the Colonel to see. “They will remain sleeping until such time as we decide on their fate.”

Rhodes took the tablet and began flicking through life signs and other facts that FRIDAY had been cataloguing. “We’ll need to see if we can figure out what she did to them.”

“I concur. I plan to scan them in more depth and I’m sure Anthony will conduct his own studies.”

“Let me know what you find, yeah?” Rhodes glanced up and received a nod. “I don’t know what we’re going to do with them though.”

“I was contemplating sending them off-world.” Rhodes raised his eyebrows. “I have an associate who specialises on strange creatures; usually the bastard creations of badly performed spells. She may be able to reverse their afflictions or help them control their new abilities.” He tilted his head. “Asgard may accept the rhinoceros; they are always endeared to beasts of battle.”

“Oh yeah, give it to the assholes who treated you like shit.”

Loki shrugged the criticism away. “Their interaction with me is immaterial; the Aesir take great pride in their animals. He would be well looked after.”

Rhodes winced. “Don’t tell Tony that.”

Loki was curious. “Oh, why?”

“Because I’m annoyed enough knowing they’d treat *animals* better than you.” Loki barely kept his wince hidden and had to try hard to suppress his thought; *a Jotun is an animal*. “But Tony will be furious.” Rhodes shut off the tablet and tossed it on the nearby couch. “Don’t underestimate what Tony will do for his friends if he thinks they’ve been mistreated.”

Loki forcibly dragged his mind away from his heritage and to the other more immediate issue as he answered, “I believe *fabricating* a romantic relationship with me is an impressive indication.”

*I think kissing me in front of his world, giving up an opportunity to take an actual lover and tying himself to **me** of all people speaks more than enough.*

It was against his better judgement that Loki's mind flashed back to the feel of Anthony against him, their lips brushing and that firm body under his hands. He wondered if Anthony would be one to laugh and smile during sex. Would his lithe body arch into Loki's? Would he sit in Loki's lap as he forced Anthony to bring them both to completion without Loki's assistance?

*Norns*, he hissed and shoved the images far to the back of his mind. He wished he was alone and able to pinch his nose, but he couldn't, not with the Colonel before him and liable to ask *questions*.

"Yeah, on that," Rhodes spoke, and the *subject* change felt like ice creeping down Loki's spine after the turn of his thoughts regarding a *friend*. "Tony kissed you, in front of everyone."

He paused, as if testing Loki for a response - a reaction?

But, no, Rhodes knew nothing of his dreams, nothing of his *thoughts*, and they could be nothing more than battle lust, he was sure. They were just an aberration due to the kiss taking place at such a highly emotional time. Rhodes must have been thinking logically; he was a warrior sizing up a situation. Sizing up the risk to his *friend*.

Loki could only try to assure him.

"I am certain my mere association - regardless of any romantic leanings - would have brought a storm to Anthony's door. I have no doubt he will weather it well. He is well loved among your people. It was also, as you are aware, *his* decision to express our association in such a--"

"Yeah, Loki," Rhodes cut in, "I'm not worried about Tony. He can take care of himself. A gay fling with a supervillain might be a bigger headline than he's gained in a while, but homosexuality is pretty 'in' at the moment."

Loki could only blink throughout the other's reply; homosexuality was... popular? He couldn't quite fathom it. "Then I do not...?"

"I'm asking are *you* okay?" Loki was confused and he didn't even try to stop it from showing. Rhodes elaborated. "He just outed you, and pretty damn publically too. Tony can get carried away and forget to notice not everyone is comfortable with the direction he's run down." Rhodes tilted his chin determinedly. "If he pushed too hard, too fast--"

Loki barked out a laugh. "Are you planning to *chastise* him for me?"

Rhodes didn't flinch or lose the sternness to his expression. "I am if he made you do something that you didn't want to. Your world is different to ours; your circumstances are different to Tony's. A sudden jump into a rainbow spotlight can't be easy."

Loki chuckled, feeling warmth flare in his chest at the *concern* from a man he *barely knew*, at the *worry* from a mortal who would consider his feelings - *his*; a bastard ergi Jotun who had invaded Rhodes' very world.

"Your concern is appreciated, Rhodes," Loki told him firmly, yet gently. "But I assure you it was never *my* discomfort that kept my relations among the shadows," He smiled, but it was slightly bitter and he didn't even try to hide it, not among someone who had cared enough to ask. "Had I a lover who would do as Anthony did and had our lives not been in jeopardy for the very action? There would be no place on Asgard that would not know of my claim, and theirs."

"Okay," Anthony suddenly spoke into the brief silence, making Loki jerk his attention to the other. "I'm getting the overwhelming urge to let you fuck me over some Asgardian soap box. I think they could use the public service announcement."

Loki's hitched breath in reaction to the words and the *vivid* imagery that filled his mind was hidden behind Rhodes groan and argument, "Public sex is not the answer, Tony."

"Public sex is a *fabulous* answer," Anthony disagreed but he also slanted his eyes to Loki. "Unless that's a little too open for you?" He also sent Rhodes a quick, grateful smile before turning back to Loki. "I am glad that I don't have to be punched for the kiss though, because we need to make out in front of Thor, it's kind of really important to my bucket list."

The question was on the tip of his tongue; *you would truly sleep with me, if I said yes?* But Loki swallowed it back down, he found himself shying from the answer. He couldn't imagine Anthony saying anything but 'no'.

Loki tried to shake the thoughts off and occupied himself with removing his battle-armor and sliding into more comfortable clothes. He would still need a bath, but this would do for now. *Anthony has a large shower; large enough for two.*

Loki brought a hand to pinch his nose before sliding his fingers up to rub his forehead. He let that small weakness show, he couldn't stop himself. He simply needed the moment to collect his wandering thoughts.

A throat clearing made him drop his hand to see Anthony's mouth in a grimace that was trying for a smile. "Right, well. Different note. Press conference tomorrow morning. Peppers's mad, but let's look at the brighter side of things. FRIDAY?"

The AI flicked on the television and all three of them turned to watch the cycling news reports of the battle and their kiss. Loki, it seemed, was the main source of confusion as reports filed in of him *protecting* civilians and *kissing* Iron Man. It was almost amusing if Loki's eyes weren't constantly drawn to the image of Tony's mouth pressed to his own and his smile obvious at even the most obscure camera angle.

"You're going to have to do some massive damage control, Tony," Rhodes commented.

"Nah," Anthony dismissed, "we've just got to show them that SHIELD and Thor lied. Once they see Loki's a good guy who was fucked over, they'll be all over him. The public forgave

Bucky Barnes and Wanda Maximoff; they'll forgive Loki." Anthony flashed Loki a smile. "The world also loves a good romance story."

Loki shook his head faintly, but Rhodes was the one who spoke, "Well, I guess it's time for me to get out of here." They turned to him and while he looked slightly rueful, he was also smiling, "Convincing the government to jump on your side *now* is going to take a bit of wiggling." He sighed. "Probably all night." He made his way back to the suit. "Have FRIDAY keep me apprised of anything I need to know, *especially* any angles you plan to work with the public and I'll make sure to be there."

"Rhodey," Anthony told him seriously, "you're a burger after a bad day."

Loki raised his eyebrows, but Rhodey seemed oddly pleased at the comparison.

"Crazy asshole," he told him affectionately before sliding into the suit. "Try to keep him in line, yeah, Loki?"

"I am a God, but even *I* cannot create all miracles."

"Hey!" Anthony growled and punched Loki in the chest while Rhodes just laughed.

He lifted the suit off the ground, said a final farewell and flew out the glass door that FRIDAY opened for him. They watched Rhodes until he became nothing more than a dot in the sky.

"You *were* okay with the kiss, right?" Anthony asked into the quiet, sounding generally worried about his comfort.

Loki knew it was ridiculous, he recognised it the second the impulse occurred, but he simply couldn't resist. He turned, watching Anthony match his movements until they were face to face. He darted his hand out and caught Anthony's chin and dragged him forward, giving him no time to react as he pressed their mouths together in a single, chaste press. He lingered for a few seconds before he pulled back, still maintaining his hold.

"Yes, Anthony," he told the mortal, his voice at a slightly lower register as he held that warm, chocolate gaze and practically purred, "I did *not* mind."

Anthony's lips parted slightly and something shifted behind his eyes, but before they could explore it further, before something not unlike the moment they shared before the battle could sweep back around them, FRIDAY was speaking. "Boss, there is a visitor."

Anthony blinked and frowned. "What?" he shifted his head but didn't pull out of Loki's hold. "Who the hell did you let in?"

"I apologise Boss, but you had requested a lack of notification on his movements while also maintaining his clearance to all floors." Anthony's eyes widened and his mouth fell open for an entirely different reason: shock.

Something like genuine happiness seemed to fill his expression, he seemed to *forget* the position they were in and it made something flare unhappy and jealous in the pit of Loki's

stomach over *who* had gained such a reaction.

“Where is he? When will he-”

The elevator made a noise and the doors receded. They both turned; Loki’s hand was lax and malleable but still cupping Anthony’s face. Their placement was obvious, the intent unmistakable and Anthony’s complete dismissal of it for the arrival of Bruce Banner even more noticeable.

Loki felt something cold flood his chest, something hurt and vaguely spiteful as he looked at the man whose eyes were wide and posture awkward. He had a fairly weathered bag hanging from his hand and looked tired beyond measure.

“Erm,” he mumbled, “I didn’t mean to interrupt something.”

Anthony pulled away from his grasp and almost ran across the room to Dr Banner. He wrapped the other man in a hug, almost making the Doctor fall. Loki clenched his fist and scowled darkly.

He had no excuse; Anthony was not his lover, Anthony was nothing more than his friend, but in that moment he *despised* Bruce Banner. He despised the man who was close enough to Anthony to be greeted with such an unrestrained show of *real* affection.

Bruce Banner received a *hug* and Loki’s magic was straining under his skin just wishing to *smite* the man for being favoured enough to gain it.

## Chapter End Notes

Jealous!Loki, a second kiss and Bruce Banner enters the tower. What more excitements await in the next chapter? ;)



# Chapter 15

## Chapter Notes

Thank you all for having such wonderful *patience* with me. Things are pretty hectic over here still and will be for the next two months, but just know that I haven't forgotten this story and will be getting to it whenever I can! Your support for this story and understanding of the time delays mean a lot to me! So thank you again!

I've just skated in under a month between updates this time, let's hope I can manage (at the very least) less than four weeks next time too, haha.

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

Tony held onto Bruce for a long time.

It only took the other a few moments before his arms came around Tony's back and he returned the gesture. It was careful and hesitant, but it was still *genuine*. While Tony knew it didn't mean everything was peaches and fucking cream between them, he still found himself clinging to his faith in the other. He *knew* Bruce hadn't been involved with what had happened - and God, that was more than he could say for a lot of people right now. Bruce had been in the wind, whether or not he would have sided with the Avengers was still an open verdict, but for now, for *five fucking minutes*, Tony had his friend, his *Science Bro* back

"Dr Banner," Loki spoke, his voice only a few degrees warmer than *freezing point* and it made Tony wince, "what a delightful surprise."

Tony could feel Bruce go stiff in his arms, but Tony refused to relinquish the hold. "Loki," he chastised, without looking at the demi-god, "give him the benefit of the doubt, yeah?"

"And his timing does not seem *suspiciously* useful to you, dear Anthony?" He hadn't heard footsteps but he *did* hear Loki's voice get closer and Tony pulled back slightly to peer over his shoulder. Loki's eyes were narrowed and fastened on Bruce.

"Maybe I shouldn't have come..." Bruce started, moving to pull away but Tony clung fast. "Tony."

"Nope. It's about time my mean, green, fighting machines got to know each other."

Bruce sighed wearily, but Tony could still hear the small but as of yet unsquashable *fondness* in his voice. "Tony."

It was too bad Loki had to coldly interject, "I see your complete *absence* from Anthony's life has not made you unaware of the movements inside it. When exactly had you become aware of myself? I notice you don't seem overly *surprised*."

Tony was about to glare at him, but Bruce was already responding. His tone was calm, pleasant, but with an edge underneath. It was the hostility and strength that lingered even without the Other Guy present. "I didn't know before I got here. And I could be on a deserted island and news of a war criminal would still show up."

"Technically cleared," Tony chimed in quickly, but not fast enough to stop Loki's, "Are you speaking of yourself as well perchance?"

Tony *did* turn at that, narrowing his eyes at the mage and snapping a warning, "*Loki!*"

He didn't look happy about it, but Loki gave a small nod, acknowledging the misstep. When Tony turned back to Bruce he found the other was looking between them with a curious if slightly uncertain frown. He also slowly began untangling himself from Tony again. This time Tony grudgingly allowed it. "I think I might just--"

"No 'just' that is a rude 'just'," Tony argued. "You can't just come and go like that. I'll be offended, *grave offence* will be taken. You have to stay for a drink." He gestured in the direction of the bar. "FRIDAY - tea, kettle, make a cup of something horrid for Bruce to enjoy."

"Yeah, that's going to keep me here," Bruce told him around a grin, but it soon faded as his gaze flicked back to Loki. "I didn't know he was here when I came back to New York I don't... I don't think it's good for anyone if we're both in the tower. I'll just," he pointed over his shoulder, "leave you guys to... erm." He cleared his throat. "I'll just leave."

"No, you should *stay*," Tony persisted, carefully following Bruce's movements in a circular dance that put him between the Doctor and the elevator. It also put Bruce between Tony and Loki, but Bruce quickly corrected that, making sure to have them both in sight at all times. Tony could see Bruce's decision forming roots not even he could change, so he hurriedly tossed out his trump card like a grenade, hoping it wouldn't blow up in his face - hoping he'd gambled *right* with his friend. "Seriously, Bruce, I could use your help, and I don't have a lot of people I can trust right now."

Bruce's mouth opened and his eyes widened, but it only took a few moments for his shoulders to slump. A depressed resignation also quickly took over. "I heard about that too, Tony."

"Oh?" He did his best to hide the tension mounting in his muscles. "The how, the when, or the why?"

"The who." He corrected, "Public channels weren't exactly talking about the rest of it."

"Yeah," Tony admitted, privately uncurling over the fact he couldn't catch a lie in Bruce about that. Well, so far. "Not a lot of people have been hearing about everything else."

Bruce's expression said he wouldn't pry, but his eyes were something else entirely. *Loki* was also standing a distance away, his unhappiness at Bruce's presence obvious, but his almost physical desire for information about what had happened was outweighing any objections he might have normally been offering.

*What's a little betrayal bonding between once enemies?*

Tony sighed and wondered how this was going to go and just how favourable their sides and opinions would turn out to be. A part of him didn't want to explain it, a part of him was still worried he'd hear '*give them a break, Tony*' or '*You're overreacting, Tony*'. He just wanted someone to find out and still be on his *side*. Was that too much to ask?

He didn't know, but if there was anyone who might understand him, it would probably be the two men in front of him.

"Stay in the tower tonight, Bruce. Help us figure out what's been altered in the animals we just fought and," he swallowed slightly, "and I'll tell you both a little bedtime story."

Loki was watching him sharply, probably analysing every facet of his expression, countenance and wording. Bruce was far more uncertain about the offer, but he didn't have the same invested interest that Loki did. Sure, Bruce would be curious and upset over how the team had splintered, but Loki had been actively holding his intrigue at bay. Tony knew Loki could have used numerous avenues to discover what he wanted, but he'd refrained - and that more than anything else deserved the truth.

Bruce also needed to know in order to prove himself. As much as Tony hated having to *test his friends*, it was better than the alternative. Right now he had Loki, he had Rhodey, and with Vision still up in the air - it left him with a pitifully small friend pool to draw on.

He'd like to have Bruce back beside him, not even to *fight* on his side - he didn't want the Hulk, didn't care if Bruce never wanted to green-up again. He just wanted his *friend*.

And if he got that? Well, he'd want to keep Bruce in the tower; not only for his own benefit and Bruce's protection, but because he wanted a chance for Bruce and Loki to get to know each other - to get *along*. He loved that Loki and Rhodey were becoming fast friends and he wanted a chance to explain, to lay everything that happened to Loki out for Bruce. He liked to think the two of them could get along with the right setting.

After all, Loki had done his territorial panther act to Rhodey and look at how far they'd come! He was certain it could happen with Bruce and Loki too. Well, as long as Loki's snipes didn't get Bruce defensive enough to draw out the Hulk. The last thing Tony's friendships goals needed was Loki being used as a redecorating agent again. It might serve Loki right, but it still wasn't something Tony wanted to have happen.

"I really shouldn't stay Tony," Bruce quietly murmured, and this time his eyes didn't even drift to Loki. "I'm not the best face to have around." His words were all self-deprecation; there wasn't even any shame in his voice at admitting it, just tiredness. "You've got enough to worry about."

Tony narrowed his eyes. "I think that's *my* choice to make." He could feel his spine and shoulders tensing with righteous anger. "And it wasn't your fault. It was *hers*." His eyes flicked to Loki briefly, apologetically, before telling Bruce. "No one blamed Clint; no one should blame *us* when it was out of our control."

Loki shifted, Tony could see it from the corner of his eye even when he was focusing his attention on Bruce - *willing* Bruce to believe him despite knowing it wasn't about to work. Bruce could be just as stubborn as he was, especially about any damage the Hulk caused. Tony was gearing up for another attempt when Loki surprised him by talking.

"This would be the young, what was it, *Scarlet Witch*." He snorted. "I would not call her a user of *seidr*, but energy she does possess." He eyed Bruce critically. "I have read reports of the debacle, I," his mouth twisted slightly, "*watched* a portion of it from my previous position. I would not call *any* of those who she affected worthy of blame."

A part of that was news to Tony. "You *watched*?"

Loki lifted his shoulder in a one-armed shrug. "I grew bored and the destruction of your world was not, even then, something I was relishing."

"And the invasion of New York?" Bruce asked critically.

"Surprisingly *not* a bag of cats," Tony chimed in, making Loki frown uncertainly and a sliver of a smile twitch at Bruce's mouth. "The invasion wasn't his call and he tried to help us. Seriously, Bruce; *lots* for you to catch up on," he grinned, "so, it's all the more reason for you to *stay*."

Bruce's smile finally broke through, warm and softly amused. "*Tony*."

"*Bruce*," Tony persisted while stepping closer. He stopped right before the Doctor and told him. "I really want you to stay. Just a night?" He widened his eyes deliberately. "Please? Brucie? Come on? For me?"

Bruce tilted his head back slightly, staring at the ceiling and sighing again, only more loudly. Tony couldn't stop his grin; he knew he'd won. When Bruce looked back he'd toned down his smile as best he could, but Bruce still saw right through him. "One night," he allowed, although a bit of his good humour swiftly drained away. "I can't stay longer, Tony, not when," he flicked his eyes to Loki before back to Tony, "not when people will be watching you."

People. Right. More like one person. Tony wanted to ask about the clusterfuck that was Natasha *so badly* that he almost bit his tongue keeping the words in. Tony knew it wasn't the right time - he knew there were more *important* things to talk about; Loki, S.H.I.E.L.D., the Animal Whisperer and hell, *Thanos* - Bruce probably didn't even know about him yet. Natasha could wait.

"Right," Tony agreed, nodding, but already planning to wear down Bruce's resistance. "One night, got it."

Bruce narrowed his eyes. "I *mean it*, Tony."

"Right," Tony nodded while reaching down and snagging Bruce's backpack and walking towards the bar. "Totally got it, FRIDAY, you heard the man, twenty-four hours, start a clock."

“Tony,” Bruce grumbled, knowing him far too well.

Placing the bag on one of the seats, Tony turned and eyed the two men in his penthouse. Bruce was standing with lines of discomfort prevalent in his posture, but Loki was far more subtle; his back was straight while his sharp eyes were assessing them both as his hands rested together behind his back.

He was a study in perfect nonchalance.

He was also a *liar* and probably only just keeping himself from clawing Bruce’s eyes out because he was too dignified to show he was getting jealous. Tony had to bite down on a smile. *Mine* couldn’t be more clearly stamped under his skin, desperate to break out.

Idly, Tony wondered what would happen if he hugged Bruce again. Would Loki try to pull them apart? *No*, he thought, *he’d be more likely to leave*. The thought made Tony sigh a little; he could see it too - a snapped comment that didn’t hide how insecure Loki actually *was* about Tony friendship (and Tony ignored the fact he also had his own bucketload of insecurities there too). Tony was still trying to build him up into believing that Tony genuinely liked him and wasn’t going to get bored, but he was working against a *thousand years* of prejudice, Tony wasn’t even sure if he was going to live long enough to actually succeed.

He could try though.

“Anybody want a drink? I could use a drink. Bruce?” He shifted behind the bar as he asked, knowing Bruce would say no and hearing the soft confirmation while keeping his eyes on Loki. “Lokes?” He waited until those green eyes were on him before he smiled and held them. “You want something?”

*I haven’t forgotten about you, you idiot. You’re still on my priority list.*

Loki didn’t seem to be accepting it though and looked ready to deny him just for the sake of his hurt pride. Tony almost rolled his eyes, but instead he answered for the mage. “A scotch sounds about right.” He pulled out two glasses without waiting for a response and casually filled them with ice and alcohol. He looked back up at Loki when the practiced motion was finished and nudged the glass along the counter. Loki didn’t move any nearer. “Come on, Lokes.” He smirked slightly, “I don’t give the good stuff to just *anyone*.”

Loki deliberated for a few seconds more but he let out an annoyed huff when Tony lightly shook his own glass in temptation.

“I didn’t request your infernal drink,” he grumbled but still came over to the bar and went to grab it. Tony darted his hand down and pressed his palm over the top of Loki’s and making the mage startle and look down. His eyes were quick to come back up and Tony leant close. The move itself didn’t have to be inherently sexual or romantic, but Tony wasn’t unaware of what Bruce had walked in on before and about exactly what lie they were perpetrating. “Lovers are meant to interpret each other’s needs,” Tony whispered making Loki raise an eyebrow. Tony just grinned and added, louder, “And *friends* don’t let friends drink alone.”

Loki scoffed; he didn't seem to be able to help it, but he was also smiling - *minutely*. Tony removed his hand from the other's, feeling more cheerful when the tension unwound from Loki's posture as he brought the drink to his mouth for a sip.

When he looked back to Bruce, he found the Doctor had been watching it all with careful consideration - but that his *focus* had been given almost exclusively to Loki. It made Tony feel a sudden, instinctive urge to protect the mage. And it was a fucking *ridiculous* urge he kept having, especially considering how powerful and nigh indestructible Loki was, but seeing him with his back to Bruce, his back to the *Hulk* - it just set Tony's teeth on edge.

Bruce didn't know the whole story, didn't know what had happened to Loki and until he *did*, Tony wasn't going to be leaving them alone in a room.

He knew Bruce wouldn't hurt Loki out of spite and that Loki wouldn't provoke Bruce without reason, but there was still a hell of a lot of ground for argument between them if Tony wasn't careful. The thought made him want to rub a hand over his face at the sheer *monumental task* he had in front of him. He didn't, but it was still a near thing.

"How long have you guys been together?" Bruce suddenly asked into the quiet.

Tony barely had time to open his mouth before Loki was turning; he placed his back to the bar, himself on a seat, and made it the work of three graceful steps. The way that Loki was holding himself, it made Tony blink for a moment of confusion before he realised *what* was off about it; his body was curved towards Tony. Well, maybe not *physically* but there was an open awareness and relaxation at how close Tony was. Couples did it all the time, and it seemed Loki was happily playing up their *romance* for Bruce. It was possible he was also screaming a level of *back the fuck off*, but Tony was choosing to ignore that part - mostly because the idea of him and Bruce in bed together made Tony want to break out in completely unmanly giggles.

"We've been allies for a few months," Tony began, but Loki just had to jump *right in there* before he could continue.

"And something more *intimate* for some time as well." He looked over his shoulder at Tony. "Come around from there, Anthony dear."

*Come stand beside me so I can lord our relationship over your friend*; was the more *direct* translation and Tony just gave him an unimpressed look.

"I have never, nor do I *ever intend* to fuck Bruce," he informed the mage simply. "We're *friends*, Loki. I'd be as likely to sleep with him as I would be with Rhodey, which is to say, uh, *fucking never*."

Bruce was looking slightly aghast while Loki looked both taken aback and also somehow *guarded*. Tony could usually read him pretty well, or at least, Loki normally *let* Tony see what he was feeling - but this was different. This was like those certain topics that Tony had skirted near and Loki had put up walls around - only Tony didn't understand why *this* had caused it too.

“Thank you, Anthony,” Loki told him, all charm and wiry amusement, but Tony wasn’t buying it. There was something shuttered in the back of his gaze. Loki still gestured him over. “I was not requesting your presence *entirely* to present you like a trophy,” he continued to drawl. “I would still like you here.”

To refuse again would be rude, it would also undermine Loki and possibly make his ease with his sexuality around Tony take five steps back - so Tony complied. He watched Loki with slightly narrowed eyes; he could play it off as suspicion of the sincerity of his answer to Bruce later, all *he* cared about was working out what weird little tripwire had gone off in Loki’s head to make him withdraw like that.

Taking his place standing beside Loki, he felt the mage’s arm move around his shoulders. It ended up resting casually even as it drew him closer so their sides were touching. Tony let himself relax into it, but he planned to dig into this later when they were alone. *What is going on in that brain of yours?*

“I don’t exactly need to be here,” Bruce started to murmur, already trying to make his way to the elevator; his body screaming his discomfort at seeing them together. Tony *really* needed to sit down and explain Loki’s history to him, and soon.

“But science!” Tony interjected, waving the hand with his scotch slightly. “Mutated animals! Crazy animal lady! You can’t expect us to work it out on our own!”

“I think you’re more than capable, Tony,” Bruce assured him with a small grin before shaking his head. “And I don’t think you’re going to be doing *science* any time soon.”

Tony went to argue *-science before sex*, being the phrase he was planning to use - but FRIDAY spoke up, sounding almost unhappy. “Boss, SHIELD are demanding you come to their headquarters with Mr Laufeyson. Now.”

Tony and Loki both went tense and Tony gripped his glass so hard he was surprised it didn’t break. “Tell them to fuck off,” Tony snapped. “And you can send them a fucking *sound bite* of me saying that.”

Tony clenched his fist and ground his teeth despite knowing FRIDAY was going to do what he’d said, it didn’t stop what it meant though. Including the fact that they’d keep trying. He almost startled when Loki’s arm moved, but his hand just cupped the back of Tony’s neck, massaging it and surprisingly *helping* relieve some of his tension. He took a drink of his scotch, being careful not to disrupt Loki’s touch.

Neither Loki nor Bruce said anything into the silence but Tony could imagine the same words going through their heads that were going through his own. He let out a sigh between his teeth. “How long until they get here, FRIDAY?”

There was a brief pause. “Estimation of twenty-two minutes and thirty-three seconds, Boss.”

Tony chucked back the last of his drink but didn’t turn to put it on the counter. He leant back into Loki’s hold instead, resisting the urge to close his eyes, but only just.

“Well,” he told them, feeling nerves crash through his stomach for an entirely new reason. “I guess now is as good a time as ever to tell you what finally fucked everything over.”

*And who knows, he thought, maybe you'll still side with me when you finally know what they did. When you finally find out what made me give up on having a team of people who gave a damn about me, a team of people I could fucking **trust**.*

Tony felt Loki's hand on his skin like an unwavering weight and he swallowed, his eyes on Bruce and his mind on that soft, comforting touch.

*I hope you're still going to be here when I'm done, he silently wished. Because I don't think I can handle losing both of you too.*

## Chapter End Notes

\*GASP\* Did I really leave it on the cliffhanger of knowing you find out the betrayal next chapter? \*smirks\* Yes, yes, I did. Anyone who reads my other chaptered story will be well aware of my cruelty in these matters ;)



# Chapter 16

## Chapter Notes

I'm not going to make much of a note here, I know 99% of you won't read it before diving into the ~betrayal talk chapter, haha. So go on, read away, enjoy yourself ;P

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

Tony was nervous and he couldn't stop himself from jittering. He didn't want to pull back from Loki's touch, but standing still wasn't going to cut it; he was just too anxious. He moved away but made the motion include a jerk of his hand towards the couches and coffee table. "Come on, might as well get comfortable, right?"

He stalked his way over, but didn't take a seat, pacing nearby instead while waiting for Bruce and Loki to join him. Bruce took a place as far away from Loki as possible, while the mage ran his hand down Tony's arm in an attempt at comfort before sprawling in his now familiar way on the cushions. His glass was still firmly held in his hand while his eyes tracked Tony.

"Right," he went to start, gearing himself up - only to be *interrupted* in a way that made him want to punch something.

"Boss. Captain Rogers is attempting to call you."

Tony scoffed loudly as his frown only darkened. "Well don't *answer*. Fucking ignore it. I thought that was the *policy* anyway?"

There was a brief pause before his AI informed him. "He requested I notify you that SHIELD are on their way."

Tony rolled his eyes so hard it almost hurt. "A fucking century late, as usual."

"At least he thought to warn you," Bruce mentioned softly, but it only made the tension in Tony's shoulders increase. Because fuck it, he was *stressed* and Rogers wasn't anywhere near his good books at the moment - and couldn't Bruce cut him some slack? More so than *Rogers*?

*But, oh no, everyone loves **Steve Rogers** more, don't they?*

He was going to say something biting, a defensive snap that was lathered in the sting from Bruce's words, but Loki was already arguing on his behalf, "Yes, I'm sure his *blatant* attempt at gaining Anthony's goodwill after so publically losing it is both genuine *and* appreciated."

A smile flashed - there and gone - across Tony's face as he caught and held Loki's gaze; a swell of affection forming in his chest for the other.

It was too bad Bruce had to disagree with Loki, probably on principle. “He could just see it as the right thing to *do*.”

And that just opened up all kinds of sharp, gutting doors.

“Oh, yeah,” Tony said with quiet bitterness that he didn’t even try to hide. His eyes were fixed on his own glass as his insides warred with depression, frustration and *rage*. “And we all know how important Steve Rogers finds the ‘*right thing*’, Bruce. Right up there with the *greater-fucking-good*.”

It would have taken an idiot to miss the mile-wide sore-spot he’d just illuminated with all the subtlety of a flare. His voice had even risen, cracking on his last, derisive comment. It was just a couple hundred more red flags put out for the two perceptive men to notice.

“Tony...” Bruce said carefully, watching him like Bruce just wasn’t sure where to place his footing anymore.

*Now or never.*

“Come on, Bruce,” Tony was forcing down his nerves through pure fucking will as he looked the Doctor straight in the eye. “I’d like an opinion. You’d say you know me pretty *well*, right?”

Looking wary, Bruce agreed, “Yes?”

“So, tell me,” he swallowed and geared up for it. “What would *you* do if you found a stockpile of old Stark Industries weapons? Found weapons that *I* designed when you and your team of agents raided and captured a threat to national security? What would you do if you found experimental adaptations of them with *impressive* firepower capabilities?”

Bruce’s eyes were showing the connections he was making while the rest of his expression was only further proving that they weren’t happy realisations, but horrified ones. “*I* would tell you,” he answered slowly, “but I don’t think SHIELD did.”

“Corr-fucking-ect,” Tony answered, grinning tightly. “Try, the Avengers and Shield had a little *meeting*. Oh, they argued, one or two even asked ‘Hey, where’s Stark?’ but all and all they decided that it was best to use *my* weapons for *their* greater good. And then when I found out about it - by *accident*, mind you - they tried to justify why they *didn’t* tell me and why they *didn’t* destroy them.”

He clenched his teeth before forcing the rest out. “They tried to tell me *why* spreading the weapons throughout their members was a good idea and how it was an *accident* that they managed to get taken by assholes who SHIELD *couldn’t* control. And oh, did I mention,” Tony faked a smile, “*SHIELD* started re-designing them as well? With the fucking *help* of Barton and Romanoff, the little *fuckers* who knew their way around *my* house. While anyone *else* who had an idea or two on how to improve them was *also* brought in. Which only makes, oh, *the whole fucking team*. Never mind it was *my fucking name* on them and *my fucking blueprints* and *my fucking right* to have them decommissioned.”

He almost threw his glass against the wall. He *had* done that the first time he'd found out about it and dug into the *clandestine* meetings they'd had - multiple ones, so fucking many of them - that had excluded him. And he knew he should probably stop, give them time to swallow and digest what he'd just said but Tony was on a roll, the story and his emotions pouring out of him in a sea of anger that was only just covering the grief that still haunted him.

"The Avengers sat down with Fury," he continued, "more than once, and in these little talks they discussed '*what should we do?*' and '*should we tell Tony?*'. But can you guess *what* the overall consensus was?"

Bruce looked like someone had just ripped apart all his hopes and scattered them in front of him on the floor. He looked gutted, he looked fucking *devastated* and he looked like that *for Tony*. "They didn't tell you."

"*Bingo.*" He gritted his teeth and clenched his fist while admitting the final part, the part that had crushed him more than he could ever admit. "They'd found schematics I'd left unfinished on the servers here, they *used* technology I made *for* the Avengers to fill in the holes. They started *manufacturing* new weapons that they know I won't make anymore." He swallowed. "And guess what the spies weren't good enough at protecting?" He shook his head bitterly. "What a mole in SHIELD took and sold to the *terrorist* with the highest bid?"

"Your designs," Bruce looked positively sickened and Tony's smile was more watery than he'd liked to admit. *They were tears of fucking rage, okay?*

"Stark Industries' weapons are being manufactured again, and oh, look, it only took the *betrayal* of someone *else* I trusted to do it." He huffed out a breath. Or a gasp. It could have been a gasp. But who cared anymore? "I just didn't have to get a hole in my chest this time to find out."

*Yes, you did. Doesn't anyone notice where your fucking heart used to be? Where your god damn faith in people once **existed**?*

"May I request clarification of a point or two?" Loki questioned; his voice completely devoid of all emotion.

Tony turned to him, a sinking feeling in his gut. He hadn't forgotten the mage was there but Loki didn't know Tony's history with this, didn't know just how much it hacked into his soul - not the same way Bruce did. Not like all the other Avengers *should* have known. Or they had, but just didn't care and had trampled over Tony's wishes like they didn't even matter.

*It's for the greater good, Tony. Can't you understand Tony? We have to be able to fight the threats that are coming, **Tony**. Everyone needs a defence, not just **you**, Tony. It's not like we didn't have permission to see your blueprints on your **private server**, Tony. It's not like Romanoff can help being able to remember them and offer them to SHIELD when they **ask**, Tony.*

"Yeah?" Tony prompted roughly, not certain what way this was going to go but feeling himself tense just in case.

“You made a decree that you would no longer sell weapons after your ordeal in the desert. A *public* decree that was easily accessible even when I researched you and your comrades during my invasion. You insisted on this despite decreases in your livelihood and anger from many of your previous supporters. Is that not right?”

“Yeah,” Tony grimaced. “And thanks for the trip down memory-”

“And you were *betrayed*,” and Loki’s eyes suddenly *burned*, “not just then but again, now, by your *new* supporters; people who were trusted, who should have been smart enough to *respect* you.” Loki’s magic crackled around him in a way Tony had never seen before, a blatant display of the *fury* that was becoming impossible to ignore as it filled his eyes. The couch even looked a little singed from where that green power was flicking over it. “They do not deserve the *air that they breathe*.”

It was so sudden, so full of pure intent to maim, that Tony actually laughed, a broken, relieved sound. He also felt the strong desire to clasp the other’s shoulder in gratitude, in *camaraderie*. To fucking *hug* him. But instead, knowing that they were *lovers* in front of Bruce, he walked closer and bent down. He pressed a hand to Loki’s shoulder for balance and also to squeeze it in gratitude - and maybe to remind him to not set the upholstery on fire.

He then pressed a warm kiss to Loki’s cheek; holding his lips there for a long moment and *hearing* the mage’s magic lose some of its angry hissing.

“Thanks, Loki,” he whispered against the other’s skin once the kiss had ended. He went to pull away further, but Loki grabbed his wrist and turned to look at him. He didn’t say anything, but his face had slipped back under that impenetrable, emotionless wall. His eyes still burned though, and he pulled Tony down beside him. Loki’s hand soon moved up from his wrist to take his hand, his thigh a warm pressure against Tony’s.

Tony stared at their joined hands for a long moment, their palms together on Loki’s leg before he slowly linked their fingers. He liked that warm, powerful grip in his own; the hand of a God who was willing to smite anyone who had dared harm his ally.

Yeah, Tony liked that a lot.

“I can’t believe they did this,” Bruce murmured into the quiet, sounding hollow. “Why... how. Why wouldn’t they trus-”

His eyes widened and Tony watched him hit on a point that Tony had come to himself. It was the only logical conclusion.

“I was never a good psych match for the Avengers,” he told him blandly, projecting flippancy when the pain from that thorn had never fully healed. “I guess Ultron cemented it for a lot of people.” His lips twitched before he put down his glass to rub a hand over his face. His voice came out with all the vulnerability he couldn’t repress as he asked Bruce, “Why don’t they ever get it?”

*Get what I’m doing, get **me**, get that I’ve been trying, get that it’s **hard**?*

But that was his life with the Avengers; one misunderstanding, one dismissal, one cursory glance that missed everything, and all right after the other. He'd felt like a one-dimensional projection for months; ignored when it mattered and blamed when it was suitable. To find out he wasn't even trusted amongst his *team*? The people whom he'd offered his home, his technology and his friendship?

And they wondered why he turned to someone new? Why he threw his hat in with the would-be villain, accepted a magical contract, and sent a harsh middle-finger to all of SHIELD's puppet warriors.

He did it because it felt *good* and because they *deserved* it, and because *Tony Stark does what he wants* - and look how well it had paid off.

Tony let himself relax back into the couch, relax back against *Loki* and squeeze the hand caught in his own. "They don't get it," he continued into the silence, "because most people don't *understand us*, Bruce." He smiled at the Doctor. "I haven't tried to fit in since I was a kid and it blew up in my face then, and it's done it again now. I'm over that game, I'm over that *pain*," he nodded at Loki. "I've picked my side now and it's got him on it." He tilted up his chin. "What way are you going?"

"Tony," Bruce sighed and put his head in his hand, "you can't just throw all that at my feet and expect me to-"

"What? Pick a team? Tell me what you what have done? Who you think was right? What you-"

"Tony, we *both* know what they did was wrong," Bruce interrupted him tiredly. "But we *also* know what SHIELD are like when it comes to doing everything and anything to gain an advantage. SHIELD tried to destroy Manhattan when they thought we couldn't defeat the Chitauri." And his eyes skated over Loki tellingly before coming back to Tony. "Steve and the others shouldn't have let them do it to you, but you can't tell me this was an unexpected decision for them to reach."

"So that means I should, what?" Tony demanded; a tight control over his voice to keep it from wavering, "Forgive them?"

Bruce shook his head. "No, I'm not going to tell you to do that. I can see their reasoning; it doesn't mean I agree with it. It doesn't make your anger any less justified or your rejection of them any less understandable."

"So, you're like Rhodey," Tony concluded, torn between acceptance and depressed understanding. "You get the reasons, but don't like the outcomes. You're not on either side, so you're going to happily play for both teams and keep your own counsel."

"Tony-"

But he waved Bruce off, a familiar ache in his chest but one that had faded around Rhodey and would hopefully do the same around Bruce. "It's alright, its better than I got from anyone else. Two friends left are still better than none."

“Two - wait,” Bruce was frowning deeply. “What about Pepper?”

*Hah*, Tony thought with resentment. “Pepper is a bit more loyal to SHIELD than she is to me nowadays.”

The unanticipated movement of his hand drew Tony away from that painful recollection. He looked over at Loki who was watching him intently as he brought up their linked hands to press a kiss to the back of Tony’s. Tony was so shocked it derailed all other thoughts for a good moment. Loki kept their hands close to his mouth even while turning to face Bruce.

“She learned of our involvement and ran straight to the Avengers. Were it not for a binding of silence - something that she agreed to, I may add - than she would have disclosed all she could of our partnership to any there who may have asked.” He brought their hands back down to his thigh while continuing. “She had also chosen previous to that a far more rigid position against Anthony than yourself, Dr Banner.”

Bruce automatically turned to Tony, seeking clarification and reminding Tony that he *really* needed to explain Loki’s side of the Invasion to Bruce as soon as possible. He needed Bruce to, if not trust, than at least *accept* that Loki was on the good guy’s side. Granted, the last of Loki’s words about Pepper were all speculation at this point, but they still weren’t wrong, so Tony elaborated for both of them.

“Our breakup wasn’t great,” he admitted first, “we were arguing a lot when we did see each other, so we’d tactfully made a point to avoid being in the same room. She probably doesn’t know all the details,” Tony admitted, “but she found out when I publically denounced them and when Romanoff and Rogers went and spoke to her.” He shrugged. “She found me less than a day later and she was more interested in speaking on SHIELD’s behalf than listening to what I had to say. We argued, a *lot* and I was hung-over as well. It was a hell of a bad mix for anything reasonable to come from either of us, but...” he swallowed, “she still wanted to find good in them, more than she wanted to find good in me.”

*Like the palladium poisoning all over again, only this time neither of us could get out anything but hurt feelings and fury.*

Pepper had hurt him in places he hadn’t thought she still occupied, and some that he’d known she always would. It could have turned out a whole different way if it wasn’t for circumstance and a fractured relationship leaving things a mess between them. But it hadn’t, and it had twisted them into darker, more hateful versions of themselves. They’d been stubborn, malicious and unable to see the other’s side despite numerous shouting matches.

She’d chosen SHIELD in the end, and even if her eyes spoke about how much she regretted it - she couldn’t take it back and wasn’t even offering to try. The bridge had burned, the ship had sailed and he only regretted how badly things had gotten between them to make it happen so easily.

*Tony Stark has a heart.*

Well, now Pepper was one more person he’d convinced *not* to believe that. But, maybe she still did, she just didn’t believe it was a heart worth allying with anymore. He guessed he

probably deserved that; Tony broke hers, so Pepper gave up on his.

*What a fitting end to our friendship, Miss Potts.*

He leaned forward enough to pick up his glass; toasting the air, toasting *her*, and swallowing the last of the liquid.

“Anthony.”

He set the glass back down before turning to the mage. His eyes were glowing a worrying green and while his magic wasn't spitting anymore, there was still a barely contained fury that lingered under the surface, hiding beneath his calm question, “Would you like me to find them?” Tony frowned and Loki elaborated. “What they have taken from you,” and his gaze flared brighter. “Would you like me to *return* what was taken from you, return it for *destruction* at your leisure and to *redress* the offences laid against you?”

Tony's mouth went dry and he swallowed thickly, his mind running away with so many new possibilities. “You can do that?”

“I will need to formulate a spell, but *yes*,” and the word was a hiss of satisfaction, spurred on by the smile spreading across Tony's face. “I *can*.”

Tony could see it; the disappearing weapons, the shock and fury as everything they'd worked so hard to keep from him was lost in a wave of powerful magic. The rush of pleasure, of *satisfaction* at getting them back, of *gaining* what he was owed; it was *revenge* and Tony adored every part of it.

*Perfect.*

And he told the mage as much. “You're *perfect*.”

Delight unfurled in Loki's eyes, dampening some of his rage and making him look softer, making him look like *Loki*, the guy who wandered around Tony's tower and was curious about everything. The guy who was pleasantly surprised every time Tony half-flirted at and half-teased him for checking Tony out.

He was *also* the man who had heard about what had been taken from Tony and offered to *claim it back*.

Tony moved without thinking and kissed that smirking, fabulous, *mischievous bastard* of a man with firm affection. He pulled back and told the other from only inches away. “You are the *best*. The utter fucking *best*, Loki.”

A light dusting of colour was tinging Loki's pleased cheeks and Tony felt the sudden urge to kiss him again, not an excited burst of emotion - half for the audience and half for himself, but something softer, *simpler*. He wanted to kiss Loki because he was there in front of Tony and he *wanted* to. It made Tony's smile fade slightly because of it, his eyes taking in Loki in a different way for a fraction of a second. He saw something confused enter Loki's eyes as he noticed the change but couldn't pinpoint it.

There was just... *something* and Tony could feel them on the edge of tumbling into it, and he was half tempted to just *push* and see where they landed, but-

“Tony, I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

-but, Bruce made him blink and turn away. He leant back and frowned at the scientist, thinking for a moment that Bruce was talking about the *kiss* before quickly cottoning on that no, it would be about the *weapons* not about pushing Loki against the couch and catching his mouth again. Not that Bruce probably wanted to see that.

But no, right, focus; weapons and Bruce disagreeing with him, it made Tony's eyebrows furrow. “What? Why the hell not?”

“Look, I don’t like them having unauthorised weapons either, especially when they were made from your blueprints and weren’t purchased legally,” Bruce explained, “but that doesn’t stop them from being used as a means of self-defence by SHIELD Agents just doing their jobs.”

Tony scowled. “Well then Loki can tailor it specifically to *not* take from people in dangerous situations.” He turned to Loki. “You can do that, right?”

He shrugged with a slight stiffness to his posture that made Tony wince. *Fuck. Yeah, need to finish that conversation on spontaneous kisses.* “Yes, I can.”

Tony nodded, and breezed past Loki’s discomfort as best he could. Loki might have kissed him before Bruce arrived and said it was fine, but they still had a lot of situations to outline their behaviour in, especially when Loki wasn’t comfortable around Bruce yet.

*Hell*, knowing Loki’s hang-ups, he might even be pissed off that Tony had given up his attention on Loki so quickly in favour of Bruce. *Shit, it probably was that, possessive little Diva.* Honestly, that head was a mine field he didn’t think he’d ever learn how to navigate.

“See, there you go, Bruce,” Tony elaborated. “Loki’s got it all covered.” He squeezed their linked hands before rearranging and slumping against the mage, in part to show his boyfriendly behaviour but also to solidify their connection. *Not. Going. Anywhere.* He was also *relieved* that things had been explained and that they’d both been on his side - but more than that, he was *ecstatic*, hell he was *lighter* knowing that the Avengers’ actions were going to be reversed, *overwritten* and he owed it all to the man beside him.

*I’ve got the best ally in the fucking universe*, he internally crowed. *The best. And fuck you all, I’m not giving him up. I’m parading him around like a God damn trophy. Screw you all, he’s mine and I’m not giving him back.*

He shifted again, tilting his head to look at the mage beside him, waiting until Loki noticed and paid attention to him. He grinned at Loki and was about to tell him as much, to mention the press conference and all the *fun* they were going to have, when FRIDAY announced, “Boss, SHIELD are moving at increased speed and are now six minutes away.”



And *that* wiped the smile off Tony's face. "Fuck." He sighed and pushed himself away from Loki, removing his hand from the other's as he got off the couch. Bruce was already looking twitchier than usual and he told the scientist. "Head down to the lab or to your floor, FRIDAY will keep them from stepping inside. No one will know you're here."

Bruce stood quickly and gave a sharp nod and a tight smile. "I'll see what I can find out about those animals while you're gone."

"And FRIDAY will give you a rundown on what's been happening and what you've missed." Bruce looked unhappy, but Tony insisted, "It's important; new threats, new alliances, new information on not-so bad guys." Bruce's eyes flicked to Loki and back again, but Tony's words were serious. "You really need to know about it."

Bruce sighed, but agreed. "Okay, Tony." He took a step forward, looking uncertain about what to do, but Tony answered for him by closing the rest of the distance and pulling the other into a brief hug. "Stick around until I'm back, alright?"

He pulled back to catch the other's face and got a fond grin. "Yeah, okay." He sobered. "Be careful at SHIELD." His gaze didn't move to Loki this time, but he requested, "Don't do anything *too* dramatic."

Tony grinned brightly and told him confidently, "No promises."

Bruce just shook his head and pulled away. He didn't look back as he hurried to the elevator, grabbing his bag on the way. Tony couldn't hear what destination was picked, but FRIDAY soon shut the doors and let him descend to wherever he wanted to go.

He stared after him for a long, pensive moment. There hadn't been enough time to cover everything, but it was a start. He just had to convince Bruce to stay a little longer and they could work on the rest.

Bruce might not understand everything and he might end up disagreeing with some of Tony's decisions, but so had Rhodey - and in the end, and much to Tony's surprise, it didn't matter so much that they didn't fully get him, because somehow *Loki did*.

He turned back to the mage who was still sitting on the couch and watching him with eyes that analysed, with magic that could steal back his weapons and with an empathy that spoke of betrayal experienced and never forgotten.

It turned out that one person understanding and choosing his side - *only* his side - was enough.

## Chapter End Notes

RIGHT. THERE IT IS. THE BETRAYAL. Did anybody guess it? Was anybody shocked? Hell, do you all *like* it? I was seriously worried about revealing this. It was

built up so much (by accident!) and I hope it lives up to your expectations! \*nervous finger twisting\*

But, okay, that aside two important things to mention!

1. [Amara1783](#) is a *beautiful creature of beauty* and betaed this chapter for me as well as gave her opinion on the betrayal when I was in the height of my freakout. She's beautiful and needs to be thanked and given many hugs. ♥

2. Now that this chapter has been presented I don't mind saying that, well, I can't guarantee how quickly the next chapter will be up. I'm going to try for my usual two week turnaround, but, frankly? This story needs a good sit down session for some hard plotting. This story was never meant to evolve and now it's running in so many different directions (22 dot points of *shit I need to cover*, to be exact. And there might be more. I could be forgetting some.) and I need to *pull these reins back on track*.

This story has a long way to go and a lot of things to cover. I'm hoping to be writing and plotting at the same time (since I do have a good idea of what will be in the next few chapters) but I want to know *everything* so that I don't pen something I have to go back and erase later. So I'm just warning you that while I'm in this shaky plotting period chapters may fluctuate. I'll do my best and this isn't a *hiatus*, it's just me attempting to get this story together so I know I won't miss anything.

So I want to say thanks in advance for your patience. Hopefully this will be a lot easier and quicker than my nervous brain is making me believe. Fingers crossed! After all, I know the main points, I know where it's going to *end* and how and why. I just have to outline a bit more. Rest assured though, it's a journey I don't want to stop taking :)

# Chapter 17

## Chapter Notes

So, hi! The update is a little later than originally expected, but on the bright side, I have a *lot* of this plotted now. ~~This fucker is huge, omg.~~ So hopefully that will allow more consistent updates again, yay! Thank you to everyone for being so patient! I hope you like this chapter :)

p.s. From now on until hopefully the end the awesome [Amara1783](#) will be my proof-reader and general fixer-upper of the first draft. She is precious and deserves lots of love for helping improve each chapter. ♥

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

Loki was the one to break the silence that had lingered around them. “What will you have us do when they come?”

Tony blinked. “*Have us do*?”

“They are coming to your house to demand an audience, to *order* our compliance when we are under no such obligation to them.” Loki tilted up his chin, stubborn and incensed. “Traitors should never be warmly welcomed unless one wishes to *destroy* them.”

Tony had to fight down a small smile as he made his way back over. He briefly contemplated sitting on the table so he could face the mage, but in the end he took his place beside him on the couch. He did put his back to the armrest but before Loki could rearrange and turn towards him, he spread his legs over the other’s lap. Loki narrowed his eyes slightly but Tony just let his grin widen. “We’re dating, babe. You’re going to *love* sharing your personal space with me. I make everything look better.”

“I believe I should have more carefully worded my agreement to this ruse,” Loki grumbled, but there was a twitch to the corner of his mouth that said he was only teasing. His hand also came down to lightly rest over Tony’s ankle. That point of connection was oddly comforting in the face of what Tony knew was to come.

He sobered at the reminder and answered Loki’s previous remark. “I have to pick my battles, Loki.” He closed his eyes on a sigh, feeling his energy waver, but the soft stroking of Loki’s fingers through the fabric of his jeans made Tony open his eyes. Loki was watching him intently, his hand a warm, heavy weight that grounded him to the room and the demi-god beside him. He half-smiled at the other. “I could destroy the support given to the Avengers and fuck up any of SHIELD’s attempts to gain back public support after the revelations about Hydra. It would only take one ‘*tell all*’ interview and they would take months, *years* to recover from that.”

“But you have stayed your hand,” Loki said in the pause that followed, his eyes narrowed. “You have done little more than remove yourself from beneath their flag.” He was assessing Tony, his mind whirring as he pieced things together before his expression cleared. “They are your pawns. You do not remove them because they are *useful*.”

Tony let out a harsh laugh. “That sounds better than ‘if the public hates them, we’re fucked when they need to fight Thanos with us’.”

“You recognise their use over your own desire for vengeance,” Loki remarked, his eyes slightly pinched. “Many, far older than you, have taken much longer to reach such important conclusions.”

Tony eyed him carefully, seeing a personal understanding behind his eyes that Loki wasn’t even trying to hide.

Loki smiled a little self-deprecatingly, “You employed far greater restraint in your actions than I did.”

Tony knew they were skirting around something very important and in no way simple. He’d only caught snippets from Thor and didn’t like what any of them said, and even less what they *didn’t* say. “Your situation was different than mine, Loki. Not everything is that black and white.”

“No,” Loki admitted quietly. “But some things will never stop being a cause for regret.”

“Hey,” Tony leant forward so he could reach and lightly squeeze Loki’s arm. “The Invasion-”

“Is in no way the worst of my crimes.” *That* made Tony stall slightly, but Loki just shook his head. “But it is a charge no one is pursuing, it is something that *should* be paid by me, but that I will not force at this junction. I have other things I must see to first.” He smiled bitterly. “But they are my transgressions, not yours, and they will be repaid.” He nodded at Tony. “You have your Iron Man and your reparations to those your weapons have harmed.” He swallowed. “So too will I repair the actions that my senseless thoughts drove me to.”

*What did you do?* Was on the tip of Tony’s tongue, but he could tell it wouldn’t be a short or emotionless answer - if Loki even told him at all. SHIELD were also on their way and they needed to be a *united* front. Now wasn’t the time. It didn’t stop Tony from worrying about *what* had happened. The fact that he wasn’t being chased to repent for his crimes either meant it wasn’t as bad as Loki was making it out to be or that *Asgard* didn’t find it as bad as Loki did, which didn’t narrow things down in the slightest.

Tony wanted to know, but he had to put it on hold for now. He also gave a second comforting squeeze to Loki’s arm as he told him, as carefully as he could when he didn’t have all the facts. “You’re doing what you can to make it right, at least in your own mind. That’s better than a lot of people do, Loki, don’t sell yourself short.”

Loki smiled in a way that said he didn’t believe a word of it. “But it is not my mistakes that we should be speaking of; rather it is our response to the current and more immediate threat.”

His expression turned more genuine while also firmly distancing the conversation from his past and from himself. “I ask again, Anthony; what would you have us do?”

Tony watched him for a long moment, wishing he could press on this subject more, but knowing, even without SHIELD on the horizon, pestering a mage about something he didn’t want to talk about would only end up with him teleporting away. Loki hadn’t done that for a long time, but Tony didn’t want to do something to inspire him to start again.

He wanted the Tower to be somewhere Loki felt *comfortable*, where he didn’t need to protect himself or hide who he was. Loki had given Tony as much distance and time as he needed to talk about his betrayal and the right thing to do would be to respond in kind.

It did mean talking about SHIELD and the Avengers though, something Tony really wasn’t keen to deal with any time soon, but with those assholes practically on his doorstep, they had no choice but to decide on their plan and *quickly*.

“We go with them,” Tony told him and wished he had another drink without having to move. *Actually, that can happen.* “Can you summon me another scotch or something?” He sounded tired, and that was probably one of the main reasons Loki acquiesced so easily. It appeared floating in the air before him and Tony took it with a pleased quirk to his mouth. “Right.” He took a sip, relishing the perfect taste. “We make sure they don’t find out about Bruce, we make a suitable show about being dragged into their ‘friendly meeting’ and give them as little as fucking possible in response to their questions.”

Loki was stroking his ankle again with a purr. “*Excellent.*”

“FRIDAY will make sure they’re not about to fuck us over while we’re there, and we’ll stay updated on what Bruce finds on the animals. If he gets anything important, we’ll get the fuck out of there and back here. Hopefully this won’t take *too* long, but knowing SHIELD it will take most of the damn night.”

Loki’s hand was a calming presence. “And what of us?”

“Hmm?”

Loki gestured at their position. “We have recently come to be seen as lovers to your world. How do you wish to present this relationship to their organisation?”

Tony snorted. “By making out when we’re supposed to be in a serious meeting? *That* will piss them off real good.”

Loki blinked and something passed across his face Tony couldn’t catch. He was curious, but he could also see the approach of the SHIELD convoy. Luckily, Loki also noticed it and didn’t seem ready to beat around the bush. “You wish to be... that demonstrative?”

*Right. Parameters. Keep forgetting about those.* “Yeah, that a problem? We don’t have to be.” He shrugged. “But I’m a tactile kind of guy, especially with someone I’m dating who people don’t approve of. Call it the rebelling little shit in me-”

“They will have devices for monitoring magic in their compound, will they not?” Loki interrupted, looking vaguely uncomfortable. “You are able to detect my illusions. Would they have a similar level of technology?”

Tony flicked his eyes to the approaching jet. “Yeah, maybe. Why?”

Loki licked his lips and his eyes skittered away as he admitted, “You are an attractive man, Anthony, and you know of my... reactions to that.”

His body was tense under Tony’s legs and Tony was quick to catch on. Tony had to stifle a chuckle. “Well, I can’t exactly promise to *help you out*,” *fuck, not when they were in the middle of SHIELD, but with the right amount of privacy? Well...* “But I’m not going to be anything other than flattered if I feel your Godly cock all hard against my thigh.”

“*Anthony*,” Loki hissed appalled and embarrassed and trying desperately not to show the latter.

He couldn’t stop from smirking. “So wait, were you going to *illusion hide* your arousal from me if you could? That’s just *cold*. I might get offended at the insult to my kissing prowess!”

Loki’s huff of breath was long-suffering in nature, but Tony was just happy to feel that he’d relaxed back into the couch. Well, he was still slightly tense, but his eyes were focusing more on the aircraft that was landing.

“I would prefer that to a different kind of offense I could have gained,” Loki murmured and it dampened some of Tony’s good humour. The sight of Barton and some standard issue SHIELD Agents didn’t help either.

He still leant closer so that he could take Loki’s chin in clear view of everyone on the landing deck. He made Loki look at him as he told him seriously. “Not offended, Loki. Never offended. Not even if you came in your pants moaning my name.”

Loki’s cheeks didn’t flush, which was a shame. Was he getting desensitised already?

“I am a *God*; you should be more concerned with *yourself* ending up in such a position.”

Tony’s eyebrows rose. “Oh yeah? Got some tricks up your sleeve?”

Loki smirked, fierce and full of a thousand years of carnal knowledge. “*Always*, dear Anthony, of that I *assure* you.”

The promise in his gaze made Tony feel slightly hot under the collar as his mind decided to go in *every possible direction* to try and work out what a *mage* might have up his sleeve. “Okay,” and if he was slightly breathless, it was totally justified, “*that’s* a conversation I need to hear the end of.”

Loki eyebrows furrowed curiously. “They will not be stories easily adapted for your own use.”

Tony didn't know if that was because Loki was a mage or that he thought Tony was going to try and apply them to women. Tony wasn't really inclined to find out. "I am the best damn inventor on this *planet*. I will find a way to make more kinky sex fit into my life."

Chuckling, Loki shook his head but still promised, "At another time Anthony, I will entertain you with tales of some of the sexual practices I have come across." He had barely finished before his eyes were turning to the intruders at their door that were only just held at bay by FRIDAY. "For now, we have less pleasant topics and even less welcome people to contend with."

Tony eyed them and pulled in a breath to strengthen himself. He let it out slowly, carrying with it all the teasing, light-hearted and *friendly* air that easily came around him and Loki. He let his hand slip from Loki's jaw and sat back, taking a sip of scotch as he did.

"We tell them nothing more than we have to," Tony reiterated.

"Do not worry, Anthony," Loki answered easily while sinking back into the couch. "Showmen and liars as we both are, they could not find themselves on more uneven ground." He flashed Tony a conspiratorial and mischievous smirk. "*They* invite their own downfall; we merely assist in the more sudden arrival of it."

Tony liked hearing that, he *really* liked hearing someone share his thoughts so easily. They just... lined up, more than he'd ever expected when he'd thrown the partnership at Loki. He'd known they were similar, but not to *this* extent. They weren't even two sides of a coin, they were individual structures; complex and unique and quietly crumpling on their own... but put them together and not only did they look good but they *worked*. They strengthened each other and helped to keep them both standing.

"You're going to wreck me for other people," Tony complained, making Loki blink in startled confusion. "I'm not going to find a better ally *anywhere*," Tony elaborated, "on the one hand, it means I've got the best, but on the other hand..." Tony paused thoughtfully. "You know what? Nope. No other hand. I simply have the best and am pretty okay with this."

"Boss," FRIDAY interjected, before Tony could continue or Loki could respond. "Agent Barton is requesting you open the doors before Fury orders him to shoot through them." Tony looked over at the window, seeing Barton standing in the centre of a group of black-clad gun-toting SHIELD minions. "Agent Barton," FRIDAY added, "has twice refused to initiate more hostile attempts to enter the penthouse despite communications from SHIELD requesting he do so."

*That's interesting*, Tony thought, not that it particularly *warmed* him to the agent, but as far as potential attempts to gain his favour went - it wasn't a terrible ploy. It certainly kept his agitation from doubling at being able to *allow* them in, rather than watching them trample through broken glass.

"I guess we better open the door before they get too trigger-happy."

"I feel as though I should put a ward on your windows," Loki mused, "something to lightly curse those who attempt to break them."

Tony didn't get a chance to poke at that idea - what would it do? Give them boils? Purple hair? Shock them off the Tower? You never could tell with Loki - before FRIDAY was letting Barton and the other agents come into his penthouse.

The three agents had all of their attention locked on Loki as their hands hovered near their guns. Barton, at least, was giving Tony his concentration. "Stark." His lips pulled painfully but he still added, "Loki."

"Little Hawk," Loki said with the full intention to annoy.

Barton tensed and his teeth clenched, but he otherwise didn't react, he kept his focus on Tony. "Fury wants to see you both."

"Hmm," Tony swirled his drink. "I think 'want' is being a little generous; the armed parade and attempted invasion of my home smacks a little more of a *demand*."

"I was also under the impression," Loki chimed in, "that we made ourselves *perfectly* clear the last time you forced your presence on Anthony. *He* is no longer one of your little minions and *I* have never been one."

"No," Barton snapped, "you were *the minion* of someone who spat you out and now wants to turn his attention on *us*."

Loki's face was wiped clean of emotion at the comment and Tony sat up straighter on the couch. His voice was as cold as ice as he spoke, "And I was tortured in the fucking desert. You going to take a shot at *that* now, Barton?"

Because it was common fucking knowledge among the Avengers about what had happened to Loki and if Barton was going to be an *asshole* about it then Tony was going to find any weak spot in his armour and rip him to shreds. *No one fucks with my friends*.

Barton's cheek twitched a little, but he didn't continue the subject, nor did he apologise for the dig at Loki. "SHIELD is concerned about the woman who attacked New York. You currently have the most information on her and SHIELD, in the interests of international security, would like to discuss her potential threat."

*And you in **no way** want to scream at me for my now **very public** alliance with Loki Laufeyson.*

"Mhmm," Tony hummed before turning to Loki who was still glaring at Barton with something seething under the surface. "Babe?"

Loki turned to him, the anger still present but there was small arch to his eyebrow that was the only sign the nickname had amused him.

"I know we had plans, you know, for a victory *celebration* and all, but voyeurism isn't something I'm fond of when it includes *Barton*."

"Ah," Loki replied, "so you wish to postpone." His eyes danced a little and his hand slid sinuously up Tony's leg. "You will pay dearly for that deprivation."



Tony shivered and it wasn't entirely faked. *Damn*. He relaxed back into the couch in a gesture that was *very* submissive, his attention on Loki. The action seemed to both shock and *greatly* intrigue him. *Surprise, I like powerful people in my bed*. "Mmm, but you always know how to make it *very* worthwhile."

Barton, who Tony was still staying aware of from the corner of his eye, had shifted uncomfortably at his actions. The other agents actually seemed shocked at the behaviour, which was disappointing. Weren't they supposed to be a little more unflappable than that?

Loki chuckled at his words; a deeper sound than usual. "I will keep that in mind. But what of SHIELD? Do you believe the discussion would be beneficial to us? I have no inclination to endlessly repeat myself to those who have proven their lower intellect."

"That's true," Tony shifted slightly to further encourage Loki's touch. The mage's eyes were locked on Tony's and were the only thing betraying his uncertainty about the contact, and Loki's increasing enjoyment the more Tony accepted it. "I mean, intelligence aside, I'm not sure how well they can handle a civilised discussion. Or, you know, an *honest* one." A hint of hardness entered his voice and eyes, even when he didn't look away from Loki. "I wouldn't want them to *misuse* something we *gave* them."

Loki's hand paused for just a moment, his green eyes *erupting* in a blaze of anger at the suggestion. His hand started to glow green from where it was resting on Tony's thigh. Tony glanced down at it curiously, feeling something not unlike a heat pack - you know, if heat packs crackled like electricity and felt like little more than a soft tingling. "Do you wish for them to *depart*?"

Tony was curious, and that really was his downfall, because he reached out for Loki's hand, sliding his fingers and palm against Loki's, capturing the magic and watching it wrap around *both* of their hands as it vibrated softly. *Fuck, that's cool*. Tony's eyes were captivated by the way their fingers linked and the green fluttered around them and down to their wrists like some kind of flame.

It took Loki drawing it back into his skin before Tony could tear his eyes away to stare at the mage. Loki looked... shocked, *deeply*, although he was masking it *really fucking well*.

*What the hell was that?*

"Barton," Loki abruptly snapped, turning to the agent but never letting go of Tony's hand. "We will attend, but I will not tolerate delays or pathetic mind games. I wish this to be over as soon as possible. And be aware that we *only* do so as a means of informing your Director, in person, of just what we *will* allow and what we will *not*."

When Tony made himself look away, Barton and *hell all* of the SHIELD agents looked as if they'd collectively sucked a lemon. "If it gets you guys to stop fucking each other in front of me, then fine, you've got it."

"Good." Loki turned back to him and moved to pull his hand away but Tony held firm.

He kept his eyes on Loki's as he slowly brought the glass to his lips and tipped the last of the liquid down. Holding out the glass on the flat of his palm, he let Loki disappear it away with an unimpressed but still slightly fond look. When it was gone, he removed his legs from Loki's and stepped off the couch without letting go of Loki's hand. He lightly tugged Loki to his feet, ending up with them inches apart.

Tony was grinning at the mage and he raised his eyebrows in half request and half dare. Loki got it in an instant and when he huffed out his amused breath, it was in a quick press to the corner of Tony's mouth. Tony was surprised but he still angled into the gesture. It actually had the appearance of something softly affectionate even if it felt vaguely stilted. It didn't *look* it, as from the angle of the agents it would have looked as if they were just kissing gently.

Tony could *feel* something off about the action though, and it took him a moment to register just what it was. *He didn't take the dare, not the way he usually does.* It was normally one-upmanship and teasing. This might have looked tender in the face of SHIELD, but to Tony it only spoke of something going on in Loki's head that was making him hesitant.

*Could be the whole fear of getting an erection thing?*

Which, actually, Tony could buy that. He was *tempted* to make it a reality by grabbing Loki's hips and pulling him close - at *proving* it was very okay to get aroused by him, but he refrained. The last thing he needed was to make Loki awkward when they were surrounded by SHIELD cameras and agents. They were playing up a boyfriend act in an organisation of spies; caution was really the best way to go.

So when Loki moved away, he simply kept hold of Loki's hand and walked at his side, but that was for more reasons than just their ruse. Holding Loki's hand meant they could comfort and warn each other non-verbally. It also meant, if anything turned to shit, that Loki could teleport them the fuck out of there.

Tony had a gauntlet hidden in his watch and Loki simply *was* a weapon. They were as protected as they could be while walking into the lion's den. While Tony didn't expect a fight, he'd already been surprised by a betrayal once before; who was he to say they wouldn't try something again?

No, Loki and Tony might be following the agents out to the jet, they might be *agreeing* to the meeting - but it was hardly because they had no choice. Loki had said it himself; they were showmen and liars.

They both knew how to play a room, especially to get the outcome that they wanted. SHIELD and the Avengers were pieces on their chessboard and they were far too useful to be discarded *just* yet.

Okay. So it was a *slightly* fillerish chapter. But, things happened! More flirting, more cock-blocking, some cool magical hand-holding and the trip into SHIELD.

What will await them when they reach the compound? Who knows?

Well, *I* have a good idea ;P

# Chapter 18

## Chapter Notes

Alright, let's switch it up a little! **charminghex99** made a request quite a few chapters ago that asked for some Shield/Avenger POV. I told them I liked that idea and that I would try to fit it in, so, here we go. I don't know if this is what you or anyone else had in mind/was expecting or wanted, but, ah well, it's the best way that fits in with the story!

I do have plans to include a handful more alt POV chapters over the course of the story, but I assure you, there won't be many; a spattering here and there. So rest assured, the majority of it will remain as Tony and Loki's side of things :)

And once again, much love to my wonderful beta who makes my chapters so much more beautiful and readable, haha. ♥

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

“They’re coming.”

Steve twisted to look behind him as Natasha entered the room, her eyes narrowed. Wanda was sitting nervously in one of the boardroom chairs no doubt wishing her brother had already returned from his latest mission.

Steve hadn't been happy with Fury's plan to separate them in the beginning, but while Pietro's enhanced metabolism had helped keep him alive after Ultron, he'd still had a lot of healing to do. He was only just moving into active duty and they were keeping it simple.

Fury had also moved them apart in a bid to make them form connections outside of each other, and it seemed to have worked, even if both twins still preferred Clint over any other new friends they had made.

Thor was the only other person present, standing apart from everyone with his arms crossed as he stared pensively at the floor.

“Loki does not tame so easily,” he murmured in response to Natasha. “I would not welcome him warmly into this facility.”

“Barton thinks it's Stark influence,” Natasha replied, coming to stand beside Steve. “Loki seems charmed by him, or at the very least, keen to play along and keep Stark's favour.”

Thor scoffed at her in a way that made her eye twitch. “Loki thinks to lord his alliance with Stark over us. He believes himself to have a prize and will take great pleasure in holding it out of our reach.”

The description made Steve frown heavily as he regarded Thor. The very public kiss Loki and Tony had shared had spread quickly through social media and government channels. Fury had been furious at the revelation of Loki's presence but hadn't seemed bothered by the intimate nature of the photos. All he cared about was damage control and how fast it was going to blow up in their face.

Steve had been shocked at the depth of their intimacy. Natasha and Clint weren't talking about it, but he had to wonder how much of a surprise it had been to them. Tony was affectionate with everybody he liked and Steve had heard more than a few rumours about how he didn't discriminate with his lovers. Had Tony chosen any other man, Steve would have blinked and moved on - but for him to choose *Loki* as a lover concerned Steve. Deeply.

He couldn't imagine that the nature of their relationship stemmed from anything other than the same driving force that had compelled Tony into choosing an alliance with the mage in the first place. Tony was searching for a way to vent his frustration and Steve was worried that Loki was very aware of that vulnerability and was using sex and affection as a means of manipulating Tony further onto his side.

"Do you think he sees Tony as just a means to an end?" Steve questioned. He knew trying to anticipate Loki's actions or the turn of his mind was a long-shot, but Thor was the best source they had for information on Loki.

Thor wasn't quite sneering, but it was a close thing and Steve knew there was something more going on than the obvious unhappiness at their alliance. There was some other aspect that was making Thor grind his teeth, but not even Natasha had been able to pry it out of him. Thor was being unusual reticent since speaking to Tony and Loki the last time. While Steve didn't know what it was, after having growing up in an environment that had more than its fair share of violent homophobia, Steve had a lot of suspicions that he was hoping would be proven wrong.

"Loki has no honour left in him," he eventually responded, "I have doubts if he truly possessed any in his youth. He is beyond the possibility of redemption, and yes," he brought his gaze to Steve. "I believe he endeavours to muddy Stark along his way. Stark is nothing but a convenient tool to him."

Steve clenched his fists tightly; anger rushing through him. He knew Tony wouldn't want to hear them out, not now, possibly not ever, but- "We have to warn him."

"He won't listen," Natasha dismissed the suggestion firmly and with a harsh bitterness that belied just how much the situation was gnawing at her. "He doesn't pay attention to anything we say anymore, Steve. Or did you *forget* being teleported back here after Stark got bored?"

"We hurt Tony," Steve insisted, using his name in the way no one else seemed to anymore except Clint - even Thor had stopped since learning about Tony's involvement with Loki. "The least we can do is try and caution him. We drove Tony to take support from someone he would never normally turn to. We can't just stand back and do nothing."

"This man, Loki," Wanda began, speaking for the first time and with a small furrow in her brow. "He does not seem to concern Rhodey. They have fought together and they have

spoken many times. Do we not trust his judgement?"

Natasha was quick to respond, quick to criticise, "Rhodes has always been more loyal to Stark than to any organisation."

"That's not true." Steve turned to her with a scowl. "He's Tony's friend but he's never stood by him if he thought Tony was wrong."

And it was that statement, that *truth*, which made something guilty and confused squirm in Steve's chest. It had been there from the moment everything had spilled out and Tony had ripped himself out of his association with SHIELD and the Avengers. Tony's movements had been violent and furious and they had stunned Steve. Steve had thought the problem stemmed from the lie and the secrecy surrounding the weapons they'd found, but whenever he pressed in that direction the pieces just didn't add up. SHIELD tried to insist that they did, but there was something off each and every time.

It was in the way Clint wouldn't meet his eye on certain questions even as he spilled out monotone answers. It was how Natasha held his gaze by comparison, doing so without flinching but with an angle to her chin that dared for him to be bolder. She was goading him to voice his doubts in a way that would only end in lies and fights. It made him grit his teeth with the knowledge that something more had gone on that he hadn't been aware of.

The fact that Rhodey hadn't been in the SHIELD compound since Tony's departure only made his suspicions grow deeper. War Machine hadn't resigned from the Avengers but he'd been very noticeably scarce. Steve knew the military and SHIELD could order him to come back to the facility, but neither of them had and it made Steve wonder *why*.

*But I can't risk him.* The thought came, as it always did.

Because Steve had made a choice; he'd chosen to help and save his best friend. He'd put Bucky under the protection and rehabilitation SHIELD could offer. He'd trusted them to clear Bucky's name with the world, and they had, they *were*, but it came with a price.

He was in the palm of SHIELD's hand while they keep his best friend, his lo... Bucky, while they kept *Bucky* safe.

And in doing that, he'd hurt Tony.

When Steve had stood at that meeting and listened to SHIELD, when he'd made the final call on what needed to be done with the retrieved weapons, he'd done more than what he'd intended. He'd set into motion actions he couldn't have anticipated, fractured things he couldn't get close enough to repair. And he regretted it.

He could look back with the advantage of hindsight and *notice* the way he had been carefully positioned to agree with them. He could try to apologise, he could *want* to take it back, but Tony had already made his decision and found his actions inexcusable.

They *were* inexcusable. He'd let Tony down - but he couldn't let Bucky down too.

The knowledge of the line he'd drawn still hung like a guilty weight around his neck; haunting his thoughts and his quiet moments.

It helped to go and see Bucky.

Bucky was laughing and quirking small smiles again. He was getting along with Sam and Clint, he'd also met the other Avengers and walked around SHIELD easily and freely now. He was treated with less fear and more politeness as every day passed. Bucky was becoming a new man, a *healthy* man and that was all Steve could afford to care about.

The problem was that Bucky was starting to pay closer attention to the dynamics of the team. Well, he always had, but now he was focusing more intently on how they were affecting *Steve*. He hadn't asked about Tony yet, but Steve knew that he likely wanted to.

Tony had done the first repairs on Bucky's arm and had talked to them both a few times, enough for Bucky to see the friendship that Steve had shared with Tony prior to everything collapsing. Tony's actions were all over SHIELD, all over the *world* and Bucky was neither oblivious nor stupid. He knew what had happened and whether he agreed with it or not, he was staying quiet on his opinions- for now.

Steve knew though, that if he told Bucky why he'd made the choice he had, his friend would only feel guilt at Steve's decision and its effects. Bucky had more than enough to deal with at the moment; he didn't deserve the added weight of Steve's actions on his shoulders.

As a result, they didn't talk about anything serious. They were monitored as well, careful eyes that followed Bucky's every move - and Steve's just as closely. So they usually just sat around going through Steve's list. Bucky even had one himself now. They listened to music and watched movies, leaning their shoulders against one another's as they rested on Bucky's bed. Sometimes Bucky talked about his past in Hydra; sometimes he fell asleep and woke with nightmares. It wasn't easy, but every day there was progress.

They might have also ignored the scrawl that Tony had put on Bucky's list, but neither of them were mentioning it.

Steve closed his eyes for a moment, wishing his friend was beside him. Wishing Bucky was free and at his shoulder, scowling at him until he made the right decision and chose to investigate something he didn't trust. *Come on, Punk. When the hell did you learn to back out of a fight?*

*The day when I learned I could lose you again.*

When Thor spoke into the silence that had fallen, it took a few moments for Steve to remember the last words he'd said.

"It does not matter what Stark has made his friend believe." He had taken a step closer as if to emphasize his point, his voice rising to a commanding boom. "The words are simply what Loki wishes us to hear." He gestured with his hand. "Loki's lies are one of his many weapons and if Stark has fallen prey, they will not rest until they make others fall under their spell." His mouth was a thin, unhappy line. "A spell not even Stark is aware he is under."

“Clint said something about that,” Natasha brought up thoughtfully. “They clasped hands and Loki’s magic glowed and fluttered around them. What do you think that meant?”

Thor scowled darkly but eventually admitted, “I do not know the nature of such a gesture. His magic is such that even the Elven scholars would not comprehend him. Loki is beyond the use of simple, common magics. His actions are not found in one answer but several; Loki shall always hide his true intention beneath his many illusions.”

*You could have just said ‘I don’t know’*, Steve almost snapped, but he bit it down. He didn’t want to introduce another argument into the team. They were already more inclined to clash than collaborate recently, and without Sam in the room as a calming presence, or Clint breaking the tension with a timely joke - there was little Steve could do to keep them functioning beyond holding his tongue or smothering angry flames.

So despite his frustration, he turned to Natasha and kept his voice level, “What does Fury plan to do with them when they arrive?”

“Get Stark alone,” Natasha answered. “Once they’re separated, he’ll talk to Stark and you and I will handle Loki.”

Personally, Steve didn’t see that going well. “Tony isn’t going to accept that.”

“He’s going to learn to,” Natasha answered back while crossing her arms.

“We don’t want to put him further offside,” Steve disagreed, not standing down. “He’s agreed to come here when he didn’t have to. We’ll ask them if they’ll separate, but if they don’t want to, we should let them stay together.”

Natasha’s eyes had narrowed, but even Thor seemed to agree with him. “Loki will not accept their parting. He is unlikely to answer you even if they are together, but he will be more inclined with his demands seemingly acknowledged.”

“If we put them in the same room, their responses will be scripted.”

Thor made a dismissive gesture. “Loki will remain in contact with Stark even with many walls between them. Stark has his technology and Loki his magic.”

Steve didn’t like the sound of that, it made any partnership between them look even harder to combat or to break. It made getting through to Tony look even less likely, but he still tried not to let it show.

“If we force them it will only alienate them further,” Steve added. “This isn’t supposed to be an ambush; it’s supposed to be a *discussion*.”

“But that’s a discussion they won’t be happy to have regardless of the way we do it, Captain.” Steve turned to face the door to the room as Fury walked in with Hill a step behind, a tablet resting in the hand by her waist.

“Loki is still a threat,” Fury continued, “I don’t care what Asgard decides to tell me about his *extenuating circumstances*.” He met everyone’s gaze for a moment before finding Steve’s and



holding it. “Stark has allied himself with a risk to national security and while Loki might officially be pardoned, none of us believe he’ll stay that way *or* be on our side.”

Steve had grown tense at Fury’s words, hearing the implication slithering underneath. “You think that Tony is going to become an enemy?”

“This isn’t a partnership that’s going to end well for anyone they come up against,” Fury answered, “and right now, Captain, I’d like to know if *we’re* a target they’re planning to aim at.”

“Tony hasn’t done *anything* against us,” Steve insisted, feeling anger flare in his chest on Tony’s behalf. “He just put his life on the line to protect New York!”

“From an unknown threat with abilities that look close enough to magic to make us *wonder*,” Natasha pointed out, blandly.

Steve could hear what she was inferring, he just wasn’t sure he wanted to believe it.

“You think this new magic-user is an ally of theirs,” Wanda spoke slowly as if testing out the words.

Her eyebrows were furrowed with contemplation, but knowing the unreserved hatred the twins harboured for Tony, Steve wasn’t holding out much hope that she disagreed.

“At this point we don’t know who she is, where she came from, or what she plans,” Fury started to list, moving around the room and drawing everyone’s attention. “Colonel Rhodes is reporting to his superiors and we have the only other people who faced her on their way here now. This is a chance to find out what they discovered from that battle and what relationship they plan to have with us in the future.”

“Loki will not ally himself to us,” Thor told them resolutely.

“We didn’t think he’d ally with Stark either,” Fury rebutted, watching the brooding Thunder God with firm focus. “And with Thanos coming far too close to my doorstep, I’m happy to take any battleground handshake I can get from them.”

He turned to Natasha when he was done; noticing the way that Steve had that other than Thor, she was the hardest sell. “We need them to work with us, Agent Romanoff.”

“Stark won’t do that.” Unwavering. Unequivocal.

“He knows the risks,” Fury persisted, “if he wasn’t willing to listen, he wouldn’t have come here.”

Natasha’s lips were pursed, but her silence on the subject was as good an acknowledgment of Fury’s point as anything.

“They’ll expect arguments,” she brought up instead. “Stark isn’t resigned to what we did, he knows we’re not apologising either.”

*Some of us aren't*, Steve silently corrected, but still had to acknowledge; *not that Tony will believe me.*

“We need to work with Stark,” Fury insisted. “We’ve tried to explain our reasons for what happened, but he’s not willing to listen. We hurt him - more than a lot of us probably expected we would.”

The look he turned on Steve then made him stiffen slightly. It made him remember too many times in the past when Fury and Natasha had run alternative missions and objectives right under his nose.

Fury had resumed his pacing and was elaborating on his point; a general rallying troops. Or a lawyer before a jury. “But now he’s walked back out into the spotlight with an ally we *can't afford* to be on the opposing side of. Stark is going to want the safety of the planet above anything else, and we need to use that to encourage him to join with us.”

“You’re saying we manipulate him,” Steve deadpanned; his unhappiness with the suggestion more than clear.

Fury sighed before he leant on the table, his palms flat on the metal as he held Steve’s gaze. “We made a choice and we chose the safety of this world. Stark has made it painfully apparent that his means of protecting this planet is now different than ours.”

“Are you talking about Loki,” Steve asked carefully, “or about what Tony thought of what we did?”

“I’m talking about everything that has got him to the point of publically kissing a *war criminal* without a care for what it’s going to do for anybody trying to keep this planet *safe*.”

Something leaden fell into Steve’s stomach at those words. “Loki’s been officially cleared.” His voice felt dead, as if he was speaking from a tunnel. “He was affected by the sceptre he was using. He was manipulated and *tortured* and-”

“Loki has a far stronger mind than he would like you to believe,” Thor cut in, unimpressed or uncaring of the situation his brother had been through. “He is said to have undermined the invasion and has made an enemy of Thanos for it. Loki cares little for those he destroys as long as he finds his own way out intact.” He was earnest as he told the room. “Do not let him fool you into believing his innocence. Loki is not one to be trusted.”

“He seems to trust Stark,” Hill spoke up for the first time while looking at the tablet in her hand, faint voices coming from the device. “We couldn’t get much from Pepper Potts, but whatever he’s done, Loki’s contractually bound himself to Stark.” She looked up. “And Stark wouldn’t have entered any kind of agreement like that lightly.”

“Trust is immaterial in a magical binding,” Natasha pointed out, eyebrows furrowed with concentration as she analysed. “While they might not be a weak point to each other yet, sex still forms emotional bonds between people,” Natasha turned to Fury. “The relationship could also be designed to help Loki gain favour quickly with the public. Stark will likely capitalises on that.”

“Thor?” Fury questioned, drawing the other from his furious glaring at the wall. He blinked back to them, but didn’t lose his agitation. “How well do you think the people of Earth will take to Loki?”

Thor grimaced and Steve could feel his hair stand on end from the tension in the air.

“His similarity to Stark is great and will work in their favour,” he answered with clipped tones, “and not in our own.”

“Hill,” Fury turned to her, a tightness to his mouth and eyes as well as a hint of exhaustion. “Have them redraft the publicity statements on Loki.” He gained an automatic ‘sir’ from her before giving his attention back to the room, that moment of weariness masterfully hidden again. “One way or another and regardless of any lingering anger we need them on our side.”

The silence was best described as mulish, but no one was trying to argue the issue any further. They seemed to have accepted it - because despite everything that had happened they all knew how dangerous Loki could be as well as just how *valuable* Tony was.

They’d recognised it too late on Tony’s part and hadn’t been able to stop themselves from making a mistake that would lose him - but Steve was hoping they wouldn’t miscalculate now. They might all fear and dislike the alliance for numerous reasons. Steve might also be worried about what Tony had sold himself into, about *who* he’d let into his house and in his bed - but he wasn’t in a place anymore where he could warn him.

He just had to hope that SHIELD and the Avengers would do the right thing now; that they would stop burning bridges and start building them instead.

Steve didn’t trust Loki, he was too unstable, and he *knew* that Tony would find himself in trouble the longer he associated with him. But Steve had lost his chance to be trusted.

He’d given up everything for Bucky; he’d given his faith over to SHIELD when they’d laid out the options regarding Tony’s recovered weapons. And he was still suffering the consequences of that decision, he probably always would.

The least he could do was help and look out for Tony whenever he could, *however* he was able, and especially in the moments when Tony didn’t know someone was there.

In the moments when Tony didn’t know that even he still needed it.

## Chapter End Notes

Ngl. It was a complete accident when the chapter developed in a way that mirrored Civil War by making Steve’s decision to go against Tony be for Bucky. I was screaming when I realised it (and as I have not seen Civil War anything else was even more unintentional). I hope you guys liked that revelation as much as me and I’m interested to

see what you all think! Hopefully you won't all click out of the story now, knowing the Avengers may not be as bad as you thought. Hehe.

Thanks for reading!

p.s. Yes, Pietro lives because I want him to and IDC. My story. My rules. \*sticks her tongue out you all\*

And as for him and Wanda. \*sigh\* Their characterisation is going to be... interesting, since I barely know them and am working slightly blind. Even her few lines here have given me much uncertainty about her 'sounding right'. Hopefully, it comes out okay not only here but in the future! We shall see :|

# Chapter 19

## Chapter Notes

I have had an extraordinarily shit day only made better by the fact it's now over and that my chapter has come back from my beta and is now edited and ready for posting.

So I apologize for the wait but both mine and my beta's life were hectic and it didn't make for a good mix. Either way, I'm glad to be able to post this to all the lovely people who read this story. You can make a really crappy day better, just by knowing I'll be making people smile by updating.

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

Walking into SHIELD was, quietly frankly, *great*.

Sure, Tony didn't actually want to be there. He would much rather be in his lab with Bruce and Loki - or even just sitting back on the couch talking about everything and nothing with the mage. But as far as shitty situations went? Walking into SHIELD with an armed guard and Loki at his side was *hilarious*.

Tony had seen the footage of when they'd captured Loki during the invasion and the only thing missing this time around was the cuffs. Loki was giving the same smirk but his attention was only rarely on where they were going. Instead he kept looking at Tony as if they were sharing a private joke.

Which, really, they were.

Tony used the walk as a way to indicate to Loki just what rooms they were passing. "That's the terribly underrated lab over there," he pointed out. "Oh, and that's the training ground for the baby Avengers."

He shifted just enough that he could see Barton gritting his teeth. It only made him more inclined to keep explaining SHIELD layouts to an amused Loki. He saw a different lab and made sure to draw Loki's attention to it. "They're attempting to work on blocking your magic over there," Loki's eyes narrowed and Tony lightly squeezed his hand. "Failing though, so don't worry."

*And if they get any better, we'll **destroy** their equipment.*

Barton didn't try to stop him as he kept chatting, which surprised him a little, but Tony wasn't complaining. The SHIELD agents they encountered stared as they walked by; their eyes filled with either fury or trepidation - but one way or another they *all* had their hands near their guns.

They were finally shown into a windowless boardroom filled with empty chairs that Tony knew from experience were painfully uncomfortable.

“No welcome party?” He asked Barton.

“Director Fury requests that Loki remain here.” He gestured back out at the hallway. “If you’d follow me, Stark.”

Tony barked out an incredulous laugh and both his and Loki’s bodies tensed; stubborn, defensive, *united*. Their arms were brushing they were so close and his grip tightened on the mage’s hand. “Not a chance, Barton.”

Barton looked like he knew he was fighting a losing battle, but he still persisted, “This doesn’t have to be difficult, Stark. Give us ten minutes apart from your *boyfriend* and then you can go crawl back into his lap.”

“I do not believe these chairs will be conducive to such a position,” Loki replied, a lascivious smirk quickly curling his mouth even as his eyes surveyed the room. He then caught Tony’s gaze and purred, “But I do so *adore* having you there...”

Tony had to swallow down a laugh as he made a show of analysing the furniture, tilting his head as if playing with logistics. “Yeah, the armrests would be a bitch,” he decided, before turning back to Loki and suggesting, “But hey, you do like me on my knees, I could always-”

“You’re winding us up,” Barton interrupted him, but despite his deduction, he was frowning, “but it’s still not an image I want to have described to me. Just wait here.”

He turned on his heel and gestured at the agents to follow him. They left the room and shut the door, but Tony knew they would be just outside, waiting for further orders and stopping anyone but Fury from entering. Or them from leaving.

Tony was *extremely* tempted to have Loki teleport them out of the compound, just to stab a middle finger in the face of their arrogant presumptions. Or maybe they could just do something to piss off Fury and anyone else who was monitoring them.

Loki, it seemed, had a similar idea.

“If you are so inspired,” Loki murmured, letting Tony’s hand go but sliding his own up Tony’s arm and then across his back and shoulder blades as he walked. His fingers were running so gently across Tony’s shirt that he shivered. “I could incorporate such a position into our evening plans.”

He stepped behind Tony until they were flush together. His mouth brushed Tony’s ear as he whispered, “I will have you at my feet and hold you in place until I am done with you.” His hands went to rest on Tony’s hips as his hot breath puffed over Tony’s skin. “Perhaps that shall be my reward for our postponement?”

Tony’s eyes fluttered and he leant back against Loki, letting the other take his weight. Loki’s mouth was no longer touching him; instead he had tilted his head so that they could see each

other.

*Your dirty talk must be phenomenal*, Tony couldn't help thinking.

"I think we'd *both* be getting a reward there," he answered the mage, his voice slightly rougher. Loki looked thrilled and Tony couldn't even tell if that was part of the act or genuine delight.

Tony barely noticed one of Loki's hands moving until it cupped him around the neck and chin. He didn't try to direct Tony or hold him; his hand was simply a warm pressure as Loki bent down and caught his lips. The thumb on Tony hip also began to stroke lightly as they softly exchanged kisses.

It was nice; a kind of oddly affectionate gesture while also being completely passionless. They were both tense and keeping an eye and ear on when SHIELD would barge in on them. They also weren't trying to arouse each other with the kissing or touching; the actions were only being done to piss off the organisation that was watching them - to cement the *nature* of their relationship to SHIELD. They were also, at least to Tony, a weird form of comfort. He had Loki to lean on, to count on, to *conspire and work with* and it was... liberating.

Still. It wasn't going to help them get the reaction they wanted if this PG shit was *all* they did.

After all, he didn't think Fury was going to keep them waiting too long. Fury knew neither of them were patient by nature and less likely to be *malleable* if overly agitated. Tony figured the incentive of keeping them from screwing on the conference table would only get him walking faster.

He broke the kiss with Loki and when both their eyes were open, he smirked at the mage and slipped his hand backwards, wiggling it until he managed to get under Loki's clothes and touch the skin of his stomach.

"How do you feel about getting caught on camera?" He questioned, feeling Loki suck in a breath beneath his inquisitive fingers. "It wouldn't exactly be the first time *I've* had a sex tape get leaked to a wider audience. So, what do you say, babe?"

Tony's fingertips started to edge under Loki's pants and fuck; Loki's eyes were surprised but otherwise completely unreadable depths of green. And if Tony was leaning back a little further and hoping to feel *some* kind of reaction, well, that was just the ego of a man wanting to arouse a demi-god talking.

But before he could push Loki any further, the door to the room opened and they were forced to look away from one another. Hill was the one who had entered and the glare she shot them could have not only curdled milk, but probably put the entire dairy farm out of business.

"Agent Hill," Tony said with false cheer and his own glower, "you really do have the *worst* timing."

“And Agent Barton said you didn’t want your time wasted,” Fury answered him, stepping into the room with his coat swishing, but his eye zeroed in on Tony and his position against Loki. “Let’s try and make that an agreement on *both* sides.”

Tony’s smile was knife sharp and just as thin. “Really? Because an email that didn’t interrupt my evening would have been so much better. ”

“There’s a new enemy attacking innocent people,” Fury calmly responded, “I know you don’t want to be here, but that isn’t something we can just ignore.”

Turning to Loki, Tony remarked, “I do love it when people ask you to ‘put aside their differences’ when it suits *them* but forget all about it when it doesn’t. If they ran it like a two-way street, your name might already be cleared with the public.”

“It was more than just SHIELD that didn’t want the world to know about what happened with Loki,” Fury told him; a new coldness to his voice that said just how unhappy he was with Tony’s decision to unveil his alliance with the mage.

*Too damn bad.* “You didn’t have a problem explaining Bucky Barnes’ situation.”

“That was different,” Fury instantly dismissed. “And it isn’t why you’re here.”

*Right, sure. Shove that under the rug as one more thing you don’t want to discuss because you know I’m **right**.*

Loki’s hand moved from Tony’s neck to his shoulder, squeezing in comfort and support before rubbing small circles with his thumb.

“Director,” Loki calmly addressed, “I have very little care as to why you saw fit to avoid even the slightest attempt at gaining my favour by exonerating me on this planet. It was certainly an amusingly terrible decision, but I had very little faith in your intelligence in the first place.”

Tony couldn’t help his amused snort and Loki’s mouth curved faintly. Fury was managing to mask anything he might be feeling beyond an eye twitch. Hill, by comparison, looked like she was actually counting backwards from ten in order to keep her gun holstered.

“Now,” Loki continued, “you wish to discuss the recent adversary.” His eyes narrowed as he warned them, “I suggest you begin before either of us decides we are *bored*.”

“We should have expected you wouldn’t care about anything if it didn’t revolve around yourselves,” Hill growled out, but her gaze was on Tony, as if he was proving correct all her suspicions about his worth. She didn’t even glance at Loki, apparently completely decided on her opinion of *him*.

Tony wanted to say he didn’t care about Hill or her opinions, but fuck it *stung*. She’d worked for him, and while her loyalties had always been to Fury he’d still *liked* her. He knew she’d never defy Fury, never disobey an order even if she disagreed, but hearing that her opinion of



him was that low after everything she fucking *knew* he'd been through? When she knew what SHIELD's betrayal over his weapons would have done to him?

*I didn't hold her accountable, Tony realised. I knew she wasn't there when they made the decision, and I let her stay separate.*

It shouldn't have hurt as much as it did and Tony shouldn't have let her sneak under his defences but he *had*.

*Another one bites the dust.*

So he just built one more wall to hide it.

“What can I say? Too many stabs in the back take their toll. But, Hill, just a tip,” he smiled with too many teeth and a complete lack of kindness, “*wooing* someone to ally with you shouldn't include a lot of insults.”

Hill looked ready to say something but Fury gestured with his hand and she clenched her jaw but stood down. Her eyes still blazed with anger, but it was a battle that Tony was honestly relieved wouldn't be fought. He could already feel himself draining; surrounded by all the people he'd trusted and been excited to call his *friends*.

He'd spent so much of his life alone and without anyone to trust but Rhodey, without anyone else who liked him for who he *was*. He'd liked being part of a group of people who might never understand him, but at least were happy to humour him or to try. Almost like a family.

It wasn't completely gone though. He still had Rhodey and Bruce he also now had *Loki* and that made Tony feel better. He'd gotten rid of the weeds he hadn't noticed had infiltrated and now he only had the best left. There was no use crying over hurt feelings and bitter anger; he had a meeting to focus on and get through.

He made himself pull away from Loki slightly and while Loki seemed surprised, he still allowed it. The way that his hands clung to Tony momentarily, spoke of his reluctance. Tony wasn't planning to go far though, in fact, he curved his hand around Loki's wrist, brushing his half of the bracelet set and feeling a rush of fondness for the mage.

He motioned at Fury and Hill, encouraging them towards the table and chairs. Neither of them looked particularly pleased but they still made their way over. Fury, at least, knew when to grin, bear it, and swallow his animosity for the sake of his goals. He knew that same attitude had burned him before, but Tony still could appreciate it, especially when it worked in *his* favour this time.

Tony was gently leading Loki over to the opposite side of the table, when Loki suddenly prevented him from sitting down and he turned to the mage with a frown. Loki gave the furniture one look and sneered, “Oh, I think not.”

Tony was confused for a moment before Loki waved his hand and made two chairs, two fucking *thrones* appear for them. They were both a dark wood that was almost black with elegant detailing and twists. Tony's was easy to distinguish with deep almost blood red

cushioning and gold filigree. The only difference between them was the green of Loki's seat as if even in this, Loki presented them as equals.

He led Tony to his throne and when he was seated, Loki took his place to the right. He sat with his back straight and his hands resting on the arm rests. He was acting as if they were two kings granting an audience; his chin tilted imperiously.

Honestly, Tony could have kissed him for the gesture, for the brightening of his mood, and the souring of Fury and Hill's faces.

*You absolute little shit*, Tony thought with a delighted grin. *I can't ever get enough of you.*

---

It only took ten minutes for the first argument to start.

"You're withholding information," Hill accused them after Tony explained they had no idea who the animal lady was.

Tony had glared. "That's funny; I always thought you couldn't withhold information when you *didn't have it*."

"She attacked the city and you were able to stop her within minutes."

"Sure, after getting the shit kicked out of me by a bunch of bulls."

"You knew exactly where to find her-"

"Because she was being *so* subtle-"

"She's also a magic-user who has suddenly appeared when *you* gain a mage for an ally."

Tony slapped his hands on the table and stood. "Are you saying you think Loki is *involved* with her somehow?"

"Stark, sit down," Fury ordered firmly.

Tony ignored him. "If you had *of* listened to what we were saying you would have heard us say *she isn't using magic*." He was holding Hill's unimpressed eyes and trying to keep his voice moderately calm. "It looks fucking genetic, as we *told you* and who do you know who has twisted geneticists? How about *HYDRA*, for one - or wait, should that be *SHIELD*? Maybe you should check your own *staff* before shooting at Loki."

"Our organisation has been thoroughly vetted."

"Oh? Did you add a new question? How do you end the sentence 'hail blank'?"

Hill didn't stand but she did lean forward, looking ready to throw some new insult but Fury slammed his own hand on the desk loudly.

“That’s *enough*.” His voice was a whip and Hill actually flinched, Tony just looked at him with faint shock. He’d never actually heard Fury come close to yelling before, but he looked ready to start.

“Quite,” Loki echoed before placing his hand on Tony’s lower back, encouraging him to take his seat once more. He only looked away when Tony was seated, but kept a warm touch on Tony’s shoulder. “I would suggest picking your ambassadors with greater care,” Loki told Fury. “Or you may find yourself *losing* members of this meeting.”

The threat wasn’t an idle one and Fury responded to it accordingly. “Agent Hill, please remove yourself from the room and bring in Captain Rogers.”

Hill was gritting her teeth, but she stood with a sharp and quiet ‘yes, Sir’. The tension to her spine made it clear she was still furious and well aware that she was going to be reprimanded for her behaviour later. *Good*.

“Do you really thing Captain Spangles will be any better?” Tony questioned him when the other had left. “I’m surprised you didn’t make it a party.” He was slouched in his throne and able to kick a nearby chair. “You have enough seats.”

“This is a discussion Stark,” Fury answered, “not an ambush.”

“Oh, it is far more hostile than that,” Loki chuckled. “You might be endeavouring to appease us by creating even numbers, but we both know no one in this room is pleased to be here.”

“Look,” Fury linked his fingers and rested them on the table, glancing between Tony and Loki as he implored. “Let’s try to work through this with as little argument as possible. This won’t help anyone if we divulge into a lot of useless threats.”

“Soooo,” Tony drawled with anger still burning bright in his chest. “Suck it up?”

Fury’s mouth actually twitched into a small grin. “You’re not the only one currently applying that phrase to themselves, Stark.”

A small part of Tony wanted to smile, but most of him just wanted to grimace. He didn’t have to make the choice as his staring match with Fury was interrupted by Rogers *knocking* on the door before entering cautiously.

Maybe he expected to walk into a bloodbath. It wouldn’t have been far off, if Fury hadn’t removed Hill. Rogers greeted them all at least before taking Hill’s vacated seat. The discussions went a little easier after that. Rogers didn’t seem inclined to see any of them fighting and Fury was a damn good deal breaker.

It didn’t mean they didn’t have further arguments. It only took one wrong word for their animosity to spill over or their sharp tongues to unsheathe. Tony had gone to stand numerous times but always stopped when Loki touched his wrist and rubbed his skin gently. He would usually take over the conversation until Tony had calmed down.

Tony had noticed the way Fury and Rogers had shared more than a few glances over their close contact. He also hoped *Thor* was getting an equally fantastic view of their *touches* and was being a homophobic ass about it. Tony wanted someone at SHIELD pick up on what Thor was doing, connect the dots and call him on his bigoted beliefs. A punch to the face would be nice too.

For the time being he just dragged his throne closer to Loki's and placed his hand over the mage's. Greatly enjoying the way Rogers kept looking at it with barely disguised frustration and confusion.

They did have to take a break eventually with all of them wound too tightly and Tony ready to start ripping throats out over one more barbed comment too far about Loki. Fury and Rogers had left them alone in the room and Tony had taken to pacing once he knew Loki had disrupted visual and hearing devices.

Tony had been hissing foul remarks under his breath while Loki perched on the edge of the table watching him.

"Anthony," Loki interrupted him calmly, "I hardly plan to concern myself with some spiteful comments from Director Fury."

"He insults you, he insults me. *No one* fucks with my friends."

Loki chuckled and pushed off the table. "I appreciate the sentiment, Anthony, but the Director knows better than to attack too violently." He reached out and caught Tony on his next frustrated pass, making him stop. "He does not wish to lose you any further than he already has."

"If Earth didn't *need* him and his organisation breathing-" Tony started to hiss, his fury still bubbling and burning through his veins. But he stopped when Loki gave a soft, rebuking squeeze to his arm.

Firmly, Loki told him. "But your world does, Anthony. Furthermore, you've said yourself that they are useful to you." Loki's thumb began stroking his skin. "I know your anger and I would gladly eviscerate their traitorous forms and burn this stronghold to the ground, but it would not be wise."

Tony let out a sound somewhere between a growl and a sigh as he acknowledged the point. "I don't like working with them."

"Nor I," Loki answered. "But for now, we must attempt to pass through this as quickly as we can."

Closing his eyes, Tony let himself rock forward and press his forehead to Loki's shoulder. He felt the mage tense as if surprised by the sudden weight, but he quickly accepted it and Tony privately smiled even while letting out a pitiful whine. "Can't I just do it via *email*?"

Loki laughed lightly. "I will teleport us away if you truly wish it."

Tony huffed out a breath, but knew Loki was right. It didn't make him feel any less like the pressure was building under his skin, the betrayal still festering in his bones. Tony knew it was making him feel thinner; it made every sneer about Loki rile his blood. It made the slightest remark that skimmed to close to his weapons fire him up and make him want to *hurt*.

It didn't help that Fury also wanted to talk about... everything.

He wanted to know what Tony planned to divulge to the public about Loki ("*none of your business, you can find out when the public does*"), what the other realms thought of Loki ("*he's a genius*") and how it affected Tony and Earth ("*I'll let you know if that actually becomes something you need to hear*").

Fury also tried to pry more information about what the animal chick was up to and what her powers were ("*I thought, 'we don't know' covered it pretty well.*"). The final thing he wanted was specifics on *what* Tony and Loki would do with and for them. They were still arguing that point.

It was like he was in an Avenger debriefing *without being an Avenger*.

The little derogatory jabs about Loki and their partnership that he slipped in didn't make Tony any happier. Fury was still trying to remain cordial, but Loki and Tony were just *that good* at smashing their fists on all of Fury's buttons. Rogers at least, was doing his best to mediate. He wasn't doing a *fabulous* job, not with Tony being unable to do anything but let his words drip with disdain.

It was a miracle that Loki was holding his tongue and his rationality. It was what Tony *needed* actually, and Tony smiled a little to know that was probably the only reason that Loki wasn't encouraging his wrath at every step. Loki knew Tony wanted to get out of here and was trying in the only way that was possible to give Tony what he wished.

The only way Tony could let himself walk out on SHIELD was to finish drawing up a contract with them to prepare for any arrival by Thanos.

He knew he could still change his mind, leave them to burn and make them face the full force of his Tower's defences if they tried to *force* an association but... but it would be one step closer to an all out war against SHIELD.

They would never stop pushing for this and while he didn't think SHIELD would ever be a threat to him, he also couldn't rule it out. Black Widow wasn't the only assassin on their payroll, and he'd almost been a smudge at the hands of HYDRA using their technology. It wasn't worth the risk.

But the contract didn't help him feel much better. They were all agreeing to it with the knowledge it meant *fuck all* in the grand scheme of things other than appeasing SHIELD. No one in the organisation was going to be honest or follow it though, not if it didn't benefit them.

*Just more lies for the liars.*

Tony let himself go limp as he put more weight on Loki's shoulder. He was fairly sure he was getting an indent in his forehead from the armour, but he didn't even care. It smelled like Loki; like powerful magic and unbreakable trust.

"We need a contract," Tony admitted. "We've been dancing around anything serious. We need paper and pen and some ground rules that we all know no one is going to stick to."

"I can make the ink change on our copy," Loki began, "A different colour or font perhaps when they are breaking one of the agreements we have set down."

Tony pulled back with wide eyes to stare at Loki. "You can *do* that?"

"Oh, yes." Loki's mouth twitched up slightly. "But only on our version, of course."

"Loki," he told the other, "you are perfect. I don't care who might have told you otherwise, I am outranking them. I am overriding. You are the most perfect thing in existence and I need to figure out what I can possibly give you to show how much I love you right now."

Loki grinned, wide and completely amused by his reaction. "I shall keep the boon in mind, for when I am next curious about something on your realm."

"Done," Tony told him. "So done. I'll make a note with FRIDAY; one boon coming up."

Shaking his head, Loki separated them before waving his hand and creating two pieces of parchment and a quill. "Well then, shall we reconvene? We wish to finish as soon as possible and I believe the wording will take some time before we are all in agreement."

Tony winced pre-emptively, knowing it was a hell of an understatement. He also pulled out his phone to quickly message Pepper; something told him that the press conference she'd scheduled was going to need to be pushed back.

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Five hours. That's how long they were stuck arguing over the smallest points and disagreeing over what SHIELD considered 'obligatory'.

Nothing was *obligatory* between them anymore. Tony had said as much, snarling it in Fury's face who had blankly took it and calmly disagreed by throwing things like "the world" and "being a hero" in front of Tony like *he* was the one being questioned over *his* tactics.

And fuck, there had been a moment right in the middle of it where he'd missed Pepper so fiercely that it had stolen his words. She'd handle these kinds of meetings for SI with grace and brutal efficiency. Tony knew she couldn't be here, that he didn't *want* her here - not when he couldn't trust her - but the sharp flare of hurt had still lingered.

The continual, grounding touches Loki's gave to his leg or arm helped. It got his thoughts off Pepper and also quelled his seething need to punch Fury in the face and declare '*fuck it*', ending any possibilities of a working alliance. Loki's glances also reminded Tony that *they* had plans. Loki would be keeping a close eye on the contract and when he had the spell prepared, he would be getting Tony his weapons *back*.

And fuck, he'd love to be the fly on Fury's office wall on *that* day.

But regardless of that thought, and even with Loki's assistance, it didn't help ease much of the tension from the room. They'd taken a few breaks when things got heated - SHIELD supplying them with shitty food and even worse coffee. He'd asked Loki to check it for poison, certain there was no other way it could be so bad.

He'd also got an update from FRIDAY that Bruce hadn't made any major discoveries on the super-powered animals. He was actually glad for that; he didn't want to find out anything while he was present as SHIELD's 'guest'.

Pepper had also called to yell at him at one point during the negotiation. He'd put her on speaker, throwing his hands in the air and letting *Rogers* deal with explaining the changed time of the press conference to her.

It was still a slap in the face to their crumbling friendship. It was just another repetition of the attitudes she'd displayed during the heart of the betrayal; believing *them* while ignoring *him*. But in the end, Tony was just grateful when the call finished even if it meant more of Fury and Rogers.

And he was *glad* when that was finally done too.

The contract, when they finally finished, was rather simple. Both sides would divulge any information gained about Thanos or any other threats to Earth that they came across. They would also work together on the battlefield and would present a united front to the public. They would not attempt to undermine or otherwise attack each other and would come to the other's aid if and when it was needed.

They were basically two armies signing a non-aggression pact.

It didn't mean Tony still wasn't pissed off at some of the outcomes.

SHIELD could request - or rather *enforce*, because Tony and Loki could both read between the lines on that one - debriefings on battles they'd partaken in. Tony and Loki could decline to attend (but it would be more of a hassle than it was worth). They would also still need to send them reports or attend occasional video conferences.

Honestly, it was just like the contracts Tony had drawn up between SI and rival companies. He'd stood on the other side of people who had tried to do him or his company damage and smiled in the face of their sneers. It had always been easy and had never bothered him then.

The *Avengers* however, had succeeded in hurting him, and it was that much harder to swallow that down under professionalism and rationality. But rage and vengeance didn't have a place in a deal, not if Tony wanted to get the best result for him and Loki.

And they *did* do well.

Fury, for all that he was a bastard, he wasn't making unreasonable requests. He was listing obligations that Tony was well aware he held to Earth. It didn't mean Tony had to *like*

agreeing to it.

When everyone seemed happy enough and Fury had read the contract Loki had written out, he put it down and allowed, "This is acceptable."

"Well thank fuck for that," Tony exclaimed, tired and irritable. "Then let's get this thing signed; Rogers for the Avengers and you for SHIELD."

As he spoke, Loki flicked his fingers and like fire was burning against the paper, their four names were added to the bottom of the document. Loki held out the quill towards Rogers and Fury. "Shall we conclude this tediously long meeting?"

Fury had his eyes narrowed; looking at the quill like it was an active hand grenade. Rogers just sighed before reaching out and plucking it. He turned the parchment towards him and after skimming it briefly; he pressed the quill to the paper and signed with practical flicks of his wrist.

He then turned to Fury and held it out expectantly. Fury looked highly unimpressed and as if a lecture was in Roger's future, but he still took the item and added his own agreement to the contract. Loki was next, elegant and, amusingly, using green ink in comparison to Rogers and Fury's plain black.

Rogers had snorted at the same time as Tony and when they locked eyes, Tony was surprised to see a painful wistfulness that made him look away, his heart feeling traitorously close to lodging in his throat.

Loki tapped his wrist with his finger and made Tony glance at him. He held out the quill with an odd expression but Tony just smiled, tight-lipped and revealing nothing before taking the item.

He scrawled his name, his smile quirking into something more genuine at the red and *gold* ink that came out from the quill. He'd made them match their thrones. *Ceremonial Diva*.

When he was finished, Loki vanished their half off the items but left the duplicate sheet on the table for Fury.

"Well, I think that's us done." Tony pushed up, Loki joining him and transfiguring the chairs back into their normal forms. "Don't call us and we won't call you."

"Stark," Fury warned in both tone and glare but Tony wasn't having it.

"No, no. We played our little part and I was *civil*. Keep fucking pushing and I will be a hell of a lot less so."

"So shall I," Loki added and ice had crept back into his tone. His glare held barely constrained disgust and contempt. "I have been hospitable for the sake of Anthony's world, but my patience for your organisation is beyond thin and my *goodwill* non-existent. Do not attempt to stop us from leaving."



"And here I didn't think you had much patience for *ants* in the first place," Fury countered, standing as well. His last veneer at politeness dropped now that their signatures were down. "I'm surprised you bothered to stay in the first place."

Loki chuckled, dark and foreboding. "Director Fury, you have been labouring under a misconception if you believe the only thing saving you from slaughter is Anthony's request that I *do not do so*. I have no care for *your* lives."

Rogers had stood when Fury had and his stiffening was impossible to ignore. "Was that a threat?"

"Had you not listened? Anthony wishes you to live, because of this, I will not be requesting recompense for your slights through laws common to the Aesir."

"What Asgardian Law?" Fury demanded with narrowed eyes and even Tony was a little curious about that himself.

"Battles to the death have been fought over less," Loki explained darkly, "*Thor* certainly enjoyed ordering a battle when his honour was besmirched - and *you* have done far more than that to Anthony." He tilted his jaw and looked down his nose at them as if they *were* the insects at his feet - *their* feet. "You are *traitors* to the man you called 'shield-brother' and your trespasses shall *never* be forgotten, and *should* be repaid."

"And we're meant to believe you dredged up something like concern for Stark from that pit you call a heart?" Fury spat before he turned to Tony. "If you think he will do anything but use you, Stark, you're a fool."

"Oh?" Tony wondered but his mouth was a thin line and his blood was rushing in his ears. He had to clench a hand around his own wrist to keep from activating his hidden gauntlet. "Because I think Loki has more *heart* than any of you. He's also done more for me than any of *you* have. But fuck, no one here thinks *I* have a heart anyway. So I guess we're just a match made in heaven, huh?"

"And if ever there was a fool in this room," Loki added, touching Tony's shoulder. "It is *you* Director, for not recognising the asset you had over the gleam of some paltry, stolen weapons."

Fury just clenched his teeth at the words. "That was a miscalculation-"

"A *mistake*," Loki corrected. "And one that will forever brand your skin." He encouraged Tony towards the door and he was happy to follow if it meant *getting out of here*. "And this audience is concluded."

"You're not a Prince down here," Fury informed him coldly.

Loki stopped them at the door and looked over his shoulder. "I am a mage and a God and Anthony is a King among men. You have far more need of us than we of you." Loki turned away from him as if he was beneath Loki's valuable time.

"This was always our show, Director; do try not to forget that again," he said over his shoulder.

Tony grinned at the mage and took in a deep breath, savouring those words and the frustration and hate probably pounding thorough Fury's veins.

"He will betray you, Stark."

Tony didn't even feel half of the rage he expected at being treated as if he were a child, or an idiot. He only felt disinterest in the other as well as a strong desire to defend the slander being thrown at Loki. He gave Fury one more look, barely registering Rogers behind him. Fury looked imposing and determined; trying to get a point across that was laughably incorrect and given to someone who didn't trust him as far as he could spit.

"No," Tony told him simply, "he won't."

They left the room before a reply could be given, but unlike what he expected, it wasn't Fury who followed them, it was Rogers.

"Tony, wait."

He ignored him, but while Rogers wasn't fool enough to try and touch him, he could hear the solidier right behind him.

"Tony-"

Spinning on his heel, he took Rogers off guard and they almost collided. "*What?*"

Rogers' eyes were full of suspicion. And worry. *Hah.*

"He might be cleared, but he's still *Loki.*" He flicked his eyes away again before saying, "You may not think anybody here cares about you-"

"Yeah, funny how betrayal gave me that impression-"

"But we *do,*" Rogers continued to talk over him. "So be careful. If you need any help, you only need to ask."

"He *has* all the assistance he requires," Loki informed Rogers promptly.

"Assistance removing himself from *you,* if he ever needs to," Rogers corrected, glaring right at Loki.

"He has Colonel Rhodes to give him support," Loki argued. "Surely you still trust *him* to make his own decisions?"

"That's not what I-"

"Nope. Only me you don't trust," Tony interrupted with false cheer. "Well, Loki too." His smile dropped. "And I don't want your help. Be suspicious all you fucking want, but don't

expect me to listen to you. We're done."

Turning to Loki, Tony didn't even have to say anything before Loki was reaching out for him and they were disappearing in the now familiar burst of magic.

Tony closed his eyes at the feeling; like a warm blanket wrapping him up and tingling against his skin. Taking him - taking *them* -home, and he was glad to finally be able to relax.

*Thank you*, Tony thought quietly as he opened his eyes to find the darkness of the penthouse, lit only by the lights of the city.

He caught Loki's eyes in the dark, watching him intently and he grinned tiredly. "Thanks, Loki."

In response, Loki's mouth just tipped up into a small smile.

## Chapter End Notes

Soooo. I know a lot of you were probably expecting more of a confrontation, but everyone in the room is far too smart for that. They both know that while they could keep shoving each other until something else broke, they aren't willing to do it.

Tony wants to make SHIELD shut up enough to leave him alone, and this is the best way he's come up with that will 'cause the less grief and destruction.

Besides you should always keep your friends close, and your enemies closer ;)

# Chapter 20

## Chapter Notes

Hello, everyone! Is it really that time again? Yes, it is! The next chapter of the story is here. Whoo! I hope you all enjoy it!

**PLEASE NOTE: There is a trigger warning:** This chapter deals with some talk on Loki's suicidal fall from the bridge in Thor 1. It's not a huge section and mostly just mentions canon events, but as it can be a trigger subject, I just wanted to let everyone know!

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

They didn't stay standing for long before Loki was placing a firm hand on Tony's upper arm and leading him towards the couch. His grip was warm and steady - easy to follow - as they took up a comfortable sprawl on the cushions. They sat facing each other, backs to the armrests and with Tony legs drawn up to his chest.

He was too tense to unwind, but Loki didn't ask him to try and relax - something, which he greatly appreciated.

"Lights, Boss?"

"No," Tony answered, "don't worry about it."

Loki sent him a perplexed look, but didn't comment on it. The city was illuminating the penthouse just enough to see each other's faces, creating an air of intimacy that was a sharp contrast to the brightness of SHIELD. Tony liked it. It was also a perfect reflection of their lives; deception under the spotlight and sincerity in the shadows.

"Anything new, FRIDAY?"

"Dr Banner has retired. He has left the lab running further analysis on samples taken from the sleeping animals."

"I will have to deal with them soon," Loki murmured thoughtfully. "Tomorrow, preferably."

And that brought Tony back to what he'd been avoiding.

"The conference isn't in the morning anymore, but it's still tomorrow." He told Loki tiredly, feeling drained at the mere thought. He knew how to play the game with the press and he knew Loki didn't deserve the public's censure, but it didn't mean it still wasn't going to be a battle in itself. He'd rather be in the lab with Bruce and Loki.

“What time?” Loki questioned softly.

“Midday.” It made Tony’s mouth twitch up slightly. “Or maybe high noon would be better a description. I’m sure it’s going to feel like that; the good, the bad and the misunderstood.”

Loki didn’t seem to get the reference. “Would you like to retire then? Or do you wish to further construct the image we’ll present?”

“Well, going in blind isn’t going to be the *best* option.” Tony shut his eyes on a sigh. “We could pull off winging it, but I don’t really want to. SHIELD won’t help anymore than they have to and while Rhodey will support us we’ll still be under fire from every direction. They’ll be sure to cover the nature of our relationship, right down to the specifics of the attack. Hopefully the tests Bruce has running tonight will give us some info on Animal Whisperer.”

Because so far his results had been inconclusive or just downright confusing. Tony hoped tomorrow would shed some more light, but he also wasn’t counting on it. Bruce did think there was some kind of contamination or mutation of their genetics, but more than that, he couldn’t say.

Tony was getting the very worrying feeling that Animal Whisperer had done something almost Hulk-like to herself by using a bad serum. Bruce’s tight voice on the phone had hinted that he was thinking along the same lines.

But Tony was brought back from *that* particular problem by Loki responding to him, “But regardless of her Anthony, it is I, first and foremost, who will be drawing your media’s focus.”

Tony smiled slightly. “And the fact you were kissing me.”

“I *believe*,” Loki corrected, his expression sardonic, “that it was the other way around.”

It made Tony’s grin widen for a moment before a darker thought took over. Loki was putting on an almost *affronted* tone at the accusation and even though Tony knew it was an act, it still dimmed his enthusiasm.

Loki noticed it and frowned, but before he could ask, Tony gently questioned him, “Are you sure you’re going to be okay with publicising our relationship? You said the guy in the sky watches everything, and you’ve hidden your sexuality for *hundreds* of years, are you sure you-”

“*Anthony*,” Loki’s tone was firm but fond and it made him fall silent. “You make the mistake of believing our relationship is not long since discovered by Asgard. While Thor *might* not have said anything for fear of my shame smearing his own reputation-”

Tony tensed, anger welling up inside him and breaking through his exhaustion.

Loki reached forward and squeezed Tony’s leg calmly before he could move, and slowly, Tony settled back down. Loki continued as if nothing had happened. But he didn’t remove his

hand.

“Heimdall will have seen us when we left the tower earlier. The wards I have in place only mask us when we’re here. He would have informed Odin as well as any others he believed should know. This press conference will not reveal it to anyone; rather, it will simply be us confirming it.”

Some of Tony’s fury was forced to abate, not because he felt better, but because he was too surprised to hold onto it. “So you...”

“‘Came out’ as you say, from the moment you kissed me, yes.”

“Oh *fuck*.” Guilt hit him like a train. “I should have asked you before I did that, *shit*, Loki, I’m so sorry.”

“Anthony.” Loki squeezed his leg again. “I assure you that I’m not concerned. I knew this would be divulged to Asgard when I agreed to the ruse. I did not *care* about it happening from the moment I implied to Thor that there was something between us.”

“But I shouldn’t have-”

Something not unlike a static shock made him jump and he glanced down at his leg before looking back up at Loki accusingly.

“Enough,” Loki told him softly. “You acted with my best interests at heart. You also acted in a way that makes our relationship look far less rehearsed. Stop finding more reasons to lay guilt onto your shoulders.”

“I *outed* you,” Tony protested, “to *homophobia land*. And yeah, you *said* that it’s okay, but that was such a fucking lapse in judgment and I-”

This time, Loki shut him up by raising the hand from Tony’s leg and flicking his fingers with a sigh. Tony kept speaking but no sound was coming out. He blinked a few times before trying again. When thirty seconds of distracted and curious testing had passed, he remembered what he had been saying, and turned a deep scowl on the cause of his sudden onset of laryngitis.

Loki was lazing back against the couch, unconcerned by the death glare he was being fixed with. “Are you finished repining about actions you cannot change?” He queried, sounding bored, “Are you finally going to take my word for this, rather than the overblown ones that are flying around in your head?”

Tony crossed his arms and deepened his glower. He also mouthed a very slow and enunciated ‘*no*’ at Loki in answer to his questions. He regretted it when Loki’s expression twisted into something unhappy and almost *hurt*.

“So my words aren’t enough for you to believe?”

*Shit*. Tony only saw the misstep when he was already falling down the hole, *of fucking course*.

He rapidly started shaking his head, but Loki was already beginning to wall himself off and Tony had no other means of proving himself when he couldn't give voice to a damn thing. Well, he did have something.

Uncurling himself, Tony practically pounced on Loki so he couldn't leave or get anymore stupid thoughts in his head. He crawled up between Loki's legs and placed his hands on the armrests either side of Loki's body. Their faces were close and Loki's eyebrows rose as Tony glared at him.

*Fix me*, he mouthed at Loki.

"Anthony-"

Tony leant in close until he was almost cross-eyed and mouthed it again; *Fix. Me.*

They were so close that he felt Loki's breath leave him in a soft exhale. He didn't see Loki's magic this time, but he felt a tingle under his skin and quickly started talking, "I trust you. Loki you *know* I trust you, fucking hell."

"And I'm meant to believe this? Your words?"

"Of course you ar-"

Tony froze, realisation flooding him at the corner Loki had manoeuvred him into. It made Loki smirk with such satisfaction he had to punch the fucker in the chest just to feel better, but Loki didn't even flinch. "You *asshole*."

"Yes, I understand that being proven ridiculous can be quite insult provoking," Loki told him with a smile and Tony just groaned and slumped down bonelessly against Loki.

"Fine," he grumbled against Loki's chest, "point taken. I should believe you. It doesn't make me feel any less guilty for outing you."

He felt a tentative hand touch his shoulder before Loki was urging him to move. He ended up with his back to Loki's front. Tony felt awkward for a moment, not because it was Loki but because it was *anybody* - but it didn't take long for him to relax into the other's chest.

It wasn't much different to a hug, after all, and from tomorrow onwards they *were* going to be more intimate than 'friends' - at least to everyone other than Rhodey. Besides, *friends* could sit cuddled up on the couch, there didn't have to be anything sexual or romantic about it. It was society that shoved certain actions into boxes, and Tony was all about flipping the middle finger at forced convention.

If Loki was fine with it, he didn't have to worry about it.

Although...

"We need to talk about this." He looked over his shoulder and up at Loki who was eyeing him curiously. "What we do and what we're comfortable with. I don't want to fuck up again by accident. I don't want to do something that *actually* upsets or embarrasses you."

“I am difficult to discomfort,” Loki told him simply.

*Sure, apart from when you have a sex dream about me and freak out spectacularly.*  
Thankfully, Tony was able to press his lips together to hold that response in.

“Okay so, to what extent are we going to push this thing? What’s it going to take for one of us to put up the white flag? How far does it *need* to go beyond where it already is? More to the point, tomorrow we air this to the *universe*; what exactly are we telling them?”

Loki was quiet for a moment, obviously thinking it over before he allowed, “We remain as near the truth as possible. I came to persuade you back into the Avengers but you offered me a lucrative partnership opportunity that I accepted instead.”

“We made up the contract,” Tony continued from there, “flirted a little, one of us pushed us to the next step and my reputation and the kiss paints any more imagery we need.”

“Your reputation...” Loki murmured quietly, something odd in his tone that Tony couldn’t place. When Tony looked behind him, Loki was frowning, but before he could enquire about it, Loki seemed to be shaking it off before continuing, “And that will be enough on your world for it to be accepted?”

“For people to believe we’re lovers?” He waited for Loki to nod. “Pretty much. I was known when I was younger for sleeping with anything that moved. The reporters loved a scandal and it was surprisingly good for business.” It sure had helped him sleep at night too. For a while, at least, and only before Afghanistan. But Tony pushed those memories aside. “That history is only going to help us at selling our relationship.”

“Ah,” Loki murmured, “and what of me? How will people take to the idea that it is *I* you join force with as well as take to your bed?”

“Yeah, I’ve been thinking about that.” Tony licked his lips. “I think we need to talk about how you were treated on Asgard.”

He could actually *feel* the way Loki went rigid at the words and Tony quickly dropped his arm to the side. He found Loki’s hand and rested his palm over Loki’s wrist, squeezing gently. “Just hear me out, okay?”

Almost expecting to be shoved away violently, Tony called, “FRIDAY, pull up a list of LGBTQIA communities that specialise in the sort of shit Loki went through.”

“That was a long list of letters, even for you,” Loki commented with only a hint of his normal humour showing through under his discomfort.

“Didn’t make that one up, Lokes.”

FRIDAY helped to confirm it by pulling up the information he requested as well as a breakdown of what the acronym meant. Tony barely had a chance to scroll over the first webpage before Loki was shifting behind him and his arms were coming up and taking over



control of the projection. He was looking past Tony to be able to see the screen as he flicked through all the information collected.

Very carefully, Tony peaked to the side so that he could catch Loki's face. Then he wished he hadn't.

Loki looked... shocked; deeply cut into by what he was reading and incredibly vulnerable. It was a plethora of emotional data he'd never had any access to in the past and Tony wished he could do something more to help him other than sitting beside him silently. But he didn't know what, so in the end, he just stayed where he was.

"There is nothing like this on Asgard," Loki whispered almost ten minutes later, dropping back against the couch again as if he was exhausted. Tony very cautiously leant back against Loki's chest, hoping he could at least be some kind of anchor in the storm. "There, you are required to love a woman, to be a warrior and obey the Allfather in all things - little more. This... this is so *vast* in its acceptance. It is closer to the Elves and their way of thinking."

"And people are going to break their heart knowing what happened to you," Tony quietly informed him. *Mine's already fucking fracturing for you.*

"I am *not* in need of coddling," Loki gritted out, back to being tense. "I appreciate your world has this for mortal youths but I-

"This is *not* pity," Tony snapped, looking over his shoulder and glaring at him to make that *known*. "This is me telling you that what you went through *wasn't right*. That Asgard is *wrong* and that there are millions of people on this planet who are going to agree with me, who are going to rally behind you for not only this but everything else that put you on the wrong side of Earth when you couldn't do anything to stop it."

Loki still looked unhappy. There was a tightness to his posture that Tony recognised from his own experience; when Rhodey showed him concern and he didn't know how to handle it. The feeling was like bugs crawling under his skin and made him feel like a cornered animal.

Tony shifted so that he could face Loki again, catch his face and hold his wary gaze. "You dealt with their oppression, discrimination and hate for a thousand years without flinching. You fell into a land of horrors and walked out of it with enough sanity to help save our planet. You walk around *now* having survived shit most mortals can't even imagine and what most of the Aesir couldn't endure for more than five seconds. You don't *need* pity, Loki. Every fucking person that *hurt* you needs pity for what we're going to *do* to them." Tony showed his teeth in a lethal smile. "But they won't get it, because they don't *deserve* it."

Loki's mouth had parted slightly and his eyes were pools of raw emotion. He swallowed hard and blinked several times, pulling himself together a bit more with every fall of his lashes. When he was finished, his mask was back in place - shakily, but holding. He even managed a smirk.

"With you as my endorser, I think you may just be right about their affection for me." But a pucker was quick to crease his brow. "But would you have them like me solely for this?"

“No,” Tony quickly answered. “I’m not trying to make your sexuality a selling point or reduce your past to a gimmick. This is going to explain things a bit, put your situation into perspective for everyone on Earth.” Tony bit his lip slightly. “I know something else happened to you, that there’s more to the story than you ending up in Thanos’ power.”

Seeing Loki’s eyes go blank, Tony hurried to add, “But I’m not going to press for the specifics! This will cover a lot of the situation and give you a good amount of ground for redemption to the public. And what with the fact you were lied to about... erm.”

Tony stopped, not sure how to touch that fifty-thousand degree hot spot.

“My heritage,” Loki filled in coldly before haltingly explaining, “I was taken as a warprize from another realm.” He swallowed. “I was raised ignorant of that truth and taught to hate the race I was born to...” he glanced away, his eyes dropping to look at his hand. “Among other things.”

*Oh, Asgard, you better fucking **pray** I don’t build a Death Star.*

“Right,” Tony replied, barely keeping his voice level. “And then you fell into the hands of someone who tortured you and forced you into a position you didn’t want to be in and-”

“And you would say all of this? Bare all of my scars to your world?”

Tony couldn’t stop himself from reaching out and cupping Loki’s neck, making him jerk slightly and catch Tony’s intent gaze. “No. *We’ll* bare whatever you’re willing to show.”

Loki’s eyes fell again, slow and slightly unfocused as if he was deep in thought or memory. “Well, I suppose you should tell them that I did not fall, but merely... ceased to keep my hold any longer.”

It was Tony’s turn to freeze as his mind ran through a series of horrified realisations. “You...”

“Did not expect the void to take me anywhere but death,” he admitted vacantly.

Tony made a noise in the back of his throat, something between a whimper and a protest. Trying to comprehend, and yet understanding all too easily how Loki could have become suicidal.

“Anthony,” he felt a hand cupping his own neck and making him focus. Loki was smiling at him gently - if still a little pained - as he encouraged Tony to listen to him. “It is long done and not an action I feel inclined to repeat. It... it is what it is and was driven by more than one circumstance fracturing so much of who I believed myself to be.”

“That doesn’t need to come out,” Tony forced out roughly.

Loki frowned. “Pardon?”

“You don’t need to tell *anyone* that, Loki, especially not the media who are going to pick at it like fucking vultures.”

Loki's cheek twitched and his eyes darkened. "Ah. It is a weakness here then too."

*Oh dear fucking-* "No. Not it's fucking *not*, Loki, *shit*. If half of the crap that happened to you occurred on Earth, you would have been put on sui-" he tripped over the word but kept forcing it out, "-cide watch." He moved in closer, almost resting their foreheads together as he tried to drive the point home. "It's not weak. It's not *you*. It's all on them; *everything* is on them for putting you in a position where they could hurt you *that badly*." He barely took a breath before admitting, "Everyone can find themselves at that point. I have and so have people close to me. You're not *weak* for-"

"Stop," Loki interrupted him gently, bringing fingers up to press over his lips. "Your point is made. Just... may we stop talking about this part of my life? About this part of *anyone's* life?"

Tony still felt filled with too many emotions and no way to let them out. He spoke against the tips of Loki's fingers. "I just... I didn't *know* that."

"Few do." Loki told him, removing his hand completely. "And Thor has undoubtedly dismissed it from his mind." His mouth twitched bitterly. "One more weakness."

Tony saw red and was about to argue when Loki smoothly added, "As you say, Anthony, that is on him."

"If I'm ever alone in a room with him again, I'll-"

"You will *not* engage him. Not until we have improved your weaponry and armour." Loki sighed. "Which reminds me; we have a war to prepare for, not just this publicity announcement. It would do us well not to get too distracted from our main goal."

"Thanos," Tony said flatly, well aware Loki was subject changing like a pro but willing to let it happen - even if his blood still boiled and his heart still *ached* for the man beside him.

"Yes," Loki agreed. "We can wait until after this conference, but then we must discuss his movements and that of those already attempting to undermine him."

Tony's eyebrows rose. "Oh, yeah? Who are they?"

"An odd collection of people, but one was a former favourite of his and someone I briefly encountered while stuck in his realm. Her name is Gamora and she is now a useful source of information about him." He smirked almost fondly. "For the right price."

"Yeah, I *definitely* want to know more about her and her band of misfits. Pencil it in for tomorrow night?"

Loki nodded. "If you wish."

Tony sucked in a deep breath and let it out. "And we'll need to listen to all the *lovely* things SHIELD said about us before we arrived, while we were there and after we left. Ugh." He let himself slump and lay over Loki dramatically, earning a theatrical grunt from the demi-god. His arms were over the side of the couch and his chin resting on Loki's shoulder. "I don't have the strength right now, Loki."

“You do weigh a pitiful amount,” Loki informed him.

Tony snuck a hand down, attempting to pinch Loki’s side but his wrist was grabbed and held almost painfully. It was such an instinctive reaction that it made him wonder, and he tilted his head to look at Loki with a smirk. “Don’t tell me - you’re *ticklish*?”

“I am not.”

Tony’s grin widened. “Nope. Not buying it. That poker face is too good. You *are* ticklish. Oh, I’m going to *enjoy* this.”

“Attempt to touch me in that manner,” Loki warned him, “and you will pay *dearly* for it, Anthony Stark.”

“Alright, alright, *fine*,” Tony allowed, relaxing back against the other. “I’ll leave you alone.” *For now*. Unfortunately, dropping that subject brought him back to ones he’d rather not remember. “We should head to bed if we’re going to do this tomorrow. We’re not going to have a lot of time to sleep.”

“Planning to distract me in the bedroom as well, Anthony?” Loki teased, making Tony crack a smile and shift a little to look at him.

The angle was fairly terrible though so they quickly rearranged themselves so they were both lying down facing each other with Loki pressed against the couch and Tony right in front of him.

“You’ll have to give me hickies tomorrow,” Tony told him when they were settled. “I need to have my ‘Loki Claim’ bright and prominent for Thor and Asgard to see.”

Loki grinned. “Oh, I am more than happy to do that.”

Tony chuckled briefly, only to quickly sober. “When Rhodey shows up in the morning, we’ll have to rehearse everything a little better. Prepare what we’re going to say and workout just what you want to tell everyone about your history. Rhodey can help. He can let us know what he thinks is workable and what won’t be bought.”

“I’ll prepare a list over breakfast, shall I? This scar, that scar; you can argue over which will hurt more.”

“*Loki*.”

He smiled. “I’m teasing, Anthony. I won’t suggest anything I’m not comfortable divulging, you have my word.”

Tony eyed him for a few seconds, confirming his sincerity before nodding. “Okay.”

He went to continue, but his words were halted when he suddenly yawned.

It made Loki’s grin grow even wider. “I do believe it’s time for mortals to be in bed.”

“Oh, don’t you even. This is *nothing*. I can last *far* longer than-”

Loki’s fingers found his mouth again. “Enough, Anthony,” he chastised gently. “You have said yourself that we need sleep. Come now.”

Tony wanted to protest, but his mutinous body made him yawn again. It was just because he was lying down; tiredness was so much *harder* to fight when you were lying down. That was his story and he was sticking to it.

Gently, Loki guided him off the couch before following along beside him. Tony didn’t need help reaching his bedroom, but was unwilling to shrug off the hand that rested between his shoulder blades. When they reached his door, he turned to Loki, watching the other take a step back to place them a polite distance apart.

“Sleep well, Anthony.” Loki’s mouth twitched. “Tomorrow, I sully your reputation.”

Tony rolled his eyes so hard it almost hurt. “Oh, as if *you-*”

But Loki had already disappeared in his favourite cloud of sparkles, leaving Tony talking to air.

“*Cheater,*” he grumbled, but without any true heat, his lip was already curving up slightly as he made his way into his room.

He wouldn’t have expected it after having dealt with SHIELD so recently, but somehow he felt... okay. Light almost, and like he might actually get a decent night sleep regardless of having been stuck in their company. Regardless of the emotionally *draining* conversations he’d just had with Loki.

Tony supposed it really just came down to one thing; Loki.

It was always easier, when it was with him.

## Chapter End Notes

I had a lot of fun writing this chapter. I've missed all the one-on-one chats and getting into each other's spaces. So I hope you enjoyed this too :)

I also have to thank **akuma\_river** as during an earlier chapter, one of her comments helped inspire the image of Loki being shown LGBTQIA communities before the public debut. So thank you very much for that!

(Oh, and for everyone whose been asking about a Loki POV, the next chapter should be one, so your wish at seeing his side of things is almost granted!)

# Chapter 21

## Chapter Notes

Heeeey. So, omg sorry. I went on vacation and didn't get this back from my beta in time to post it and have only just gained five seconds of internet and time to post. I didn't get a chance to warn (beyond mentioning it in my other chaptered story update.) So sorry about that! (And if you've left any comments recently, I'll endeavour to reply to them soon!)

Here is the next chapter, I hope you enjoy!

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

It had been surprisingly easy to sleep.

He'd left Anthony with a smirk and a tease, but when he'd lain down in his bed some minutes later, he'd been prepared for nightmares to haunt him. The discussion of his heritage, of his fall and the ever lingering horror of Thanos; it was all the darkness he needed to bolt out of bed with a pained cry catching in his throat and sweat coating his skin.

It had only happened twice since moving into Anthony's tower and FRIDAY had assured him of her discretion in the matter. Loki had long since acknowledged the truth of it though; Anthony's presence helped.

Floors and walls and *rooms* away, Anthony simply helped. His mind was less likely to wander down darker paths when Anthony was so often on his thoughts; distracting him during the day, confounding him with his behaviour when they were alone, and guarding him at night with FRIDAY's ever watchful presence.

Yet, to awaken in the morning having slept so peacefully despite such *vivid* reminders of his past... it was almost disconcerting. Loki was surprised he didn't even have the *other* dreams, because they were far more common.

Truthfully, they were frequent enough to almost be concerning.

Anthony Stark was affectionate, accepting and involved in a ruse that Loki's subconscious and his *magic* were starting to accept far too easily. Sexual dreams about Anthony had plagued him fairly consistently, and while he was able to dismiss it as a simple desire for sex, his magic's reaction was far more worrisome.

Loki had known that he and Anthony were very alike, that they got along extremely well and that Anthony accepted him, more so than anyone save his mother... but his *magic* had taken that too far.

When he'd grasped Anthony's hand his magic had done something it never had before. Loki had read about it, Loki had *seen* it, and while it didn't always mean or progress towards something romantic, it was still considered extremely important and sacred among mages.

Loki's magic had told him that Anthony Stark was compatible with him. His *magic* had more or less reached out and tapped Anthony, saying, quite simply; *we pick this one.*

It didn't *mean* anything, of course. Loki didn't have to respond in kind, and it certainly didn't mean they were *destined to be together* or any such romantic nonsense. It just meant that should they... should he...

But Loki shoved the door firmly shut on that. *It means our partnership will be far greater than I anticipated when I first accepted it.*

It had still shocked him, Loki couldn't deny that, but only because it had never happened to him before. His magic, his *subconscious* had registered their physically affectionate touches and that was why he was not only having dreams about Anthony, but it was why his magic perceived that there was more between them. But there wasn't.

Loki might be perpetrating a relationship with Anthony, but that didn't mean under the guise of an illusion he couldn't find someone else to lay with. As long as he didn't damage their ruse, it would be an inconsequential dalliance and he would even *tell* Anthony of his intentions to bed someone if it ever came up. They were not lovers, and neither of them intended to deepen their relationship.

Anthony was not a lover of men and neither of them had feelings that went deeper than friendship.

Yet Anthony's words last night came back to him; *'my reputation and the kiss paints any more imagery we need.'*

Loki had pondered those words for a long moment when they had been spoken, but he'd dismissed them in the end, too busy focusing on all the other things Anthony had brought to his attention. It had been... a trying day. The revelations of betrayal still made his body burn with the need to utterly destroy those who had ripped so casually into Anthony's heart and soul.

He wanted to send *numerous* vicious spells and deadly curses their way, rather than the one that would remove all of Anthony's weapons from their possession. It wasn't *enough*, but it was all Anthony would allow him – Anthony, who deserved far more recompense than what he was allowing himself to take.

But to follow that infuriating revelation with a meeting with the very people who had betrayed Anthony... Loki had barely kept his tongue between his teeth. It was only knowing that Anthony had needed his support and comfort, not his anger that kept Loki contained.

Loki was not usually in such a caring role and the few times he'd tried in the past for others, Loki had always found himself lacking somehow. It was... nice to see his touches helping

Anthony. It was *nice* to know that he could do more than hurt or destroy something to make Anthony relax.

So he had continued to do it.

To receive comfort and acceptance in return when he'd told even the barest parts of his own tale, it had made a weight fall from Loki's shoulders. He'd still only skirted the issues; never explaining what he'd done, never saying what he *looked like* - there was only so far that Anthony's forgiveness and his acceptance could stretch, Loki was sure.

In the end, it had left him with too much to ponder and very little time to spend doing so.

Anthony's press conference was in but a few hours and while he wasn't exactly worried about it, there was a discomfort in the pit of his stomach at airing his past so... *widely*. The communities he'd been shown certainly made his acceptance look more favourable, but none of the mortals listed in those articles had committed as many atrocities as him.

Could they really forgive him that?

Loki didn't know, and he hoped that connecting himself with Anthony didn't make the mortal's own status on Earth suffer.

*My reputation.*

And there were those words again, echoing in Loki's head as he tried to pick at them for what they were and what they couldn't *possibly* be.

*I was known when I was younger for sleeping with anything that moved.* He'd also said. *The reporters loved a scandal.*

Loki knew rumours, he was well known for creating them himself. Tony showed no indication of being inclined towards men. He was *friends* with numerous men whom he touched easily and affectionately, that was all.

A false lead was all it took; a few careful words and a mindless population who were two steps removed from the actual situation and who could follow the notes of a gifted conductor.

*It will paint a picture, and they will believe it, regardless of the truth that was never inside it.*

He supposed it helped them, and it was gratifying to know that two men being lovers was not so despised on Midgard. There was still tales of woe, of violence and disgust, but at least in Anthony's country it did not seem so bad. At least for Anthony, their relationship would be... accepted.

“Sir?”

The sudden call from FRIDAY made Loki jerk out of his thoughts rather inelegantly. He'd managed to get from his bed to the bathroom but had ended up leaning against the wall. It wasn't uncommon for him to cease all movement as he worked his way through a problem.



His magic often required him to go into deep trances and whenever he felt comfortable and safe in his lodgings, he would often let his mind drift wherever it needed to.

“Yes, FRIDAY?”

“Mr Stark is awake and going to gain some breakfast. Would you like to join him?”

Loki smiled a little. “Did he request me or are you moving us together of your own accord?”

Sometimes, Loki did wonder if Anthony’s AI wasn’t his own kind of magic, reaching out and acting for him in protection and support. He almost wished he had met JARVIS before he had become part of the Vision. The few times Anthony had mentioned him made Loki believe he truly had missed something wonderful.

“I know he would never dislike seeing you.”

Loki’s grin became bigger. “Very well. Do not bother to inform him, I will be up presently.”

He didn’t make his way directly to the penthouse floor, he continued with his morning ritual, showering and changing into more appropriate attire. It was but ten minutes when he requested of FRIDAY, “Where is Anthony now?”

“The communal lounge,” she answered. “Dr Banner is already present.”

“Ah,” Loki breathed, taking all of a moment to factor his presence in before he was searching for Anthony and finding his energy signature.

Smirking a little, Loki teleported himself to stand right behind the other man and wrapped his arms around his waist. Anthony was wearing a very finely tailored suit and Loki perched his chin on Anthony’s shoulder and purred, “You should have joined me in the shower, my dear.”

“Now, now,” Anthony answered, not even missing a beat as he patted Loki’s hand. “We have a guest; I’m not going to completely ignore him just because your tongue happens to be fantastic.”

Loki had a very hard time not laughing at the reply. He hid his amusement by burying his face in Anthony’s neck, pressing his mirthful smile against Anthony’s skin and wondering how he’d pay back his delightful fellow showman for such devious words.

To an observer, of course, he would look as if he was kissing Anthony’s neck.

“Maybe I should just...” Bruce Banner’s uncomfortable response unfortunately brought their teasing to a halt.

Anthony twisted out of Loki’s arms and also forced Loki to face the Doctor.

“Bruce, come on,” Anthony told him, moving closer. “Look, I get that you don’t like him but-”

“Tony, it’s your home and you can be as expressive as you like with-”

“Yeah, but that’s not the *point*-”

“Dr Banner,” Loki cut in abruptly, making them both turn to him. “Is it simply myself you have a problem with, or that the lover Anthony has taken is a male?”

Dr Banner went tense and he straightened, looking almost insulted, “The gender of someone has never *once* been something I have had a problem with, Loki.” His lips thinned. “FRIDAY informed me of the prejudice in Asgard and I’m appalled at the way you were treated.”

Loki raised an eyebrow when nothing further was forthcoming. “That of course, does not fully answer my question.”

He sighed and rubbed his eyes, but Banner elaborated. “I see you and know that there isn’t one side to the issue, but the Other Guy doesn’t like you.” He looked tired around the eyes, aged, when he dropped his hand. “The Other Guy sees you and the building he smashed you into and wants to repeat the experience.” Bruce nodded at Tony. “He likes you, so he’s conflicted at seeing you both so affectionate. Quite frankly, it’s exhausting.”

“Awh, Bruce,” Anthony looked guilty, no doubt doubled by the fact that it was a *ruse* and that Dr Banner was suffering for something that wasn’t true.

“Do you believe it will be easier to accept with time?” Loki asked him simply, making both men blink. When he received no answer, he requested, somewhat impatiently. “Will the Beast learn that I am not your enemy - nor Anthony’s - and cease to care about my presence around you?”

Banner was frowning deeply. “I... possibly?” He glanced at Anthony. “The Other Guy learned to distinguish who the tea...” he trailed off, looking uncomfortable and apologetic before correcting, “who was friend from foe.”

Well, as much as he had planned to have fun teasing Anthony and being responded to in turn while Banner was present; Loki supposed it would only be better for them in the long run. If Banner was intending to spend extended periods around Anthony, it would be best that they didn’t have to constantly create a persona that was fictional.

“Very well,” Loki told them, “we shall simply practice discretion.”

“What? Loki, no-”

“I could not possible ask or expect you both-”

Banner and Anthony both overlapped each other in their initial refusals of the suggestion. When they looked at each other, pausing over who would continue, Loki interjected instead, “I am not saying we will *stop*, Dr Banner, merely that you will not be greeted to our more exuberant displays of affection. I can sense where you are in the Tower; I will take that into account.” He nodded at Anthony. “We both will.”

Banner was looking between the two of them like he didn’t know what he’d just witnessed. Anthony, on the other hand, had passed through suspicion and was now watching him with a

soft look in his eyes.

“You don’t have to do that, Loki,” Anthony told him, but his eyes were filled with gratitude. “We don’t have to *hide* this.”

Loki smirked a little. “I do believe our public debut has more than shown that you are not ashamed of me, Anthony.”

His words were all tease, another part of their act, but Loki already knew what it truly meant to Anthony to have been given a quick and simple way to avoid further lying to his friend. Banner still believed they were lovers, but at least for the time being - and until Anthony decided whether to admit it to the Doctor or not - Anthony didn’t have to actively *pretend*.

Anthony’s smile lit up his eyes and Loki was momentarily confused when he stepped closer, but instead of a faux embrace, Anthony did what he had done to Banner when he arrived after months away; Anthony hugged him.

For the first time Anthony was embracing him genuinely, and as a *friend*.

Loki was surprised, but it was quickly followed by a surge of pleasure and affection and he wrapped his arms around Anthony’s back, simply enjoying the warmth of his touch.

“Thank you,” Anthony whispered to him. “It means a lot to me that he stays, *thank you*.”

Loki smiled gently. “You are welcome, Anthony.”

They didn’t stay like that long, not with the Doctor’s difficulty at seeing them together now known. Anthony pulled away first and went back to Banner who had shifted to stare out the window. Anthony drew him into conversation about something relating to some article or another Loki had no interest in. Loki made his way to the dining area to make himself some breakfast instead.

It was while he was taking out ingredients and utensils that FRIDAY announced, “Colonel Rhodes has arrived.”

Banner and Anthony had made their way to the couch, but Anthony told her, unnecessarily, “Send him up.”

There was a slight tension to his voice, likely caused by the reminder of *why* his friend was visiting, but he still went back to his conversation with Banner easily.

It took a few minutes more for the Colonel to actually reach them and by then Loki’s meal had finished frying. He had been amused at the whispers and staring he’d received when he’d been levitating items or charming a knife to cut his vegetables. Anthony was rather used to it, but Dr Banner was far more unaccustomed and intrigued.

It was when his breakfast was on his plate and he was sitting at the counter that Rhodes arrived. Loki offered him a casual wave with the hand holding his fork but otherwise continued to eat.

He only paid the vaguest attention as Rhodes' focus was snagged by Banner. "Bruce?"

"He showed up the other day," Anthony elaborated, waving him over. "Come and catch up!"

Banner smiled minutely but accepted the handshake and backslap Rhodey gave him. The Colonel then sat down on the coffee table and faced them. The conversation moved into pleasantries and Loki summoned the tablet Anthony had given him to begin reading the many media reports that his and Anthony's actions had inspired.

It was fairly derogatory and negative, which was unfortunate, and Loki could only hope Anthony was as good with the public as he said. Loki's own tension was beginning to mount at just what they would likely be faced with before they had a chance to charm the reporters.

He was so involved in his research of the news heralds that it took Banner speaking to make Loki blink back to the room and turn to him. "You didn't need to do that."

The Doctor was standing just close enough that the conversation was private. Rhodes and Anthony were talking on the couch, although Anthony did keep flicking anxious looks their way.

Loki focused back on Banner, quickly noticing the sharp intellect in the way he was being observed. It was that, more than anything that had made him such a close and cherished companion of Anthony's. Banner still distrusted him, of course, but this attempt to speak to him regardless of the Beast's attitude was favourable.

"Agree to discretion?" Loki clarified, and when he gained a nod, Loki continued, "Well, it was not solely for you."

Banner didn't look surprised. "It made Tony happy."

Loki inclined his head. "You are one of the few remaining who holds his trust. It is a small inconvenience for me, weighed against a great comfort to him, and an easier adjustment to my presence for you."

"You could ask me to leave."

"Anthony doesn't want that."

Banner was quiet afterwards but continued to watch him carefully. "I think you'll be good for him," Banner eventually decided, making Loki's eyebrows skyrocket. "Oh, I don't like you," Banner chuckled a little darkly, only sobering to clarify, "but I do trust Tony."

He paused and his eyes drifted. "He had me look at all the details he has on you; Thanos, Asgard, the contract." Banner blinked back and pursed his lips. "I think there's a lot more to you than what we ever knew, and I think there was a lot of extenuating circumstances the first time we met. *But*," Banner took a menacing step forward, and Loki was reminded strongly of the Beast that had pummelled him into stone, "if you hurt Tony, if you betray him, the Hulk won't stop at smash - he'll stop at *crushed*."

Loki accepted the threat with a slow nod, not brushing it off the way he would have preferred to. “I do hope not to experience that again.”

It was to Loki’s surprise that Banner actually grimaced, the intimidation leaving him in a moment and taking him back to the slightly timid, hunched man he usually was. “Yeah, me either.”

He looked ready to turn away, but Loki was far too curious. “Dr Banner,” he waited until the other had faced him again, “I must wonder; this threat of yours, will you apply to people who have in fact *already* betrayed Anthony?”

Banner stiffened and his eyes flicked to Loki’s, full of sudden exhaustion and barely hidden pain. “You mean the Avengers.”

“They were your team as much as Anthony is your friend. He is *my* partner and I have yet to determine whether you are a further threat to his heart.”

“I’m not here to hurt Tony,” Banner told him, resolute, unwavering. Yet he *also* didn’t pick his side.

It made Loki wonder just *what* was holding him back. “So you believe what they did was not-”

“It was unforgivable to Tony,” Banner interjected. “And I am horrified that anyone in the Avengers could let it happen or be a part of it. I don’t approve of it, I don’t like it and it never should have happened.”

Loki stiffened and his eyes narrowed with menace and the unwavering decision to *remove* Banner from the Tower if he wished to side with traitors. “But you have doubts.”

“No,” Banner shook his head negatively. “I can believe far too much of it, but I don’t *want* to. Tony is my friend, but so are they.” It was the look in his eyes alone that stayed Loki’s tongue and his hand; the look of a man who didn’t know where to turn. It resonated too closely to Anthony’s own wounds for Loki to be comfortable with. “I need to know why they did it, why they thought they *could*. I can’t give up my loyalty and faith in them until I know for sure that they deserve that.”

“And if you find out that they *do*?” Loki pressed.

Banner’s eyes hardened, gaining a green tint that warned of the Beast inside. “The Other Guy won’t be any happier than me.”

A hint of a smile curved Loki’s lips. “SHIELD could hardly find a more harrowing threat.”

“I think knowing *you* don’t like them isn’t much better,” Banner deadpanned.

Loki just raised his eyebrows pointedly. “Surely they didn’t have any hope it was the opposite?”

He was rewarded by Banner actually smiling at him slightly, looking genuinely amused at the quip. “You might be chaotic and unpredictable, Loki, but I think even SHIELD knew that was futile.”

“Yeah, well, he surprised them by picking me,” Anthony announced, coming over to them and flashing a smile, but it passed across his face too fast. It was uncomfortable, *jittery*, just like the rest of him.

Loki frowned and shifted to better face him. “Anthony?”

“We’re running out of time,” Rhodey said, coming to stand beside Anthony and place a hand on his shoulder. “Last chance to run over things before we should go.”

Loki’s eyes instantly shifted back to Anthony, seeing the tension and wanting to comfort him, to give him strength to draw from. He pushed from his seat and stepped closer; he positioned his back to the bar but with his body angled towards Anthony. Their shoulders were brushing and he let his fingers lightly stroke Anthony’s wrist, gaining a small smile from the action. While he couldn’t see it with the long sleeves of Anthony’s outfit, Loki took a certain pleasure knowing he would be wearing his bracelet.

“What do you plan to tell everyone?” Banner wondered.

“It will depend,” Loki answered into the silence that followed before asking Rhodes’. “How did your superiors react?”

Rhodes grimaced, but still replied, “Not... terribly. Some conservative views were aired-”

“Anti-gay,” Anthony chimed in.

Rhodes just continued as if it hadn’t occurred, probably long used to the habit. “And concerns for national security.”

“They haven’t liked me since Afghanistan,” Anthony instantly added before smirking at Loki, “and you scare the crap out of them.”

“*But*,” Rhodes loudly persisted, “the Pentagon - and the Air Force in particular - won’t make an official comment until after the press conference.”

Anthony nodded sagely. “It’s always easier to take sides when you know the public reaction first.”

Rhodes sighed. “Tony, you know the game as well as me.”

“Yeah, I know,” Anthony reassured him, but it was followed with a sigh that belied his cheerful tone. Loki found his hand wrapping around Anthony’s wrist and squeezing gently. It caused a minute increase of light to Anthony’s eyes, but not enough to shake off the worst of his tension and uncertainty.

But before anyone could say anything else, Anthony rolled his shoulders and shrugged Rhodey touch off and pulled free of Loki. He stepped away from them all and Loki could see

as each piece of mental armour was wrapped around Anthony; emotional shields and weapons to keep his brilliant, broken core from suffering any more damage. Yet, Loki could see it for what it now was; singed and structurally unsound with far too many weak points just waiting to be bled through.

Loki couldn't stop vile words and painful questions from being flung at Anthony, but he could stand by his side and help him to weather it. He could deflect some of the blows and offer his own armour whenever Anthony's might fail.

He would be Loki Liesmith, the Trickster and the partner of a brilliant, intelligent mortal.

Letting magic dart from his fingers he changed his outfit to a suit to match Anthony's own. He didn't add his own colours or even Anthony's. He chose a neutral charcoal that would allow him to show his allegiance in something far more blatant than *colours*.

He would show it in words, in action, in *truth*.

Loki Laufeyson had chosen Anthony Stark - and if they were to lie about the specifics, well, what did one expect, from two men like them, and two minds like theirs?

Anthony seemed to have similar thoughts as he turned around, caught Loki's eyes and then grinned, wide and vicious and *beautiful*.

“Alright guys, we've got answers we need to construct and not a lot of time to do it.” He gestured towards the couches, a small attempt at comfort when what was to come would give them anything but. “Where do we want to start?”

## Chapter End Notes

Okaaaay. So, I know a lot of you are waiting for the conference but it's just a *little longer* now. I also hope to make the next chapter longer. But I must admit, I'm not sure how much time I'll have to write it until I get back home. (So like, two weeks from now.) So the next update might be a little longer in coming. We'll see how I go. But I hope you liked this! Thanks so much for reading!

# Chapter 22

## Chapter Notes

SOOOOOOO let's just pretend we don't know what the last updating date was. I'M VERY SORRY. Life, then holidays, then a rewrite of this chapter have just made this... not so good. I'm going to try and get back to schedule now though! I still want to thank Amara1783 for being wonderful as my beta and Halcyonfrost for listening to me whine and grumble. Not to mention everyone whose asked about an update for this; it was always in the forefront of my mind, but you helped keep it there. So thank you :)

And, um, yeah. I won't keep you anymore, enjoy the chapter! ~~Here's hoping you all still remember wtf is going on and are interested. Haha.~~

\*slinks under a rock to hide\*

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

When no one answered Tony's question, he decided to throw out a suggestion to get the ball rolling, "How about 'hey, he's not actually a bad guy'?"

Loki smirked, his eyebrows rising and his voice amused, "Oh dear, lying already?"

"Loki."

"What?" He questioned, simple and unconcerned. "My negligible coercion aside, I was never considered *good* on my own realm long before the act had taken place."

"Coercion," Bruce replied softly but with his eyes hard, "needs to be addressed no matter how minor, and *torture* is not minor."

Tony could see Loki gearing up for another flippant comment, like those he'd given himself when people pressed him about Afghanistan. Because it was easier to avoid remembering the horrors, if you didn't have to think about how much it had hurt, how much it had broken, how much it had *branded* you.

It didn't help that ever since last night, he'd felt... protective of Loki. Or rather, he felt an encompassing need to be *around* Loki. Hearing that Loki had not only been suicidal but had *attempted* it, fuck, it made Tony want to attach himself to Loki's side and refuse to let him near anything sharp or dangerous ever again.

He knew it was ridiculous and that Loki didn't display suicidal tendencies, that he'd never even know that he *had* - but it didn't stop Tony's worry. He also knew that treating Loki any differently now would be the biggest slap in the face to Loki's willingness to trust him. But it didn't stop Tony's need to assure himself Loki was fine.



They'd known from the start that they'd have to talk about Loki's past and his involvement in the invasion, not to mention his physical and emotional torture as he was manipulated by Thanos. He knew Loki wasn't *fragile*, but it didn't mean Tony didn't want to shelter him.

Loki surprised him though, by giving Bruce's remark a serious answer. "I use the term negligible, Dr Banner, because at the time my interest in your world was non-existent. I wanted to remove myself from the Mad Titan's clutches and had little qualms in destroying your world to do it. It was by design that my invasion was to fail and your world to remain mostly free of harm, but had that *not* been important to my plans, I would have had little care either way."

"Yeah, but you wouldn't have done it at all, if he hadn't put you in a position where you had to choose."

Loki nodded at Rhodey, ceding the point. "True, but that only absolves my actions against *your* world."

Tony narrowed his eyes at that. "But you did something to *another* world?"

When Loki's eyes found his they were... carefully blank. "As I have said, I was never considered 'good' long before I had dealings with your world."

"And how much of that was Asgard, and how much of that was *you*?" Tony pressed.

Loki's smirk was without humour. "Well, Anthony, that would depend on just which action you apply that question to."

"As much as I think this is important," Rhodey spoke into the quiet, "and that it's something we, but especially Tony should know about, it's not immediately relevant if you're not going to talk about it at the conference."

He glanced between Tony and Loki, but Tony barely noticed, too busy staring at Loki and trying to puzzle out how many dark secrets Loki had just hinted were in his past. Tony had already assumed there were a few, but something in his expression said there might be a deal-breaker lurking in those shadows.

"In that you are correct," Loki murmured, pulling his gaze from Anthony, "Midgard does not need to become aware of it and Asgard will not dare mention it as they will not wish to reveal their own part in the matter."

"Right, then let's focus on what we need to," Rhodey insisted, drawing them back to what was important. "FRIDAY showed me the document you drafted last night, Tony."

Loki's eyebrows rose and Tony shrugged. "We'd talked about what would happen when you first showed up, which granted, there are a few things that have changed since then, but that combined with our talk last night and being unable to sleep got me productive. FRIDAY, pull it up, yeah?"

FRIDAY did as asked, revealing the list he'd made of everything he could think of that might come up at the press conference; items they wanted to discuss, plausible answers to a range of questions, rebuttals and a few twisty sentences that would get them out of answering something completely if they wanted to. It wasn't perfect, but it should cover the majority of issues they would face.

"Impressive," Loki murmured, pulling a copy of the projection towards himself while Bruce did the same.

Loki wasn't doing it intentionally, but Tony found his attention being pulled to Loki. Maybe he'd just been expecting the creak of leather armour or the sight of a rumpled tunic, but all of a sudden Tony's brain decided to *notice* what Loki was wearing.

Because he hadn't before, not really, not with his full attention. He'd been distracted by the conference and all the other things that had happened this morning. This was the first time his brain had switched gears to pay attention to the outfit Loki had conjured.

Loki looked... *good*. He was leaning back slightly, his brow furrowed as he scanned the information Tony had put together. The suit hugged his thighs and his wrists were visible from beneath the sleeves, making his pale skin stand out all the brighter. He even seemed to have changed his SMS-cuff to resemble the bracelet Tony still wore, probably to better fit into 'Earth fashion'. His jacket was buttoned over his shirt and tie, and Tony had to admit, that seeing Loki in an entirely charcoal suit was... *really impressive*.

*A boy could have a fantasy about a guy dressed like that.*

The thought had barely slipped through his mind when Tony was drawn from his contemplations by Bruce asking, "You can't rely entirely on how Asgardian culture differs from ours." Bruce had taken off his glasses and was rubbing his eyes. "That doesn't excuse everything."

"Why not? SHIELD have certainly used it whenever Thor did something stupid."

"Yes, but Thor hasn't invaded a world."

Loki shrugged absently. "Well, not in the last two years perhaps."

He was suddenly the focus of three blank stares.

"Thor invaded a world?" Tony was the one to finally ask.

Loki's confusion seemed genuine as he looked between them. "Well, yes. He was forbidden from doing so by the Allfather, but he dragged myself and four others along with him." The unimpressed slant to his mouth spoke of remembered irritation. There was also a tension to his shoulders, a discomfort to Loki as he recounted, "He believed it his right as a Prince to do what he wished. He was insulted while on the planet and he slew many of the inhabitants because he felt provoked, the fool almost started a war, and would have had... other events not affected the proceedings."

The silence lasted for almost a minute. Bruce and Rhodey both seemed a little shocked; Tony certainly was, but he was also willing to dismiss one further reason why Thor was an asshole to focus on *Loki*.

*Other events.*

It was only for a moment, but Loki had flicked his eyes to his hand again, just like he had the other night. Tony didn't know *what* that meant, but it tied into what he'd admitted about his heritage.

"You have a feudal warrior culture," Bruce murmured, his eyes distant. "Invading worlds kept power and forced peace - well, the peace of the victor at least." His eyes cleared. "And Asgard considers itself the ruler, the protector, but it also won its position by battles and blood; the stories that you and Thor would have grown up listening to."

"Most of the Aesir know those times are over and are grateful for the peace they currently have," Loki replied. "But Thor has always hungered for battle and has gone in search of it wherever possible, determined to make himself a legend like his father before him."

Bruce's eyes fell back to the projection in front of him, still looking like he was trying to absorb the glimpse he'd been given into Aesir society and *Thor's* history.

"Is that why Thor got sent to our world?" Bruce questioned, his mind leaping forward. "In punishment for that attack?"

Loki's smile was more of a grimace. "Thor's indiscretions are either kept from the Aesir or are adored by the people after a good retelling of his 'boisterous youth'."

"Something tells me you never got that consideration," said Tony.

"Be made to play a dark role for long enough," Bruce added softly, watching Loki with calculating eyes and a deep frown, "and you'll find yourself accepting it."

"Not all roles are baseless," Loki told them.

It was likely done to warn them, to keep them from absolving him of all blame, but Tony could see it was having the opposite effect. Rhodey was quietly furious, Bruce was tipping ever more strongly into revising his opinion of Loki, and he himself, well, he'd given up being shocked about the level of dickish that Asgard could produce.

He was getting worried though, about just how dramatically and painfully Loki had snapped, and just what Loki had done to make himself look so haunted.

"But as you have said," Loki continued, dismissing the projection in front of him and drawing his words around him like a shield, "it is not relevant to the press conference. Dr Banner," he addressed, quickly altering the subject of discussion, "you are the most impartial towards me." His mouth twitched. "Rather, you are predisposed to *dislike* me and as such, your opinion is valuable."

Bruce quickly caught on to what he was implying and shifted uncomfortably. “You want me as a test subject.”

“It would be helpful, Bruce,” Rhodey chimed in.

“The general public is still going to have a different view than me,” he answered, before glancing at Loki. “But I can try and look at how they might react and see if I can help.” He smiled a little more genuinely. “But you seem to be succeeding so far.”

Loki blinked, thrown slightly off guard while Tony just grinned, feeling happiness rush through him as he reached out and cupped Bruce’s shoulder. Bruce glanced at him and gave a tight smile, but his eyes were softer; they were warming to the situation, to *Loki*.

*It’s already working*, Tony thought, feeling almost giddy and with confidence rushing through his body and bones. *I knew it from the start, because it’s just so fucking easy to like him, to just look and see how brilliant he is.*

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They used every remaining minute they had before they needed to leave, to rehearse what they were going to say.

Tony had to admit that the rushed nature of the situation wasn’t doing them any favours, but Loki had been revealed when he had and they couldn’t take that back. Pepper might not be happy with him, but even she knew that the conference *needed* to happen if they were going to manage any kind of damage control with the public, and the sooner it took place, the less time people had to make up their own theories.

The time constraint was irritating, but at least they all worked well under pressure.

When FRIDAY informed them that it was time to leave, all four of them stood and Bruce surprised Loki by offering his hand and wishing him a genuine ‘good luck’. Bruce was going to head down to the lab to check on the animals while they were gone, but he was still waiting to receive the last of his results, so he’d be back to watch the broadcast when it started.

He didn’t have Happy picking them up today; there was enough going on without having to navigate another strained relationship. Things had been tense between them since his falling out with Pepper and he’d found it easier to go everywhere by himself and to just keep the suit nearby. He’d planned to drive them himself, but Rhodey slid into the driver’s seat with a glare that dared Tony to disagree.

He’d handed over the keys with minimal fuss and slipped into the back with Loki. He hadn’t even noticed he’d fallen into a pensive silence until he felt a gentle touch to his knee. He glanced at Loki’s hand - then up at the smirking mage.

“Do cheer up, my dear little mortal,” Loki told him, “It’s not every day you announce your romance to a fallen Prince.”

Tony scoffed, but the distraction still made him grin. Loki squeezed his knee once before moving to release his hold, but Tony reached out quickly and caught Loki's hand in his. He let their hands rest together momentarily before he slowly linked their fingers. His eyes glided up the sleeve of Loki's suit, lingered on his chest and the silk of his tie before continuing up to Loki's curious eyes.

He ignored the 'fallen' part to focus on the better aspect, happy to slide into their teasing banter for a few brief minutes before they arrived at the conference.

"Did I mention," he told Loki, doing his best to pack as much lasciviousness as possible into his words, "that my Prince looks *fabulous* in that suit?"

He was surprised at the way Loki's eyes darkened and his mouth parted a little on one word in particular. *Ooh*, Tony thought, *the Prince thing?*

"I *am* still in the car, you know," Rhodey announced from the front, sounding thoroughly unimpressed."

Tony swivelled his head to look at his friend, catching his eyes in the rear-view mirror. "Feeling left out? Should I be complimenting your uniform? Why, what large buttons you have!"

Rhodey just rolled his eyes and while his attention was on the road, he still sniped back, "It's not too late, Loki. You can still break up with him before we arrive."

Tony gaped dramatically at Rhodey before he pressed even closer against Loki, curling against him and holding on tight. "Don't even think about it, Rhodey. I'm not letting you steal him, he's mine."

Loki chuckled, taking Tony burrowing into his side extremely well, he even let go of Tony's hand and wrapped an arm around Tony's shoulders. "My, my, two men fighting over me; I wonder if I should transport you to a convenient field and outfit you for battle?"

It was probably completely by accident, but Tony remembered fighting with Thor in a forest and found himself giggling into Loki's shoulder. He wondered if he could work in a way to tell Thor that he'd won Loki years ago. It might have been a draw that day, but Tony was sure he could find a way to fudge the details in his favour.

It was only when Tony stopped chuckling that he realised exactly what position he was in; wrapped around Loki and pressed against his side. Loki's arm was a heavy, comforting weight over him and it was nice, *protective* even. Tony hadn't had a lot of times lately where he felt like someone had his back. Where he felt *safe* outside his tower and away from his suit, but right here, he did.

Tilting his head so that he was resting slightly against Loki's shoulder, he looked up at the mage. Loki was looking down at him and their faces were close enough that if either of them shifted just right, they could be kissing. They didn't though. They had no one to kiss *for* after all, Rhodey was concentrating on the road and already knew the truth. But they *could* have,

and they probably would again, they might even do it at the conference, if the right moment presented itself.

Tony didn't move from where he was though and even though the time to reply to Rhodey had passed, he still told Loki's seriously, "You are a great prospect, Loki. I can see lots of people fighting over you."

"A disgraced and fallen Prince?" He raised his eyebrows ruefully before shaking his head. "I am also committed to you, should anyone even try. I do believe *you* are the one people would battle for."

Tony snorted. "I'm a broken mortal with a basket of demons on my back." Tony smiled, but it was quick and full of all his flaws and crooked pieces. "At least you've got magic and space travel on your side, all I have is alcohol and a suit made of ego; just ask the right reporter." His smile turned softer. "You're the better catch." Loki was frowning at him, looking ready to protest, but Tony broke the moment with a chuckle, glancing away. "Or maybe we're better off left to each other; a grand disaster of a romance."

He felt a hand on his chin and was forced to look back at him. Loki's eyes were travelling across every inch of Tony's face; reading every painful story, every battering his heart had taken. He saw the swathes of history, pain and baggage that Tony knew he carried but Loki didn't even flinch, instead Loki grinned. It was full of self-deprecation and eyes that looked hollow. "Oh, Anthony, such arrogance you have to think that you are somehow *worse* than I."

"Oh, babe," Tony told him, just as darkly. "Don't count me out just yet."

A loud sigh from the front of the car didn't make them look away from each other, but they did listen to Rhodey as he told them loudly. "Are you really trying to battle this out? Can't you be arguing over who looks better in their suit? Or who has the nicer hair?"

"Rhodey," Tony sighed, finally glancing away. "Why would we argue over that? Clearly, it's me." He was flicked on the ear for that and flinched, scowling at Loki who just looked unimpressed. "*Rude.*"

"Learn not to insult a divine being," Loki told him simply.

"*Divine being?*" Tony repeated incredulously while pulling away from him. "Are you trying to call me-"

He stopped himself from continuing when his attempts to distance himself and sniff haughtily at Loki were derailed by Loki's hand on his shoulder firmly pulling him back into place. He was surprised, but allowed it, frowning at the other in confusion.

Loki didn't comment on his expectant expression, or even continue their teasing argument, instead he asked Rhodey, "How long before we arrive, Rhodes?"

"Twenty minutes, depending on traffic."

“Fabulous.” Loki turned back to Tony and with a smirk, he flicked his fingers. Tony didn’t *feel* any different, but he’d seen the spark of magic on Loki’s fingers so he glanced down at them only to blink and then to laugh.

Loki, the *fucker* had switched their ties. He was now wearing the smooth charcoal that very *noticeably* went with Loki’s suit. Loki, on the other hand, was wearing the patterned tie he’d chosen this morning. It didn’t long *wrong*, but it certainly stood out, at least to Tony. It felt almost as blatant as showing up with lovebites and a rumpled suit.

Tony found himself shaking his head at the other, but he didn’t mention it. He just relaxed a little more against Loki.

“Will you join us when the conference finishes, Rhodes?” Loki questioned. “We will be analysing the animals and deciding what is best to be done with them. I’m sure Anthony will also open some manner of alcohol in celebration of returning to the tower.”

“Hey, I’ve been cutting back *thank you*,” Tony protested.

“Yes, you should thank me,” Loki remarked, “it is only due to my magic that you’ve been adhering to that part of our contract.”

Tony grumbled under his breath, but the others ignored him as Rhodey answered, “We’ll see how quickly they want me back at the Pentagon.”

“Tell them you’re uncovering magic animal secrets!” Tony insisted; keen to keep Rhodey, his *friends* close and by his side after the conference.

He wondered if Loki hadn’t anticipated just that.

Rhodey just chuckled at him. “We’ll see.”

Knowing that was as far as he could push for the moment, Tony decided to change the subject entirely.

“Soooo,” he drawled, “are we there yet?”

Loki looked confused while Rhodey looked like he would have thrown something at Tony if he had half the chance. Tony just smiled innocently and wondered how many times he could get away with asking it before Rhodey finally gave in and threatened to turn the car around on them.

It was nice, sometimes, to pretend nothing nerve-wracking was about to happen.

---

They arrived fairly quickly after an amusing conversation where Loki found the human race’s need to quote things both puzzling and amusing. It left the car ride filled with light-hearted chatter until they reached their destination; the main branch of Stark Industries.

Stark Industries had been moved from Stark Tower after the battle of New York, when the Avengers became more frequent residents. Security had been a factor, but he mostly wanted

to ensure the safety of his employees and for Pepper. He hadn't wanted them working in a place that could so easily become the focal point of another attack.

After the betrayal and subsequent stripping of anything SHIELD or Avenger related, he hadn't wanted to do anything but lick his wounds in private. The tower was mostly bare and empty now, but it was all he had left of a home and Tony hadn't wanted to bring more people and more conflict into the one place he had left to be protective of.

It didn't help that wherever Stark Industries was at the moment, so was Pepper. He'd thought their fight and disagreements would be temporary at the beginning, but now Tony wasn't so sure. Pepper wasn't welcome at the Tower and Tony didn't really want the reporters at his doorstep either, especially when he was hiding Bruce. When she'd suggested holding it at Stark Industries, he hadn't argued.

Rhodey had driven them into a cordoned off area of the underground carpark. It was usually reserved for employee parking, but had been cleared while the conference occurred. It gave them a few more minutes alone.

Turning off the car, Rhodey turned in his seat to ask them, "Ready?"

Tony grimaced a little but still nodded his agreement. "Yeah, sure."

*What could go wrong?* He wanted to add, but that was just asking for trouble.

So instead of saying anything further, he pulled himself away from Loki's hold, meeting no resistance this time, and stepped out of the car. Loki and Rhodey were soon to follow and came to stand by his side. Loki slid his hand down Tony's arm before ending over his wrist where Loki kept it carefully positioned.

Tony glanced over at him and Loki quirked a smile before dropping his hand even further until he could link it with Anthony's. "We are lovers, are we not? Shall we not begin this meeting with every intention of assuring your world of this fact?"

It made him relax, minutely, as he gripped Loki's hand in return. "Yeah."

Slowing to a stop just before the doors of Stark Industries, Tony reached up with his free hand to fiddle with Loki's stolen tie before smoothing it out over Loki's chest. Loki's eyes were unreadable as he watched him and Tony quirked a smile. "I've got to have my Prince looking his best."

Loki's smile was small, but it somehow transformed his face into something that made him look younger, *happier* even. Tony *also* didn't miss the way that while 'Prince' might not have gained the exact same reaction as last time, it did do *something*.

*Definitely worth further investigating.*

Taking their joined hands, Loki raised it until he could press a kiss to the back of Tony's hand. Tony raised his eyebrows, surprised at the display, but Loki's eyes just danced with enjoyment. "What luck, as my mortal has already managed the same."



It made him roll his eyes at the other, but Tony otherwise didn't comment, they were *lovers* after all. Affectionate gestures were meant to be common place.

They began walking soon after that, their hands still linked. Tony caught Rhodey giving them an amused smirk before he was stepping through the doors.

They wouldn't be meeting the reporters yet, they'd be going to find Pepper and waiting in a side room until the conference begun, but Tony still felt bolstered. He felt like he could walk into that room of hundreds of flashes and questions right now without missing a beat.

Loki's fingers were curled around his own, the warmth of his palm pressed against Tony's and the memory of Loki's kiss tingling his skin. He was ready, *they* were ready and there wasn't any urge inside him to turn back.

## Chapter End Notes

Press conference next chapter! I almost 100% promise, since I don't think these boys could find a way to derail me *again*. But hey, we'll see :/

# Chapter 23

## Chapter Notes

What? You're getting this earlier than two weeks?? Consider it my further apology for the previously late update. -\_-

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

They reached the room where Pepper was waiting for them without encountering anyone other than a few security guards. Tony had expected as much, but he was still grateful for it. The next few hours were going to be trying enough without any initial surprises. Pepper had repurposed a room for them to wait in, while the conference was being held in the foyer of the building.

Tony found himself squeezing Loki's hand unconsciously at the thought of what was to come. He only stilled when he felt Loki's thumb soothingly brushing the back of his palm. Tony glanced down at the touch before up at the other's face. He had an eyebrow raised and a smirk curling his mouth.

Tony sighed, forcibly letting his tension slip from his shoulders with the exhale. Pulling on his best camera smile, he opened the door and stepped inside with Loki and Rhodey following. Pepper glanced up from where she'd been speaking to her assistant to eye them warily.

It was the perfect control of his features that kept Tony's cheek from twitching and his smile from fraying. "Well, we're here."

Pepper turned back to her assistant and said a few more things before dismissing her. She looked wide-eyed and terrified as she came towards them. Tony pressed against Loki to leave her a path, and she darted past them before shutting the door firmly.

Tony raised his eyebrows and turned back to Pepper. "You might want to get them made out of stronger stuff."

"I didn't think I'd need 'being comfortable with war criminals' on my hiring criteria."

"Good thing he's not one of those then," Tony fired back.

"His reputation won't just disappear because you want it to," she argued.

"Well, that's why we're here, isn't it?" Tony insisted, his irritation increasing. "We're letting the world know the truth about him and why I've chosen him both as my ally *and* as my partner."

Pepper's lips were a thin line. "And what happens if you can't change their minds?"

"You read the dossier I sent." Tony's flat remark finally made something shift across Pepper's face and she dropped her eyes to the tablet in her hands. It was all he needed to see. "You *know* what he's been through now."

She sighed and when she looked up again, her expression was a little softer. "That doesn't bring back the people he killed."

"I'm not attempting to erase the actions I performed against your world," Loki spoke for the first time. "It's true that I was attempting to undermine a greater evil, but you're right, Miss Potts, it does not take back the deaths that I caused."

"So what *do* you want?" She asked Loki.

"You read our contract," he answered. "You know why we began what we did. Defeating the Mad Titan is in the interest of everyone on this planet."

"Your association with Tony has dropped SI stocks overnight, and the outcome of this conference is going to show the full impact of how detrimental your presence will be. You might not have a vested interest in this planet outside of Tony, but what you do here will affect his future and that of the company."

"I have an interest in *Anthony*, Miss Potts," Loki answered, his voice clipped. "Stark Industries is important to him and therefore important to *me*. I have no intention of hurting anything that Anthony holds dear. I am here to support him in *all* his decisions."

Pepper's ever so slight recoil said that she'd felt that for the very pointed dig it was.

"Right now we need some *group* support," Rhodey interjected, wanting to dispel the tension that was forming. "We all know there's some unresolved issues here." He caught and held everyone's eyes as he spoke, but he lingered more on Tony and Pepper. "Issues, that really need to be clarified and dealt with, but now is not the time, not when we have to go out and show the public a *united* front."

Pepper didn't look happy, but she still nodded and recited a line she'd likely devised and memorised after gaining the dossier of information from FRIDAY. "Stark Industries will support Mr Stark and Mr Laufeyson in the same capacity that it does Iron Man."

Tony could hear more coming, the complete company statement, but he interrupted, "What? We love them when they're good and we duck for cover when they're bad?"

Pepper glared at him, quickly thrown out of her speech. "It is my job to do the best for this company, Mr Stark. Your partnership with Mr Laufeyson *might* save the world, this conference *might* turn out the way that you want, but if it *doesn't*, it is my job to keep SI from suffering."

"You've read everything we're going to tell the world about his past," Tony said, staring at her incredulously. "Are you standing here and telling me it doesn't make any difference to

you?”

She pinched the bridge of her nose, taking a breath and releasing it before she admitted, dropping her hand, “I don’t know what I think at the moment.”

*And how much of that is SHIELD hissing in your fucking ear?* Tony thought viciously, fury rushing through him. He barely kept the words behind his gritted teeth.

How could she stand there and still side against him? She *had* the information on Loki's past, was she really just taking SHIELD’s side out of some misguided spite? Could everything between them really be traced back to bitterness over their break up and the ensuing arguments?

*This is why you don’t fuck up a friendship with romance,* he thought bitterly, *apparently it ruins everything else too.*

“May I suggest then, Miss Potts,” Loki said, responding to her indecision, “that you review *all* the facts before drawing your conclusions.” He was holding her eyes intensely. “Anthony has made his decision to pursue an alliance with me; further isolation from his good graces will hardly assist you.”

Tony was a little stunned at that piece of advice, and he wasn’t the only one. Pepper looked completely thrown. Rhodey seemed to be the only one who wasn’t surprised; he looked like Loki had just impressed him.

Was Loki just trying to win over the next in a long line of suspicious earthlings? Trying to appeal to her by showing his helpful side? Tony couldn’t imagine he *wanted* Pepper to start showing up, likely passing on anything she learned to SHIELD. Was Loki just trying to keep his enemies close? To spy on the spies?

*Or is he trying to help you mend one more friendship?*

Tony shied away from that thought, unwilling to touch it when he didn’t know how to feel about it or about working through his issues with Pepper. There was too much pain and anger in those waters. He’d need to ask Loki what he thought he was doing and whether it was practicality or unwanted meddling.

Regardless of the motive - and Tony could admit, with Loki, there was probably more than one - Pepper seemed to have accepted the advice.

“I’ll see what else you have to say at the conference.” She gave a fleeting, almost *honest* smile. “Maybe you’ll surprise someone.” She shifted her attention to Rhodey and stepped towards him. “But first I have some questions about the military’s response to this.”

Rhodey nodded and allowed her to draw him off to the side while Tony took the chance to get Loki as far away from the others as possible.

“Make this private?” he asked. Loki raised his eyebrows but complied, waving his fingers in the same way he had the last time they spoke to Pepper; blocking them from hearing but not

from sight. When Tony had received Loki's nod, he continued, "Okay. Spill the beans. You're being nice to her; why?"

"And fostering her dislike of me will assist us in what way?"

"Beside the point. There's more going on in that head of yours and I want to know what it is."

Chuckling softly, Loki admitted with a smirk tugging at his lips, "Only a wish to help ease your tension wherever possible, Anthony."

Tony narrowed his eyes, ignoring the blatant innuendo to focus on the more important issue, his voice coming out wearier than he'd intended, "I can't trust her, Loki."

The tease slipped from Loki's expression to be replaced with a pensive frown. "I know, Anthony, but she still retains a position of power and that should be brought more fully back to your side."

"You mean Stark Industries."

"Mm," Loki hummed, "that as well." Tony narrowed his eyes, but before he could examine that particular evasive remark, Loki changed the topic. "I had actually wished to speak to you privately."

Tony could see it for the deflection it was, but he also wasn't able to ignore it. "About what?"

"This deception of ours." Loki was looking down at their hands, but he slowly brought them up. It ended with their palms being held in the air between their chests. "You've given no indication that this bothers you--"

"Because it *doesn't*," Tony assured him firmly even as he geared up to allay any worries about homophobia or the besmirching of his reputation.

Loki however, took them down a different path. "Your remarks in the past have led me to believe you were very... fond of your nocturnal activities."

Tony blinked. "If that's a very polite way of saying I slept with a lot of people, then yeah."

"And then you began a romantic relationship."

Tony smiled tightly but nodded. "Yeah, what's the point? That they won't buy we're in a relationship because my track record speaks better for the sex without strings category?"

"No," Loki disagreed. "I wanted to be certain that you will not feel unhappy about our relationship making any dalliances or relationships on your world... difficult."

Tony laughed. "Well, it's a little late for that now."

"No," Loki assured him, his tone firm, "it isn't."

Tony could see that he meant it. Loki would abandon their deception despite what it would make Thor and SHIELD think, despite it exposing Loki's lie and destroying his chance to be open about the kind of relationship he'd always had to hide in the past.

Loki knew he had no problem with being seen with a boyfriend; that wasn't the issue. Loki was worried Tony would lose the chance to sleep with someone or find a romance because of their relationship. He was worried about Tony's happiness.

And yeah, he wasn't wrong, but Tony had already thought about that before agreeing to go public.

"Thanks, Loki," he told him, softly and genuinely, "but you don't need to worry."

"We will not be able to change it for some while, if you agree," Loki warned him. "Your world will perceive you as unavailable. Thor is often wrong, but he does know me to some degree and he will be aware that I am possessive of my lovers. I would not accept your finding pleasure with another while you were committed to me."

"Loki, really, don't worry about it." Tony sighed before he admitted, "I'm really not looking for a relationship. I tried that and it blew up spectacularly. And casual sex with someone I find attractive but don't plan to see again hasn't appealed to me for a long time." He shrugged. "I've thought about this already and our relationship isn't going to bother me."

He paused and then he grinned. "If anything, it's going to minimise people trying to throw themselves at me. It's hard to win me over with a glaring and *possessive* space mage hovering over my shoulder."

Loki had looked torn between amusement and exasperation during his response, but at the end he just shook his head "You are a strange creature, Anthony Stark."

"Why? Because I'm dating you? I will get offended on your behalf if we go down this path again."

This time Loki let his amusement win out as he chuckled. He still sobered too fast for Tony's liking and questioned once more, "But you still wish to be perceived as courting me, despite all it's constraints?"

"Loki," Tony stepped closer and held the other's eyes. "There are a hell of a lot of positives in doing it too."

"So you say."

"So I *know*," he corrected.

Loki smiled faintly and said softly, "I feel for any man who attempts to court you once our ruse is through. The hearts I will break by making you seem attainable."

"I'll just blame you for ruining my desire for a relationship," Tony quipped even while enjoying the compliment.

It was nice to know that even when faked, Loki thought he was good boyfriend material.

“All others would pale beside me,” Loki agreed, his chin tilting arrogantly.

Tony snorted.

He would have loved to contradict and tease Loki more, but Rhodey interrupted.

“Hey guys.” They glanced over at him and Tony knew exactly what he was going to say before Rhodey spoke; the line of his shoulders and the expression on his face said it all.

“Time to do this.”

Tony grimaced but gave a brief nod. He turned back to Loki who was already watching him.

“We good?”

“Yes,” Loki agreed without hesitation. “We are.”

“Then let’s go.”

---

They all stepped into the room together, cameras flashing and a cacophony of murmurs beginning as the reporters caught sight of them. Pepper took the lead, moving to the podium while Tony and Loki came next. Their hands were still clasped together and their shoulders brushed. Tony was on the side of the crowd, a barrier between Loki and the media. Rhodey came last, a protective presence watching over their backs.

“Good morning,” Pepper addressed when they were all standing and facing them. “Thank you all for attending.”

The three of them all sat down on the chairs provided as she continued from there, giving a perfectly thought out and expected speech, littering it with the information Tony had provided her about Loki’s status as a war criminal, or lack thereof. The media listened, frowned and took notes, but they were all still waiting with barely contained impatience for the interrogation to start.

Pepper finished her part of the speech before passing it over to Tony. He didn’t want to let go of Loki’s hand, but he’d had little choice. Taking his place at the podium, he took a breath, staring out at a sea of familiar and unfamiliar faces before he began, “I have a good idea of what you’ve all been expecting since you found out about Loki and I, but we’re here to disprove a lot of them. The world needs to know a few things about Loki that’s been kept from it - a few things that *I* didn’t know until we became friends.” Tony smiled tightly. “But, I suppose that starts, first and foremost, with New York.”

He also hoped that with this updated addition, it was where things started to change.

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“And Thanos is still out there?” A reporter asked into the silence that followed, his eyes almost bug-eyed.

“Yes,” Loki answered. He’d joined Tony midway through his speech, standing up beside him at the podium, their fingers linking once again. They were sitting back down now that the initial statements were over, but it was still only the beginning of the questions. “He was the initial reason for our alliance and we still intend to stop him.”

The reporter nodded slowly and fell quiet, a sudden lull in questions as everyone absorbed the information they’d just been given.

Eventually, someone cleared their throat and asked, “Colonel Rhodes, does the military intend to help with this threat?”

Rhodey nodded. “The military will lend their support to The Avengers, SHIELD and their allies. Tony and Loki have already discussed an alliance against Thanos with both parties and the military will honour that agreement.”

That snapped everyone out of their shock and all their attention back to Loki and Tony. It also brought more questions with it.

“Does this mean Iron Man will be considered an Avenger again?”

“Will Loki be joining the Avengers?”

“Does this mean you’re both contracted to SHIELD?”

Tony felt Loki’s thumb start up its soft stroking before the questions had even finished. A gentle reminder to keep calm and not shout, *no it fucking doesn’t*.

He was still tempted, but he settled with firmly telling them, “Neither Loki nor I are part of The Avengers or SHIELD and we don’t ever intend to be. We are happy to work with those who will aid us in protecting the universe, but we work for ourselves.”

It started a whole new volley of questions and Tony could already feel himself getting a headache and it hadn’t even been fifteen minutes.

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There had been a series of questions Tony was sure they both could have lived without that had dealt specifically around Loki’s romantic past (“What happened to your partners on Asgard? Were you ever discovered?”) as well as his thoughts on Earth’s tolerance and acceptance of homosexuals (“What do you think of the homophobia still present in Earth society and those suffering from it?”).

They’d both known they were coming, but Loki handled them masterfully. He let emotions crack through his mask just enough that people saw them and could feel empathy for him, but without giving the appearance that his feelings were scripted.

Tony knew that the only intentional part of the whole thing was when Loki let anything show at all. His emotions and his answers were normally guarded, but for this, he was letting honesty and hurt slip into his words. Tony ended up grinding his teeth so much he would



probably have an ache in his jaw for days. He was going to blame that on Loki, with innuendo, *to Thor's face* at the first chance that he got.

It was actually Thor that prompted the only question he'd liked during that long skip into Loki's painful past. A young woman asked them with narrowed eyes and suspicion in her voice, "Does Thor still hold the same opinion that the Asgardians do regarding homosexuality?"

"Well, he certainly wasn't happy about the fact *we* were dating," Tony answered promptly. "I ended up with a broken window after that revelation."

Loki just smiled thinly. "Thor is rather... physical when he is displeased," Loki explained, saying nothing, but implying *everything*. "He might change in time and with the influence of your world to assist him, but I find he has yet to react positively to my choice in lovers."

And there it was, the moment Tony had been waiting for, when Earth suddenly realised that Thor was an *utter asshole*. He felt a spike of pure vindictive pleasure at seeing opinions change right in front of his eyes. He hoped FRIDAY was monitoring the internet to see how fast *that* was trending.

There was another brief silence before a new hand was raised and they were asked, "What made your decision to 'come out' and reveal your romantic relationship?"

Thankfully, that allowed Tony to take over and steer the topic far away from Loki's oppression and discrimination by Asgard. He knew it wouldn't remove all of the tension from Loki's posture, but it was still a start.

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There were a few other questions that dealt with Animal Whisper and what they knew about her powers ("our investigation into the captured animals is still ongoing, but we will make every effort to revert them back to their original state without harming them") and if she'd be back ("if she is, we'll be ready for her.").

A few of the more gossip rag reporters pried into their romantic relationship, either looking for sexual deviancy or romantic bliss and Tony could probably say they gave them a good dose of both.

They circled back to Thanos a couple of times and did a bit more prying into Loki's past and what had led him to crash-land on Earth so dramatically, but all and all, Tony was fairly happy with how everything had turned out.

He was exhausted, but at least when the reporters had filed out the general consensus seemed to be more luke-warm to positive of Loki rather than abject hate. They might just be happy for the amount of juice they were going to get from the story, but Tony could hope, at least, that the acceptance was genuine. He knew they'd probably have to do a few more interviews, but it was a start.

Tony still wanted to go back home with a vengeance. Loki seemed more than a little frayed around the edges too. It was hard to see, but there was a tightness to his eyes and an added

stiffness to his walk. Tony had taken to stroking Loki's hand at times, especially when some of the more... personal aspects had come into play. He'd even swapped hands so he could place one on Loki's knee, squeezing gently.

When they reached the relative peace of the hallway Tony had planned to keep right on walking but Pepper quietly spoke, "You were very diplomatic about SHIELD, about the Avengers."

Tony scoffed and looked over his shoulder; it was the confusion on her face that made him swallow down the sharper response that had been on his tongue. "They're needed Pepper. I might hate them, but I'm not about to destroy one of the best lines of defence that Earth has just because of what they did to me."

She didn't say anything more, and Tony was happy to leave the whole conversation for the sanctity of the tower.

He must have looked more than a little drawn because he felt Rhodey clap his shoulder and smile softly after they began walking again. "How about you have Loki take you back? I'll meet you guys at the penthouse. Take a few minutes to unwind."

Tony felt his shoulders fall with relief, but still offered, "Are you sure? We can still-"

Rhodey was already shaking his head and turning to Loki. "Get your asses out of here."

"Thank you, Rhodes," Loki told him, and Tony barely got a chance to see Rhodey's grin before Stark Industries was fading from his sight and being replaced with Loki's quarters.

"Welcome back, Boss," FRIDAY greeted him.

"Hey," he murmured before turning to Loki. "Does Bruce know we're here?"

Loki shook his head and guided him to the settee. "I think he may remain unaware for now. A period of silence would be beneficial for us both." Tony nodded tiredly and the moment Loki sat down Tony leant against him like he had in the car and closed his eyes. Loki just chuckled at him. "Do you intend to use me as a pillow now?"

Yes, Tony thought, because he was already trying to push the conference and all his responsibilities from his mind. Normally, he'd lose himself in the workshop but he couldn't afford that at the moment. There were too many things to focus on; how the world was reacting, Bruce's thoughts, if the tests had come back yet, *how Loki was handling it* - but all of that would come later.

Rhodey knew they needed a bit of peace, and Loki himself had asked for quiet, so why couldn't they share that silence together?

Opening his eyes, Tony was struck with an idea and he put his hand on Loki's shoulder, urging him gently backwards against the couch. Loki's eyebrows rose but he obligingly let himself be rearranged to lie on the furniture. Tony very happily laid down on top of him and used his chest as the very pillow he'd suggested.

“Truly, Anthony?”

“Mm,” he murmured, relaxing into the comfort of home, the protection given by FRIDAY and Loki, and the feel of someone he cared about close and safe. “I’m tired. Wake me if I fall asleep.”

He could feel the rumble of a laugh in Loki’s chest. “And you need to use me as a place to rest?”

Shifting slightly, Tony let one eye open so he could look at Loki and tell him softly, “I don’t want to talk right now and neither do you.” He smiled a little. “But we could both use the company, and this too.”

The good humour slid off Loki’s face, presenting the slightly raw man underneath. It was the expression that had caught at the edges of his mask throughout the conference and Tony did as he had then; he found Loki’s hand and he clutched it. He also pulled it close to rest by his chin on Loki’s chest.

“FRIDAY,” he requested, when Loki gave no further protests, “can you play us some Mozart?”

It took only a moment before the soothing melody trickled through the room, soft and lilting and just enough of a distraction when combined with the rising chest underneath his ear. When he felt fingers very gently and hesitantly touch his hair, Tony allowed himself to sigh and close his eyes again.

He always had liked hugging and being able to touch the people he was close to and cared about. After a conference like that, he just needed a way to unwind, and this just seemed like the perfect way to do it.

## Chapter End Notes

The conference! It happened! Who'd have thought, huh? And it got to end on cuddles, awwh, isn't that sweet? I love me some FI cuddles, and I hope you did too :D

# Chapter 24

## Chapter Notes

I have edited this chapter so many times, *holycrap*. I want to thank and praise and give so many hugs to the *beautiful* HalcyonFrost who helped me on the latest and last edit of this thing despite being busy and trying to work on her own stuff in the minimal free time she has. She is PRECIOUS and I am so lucky to have her willing to help me. You are wonderful, darlin' ♥

But, ahem. This chapter is well... it's not *filler*, more like a bridge (as my friend tells me XD) as it brings up a lot of things that needed covering. And honestly, I'm hoping you like it. I've been over it so much that idek anymore. But, here's hoping, hey? Sorry it's a bit later than I intended! It's longer than usual at least, heh.

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

They didn't fall asleep, but they did stay together, breathing gently and lying quietly as the music played softly overhead. It wasn't until FRIDAY informed them of Rhodey approaching the tower that Loki even stopped stroking Tony's hair.

Tony had pressed his face fully against Loki's chest and let out a muffled, unhappy groan. Loki had just chuckled before encouraging him to rise. He hadn't wanted to, but Tony had eventually forced himself to climb off his comfortable Loki pillow.

They made their way directly to the lab after that with Rhodey being asked to join them. Bruce was already there and working; he had his back to them when they first stepped inside, but he turned upon hearing the doors open. "Hey," he greeted, before smiling somewhat wanly, "I watched the conference."

"Oh?" Tony wondered, feeling his hand itch to take Loki's again, just like he had when they were being battered by the media. "Thoughts? Comments? Criticisms?"

"More like concerns," Bruce answered. "How are you both?"

Tony couldn't stop the way his gaze automatically moved to Loki, and he found the mage was already watching him. Loki's expression was almost flawless, but for his eyes, they were full of weariness - yet, he still seemed better than he had before. The closeness on the couch had just helped make them feel... better. And that was something that Tony would happily see them both doing again if it got the same result.

"We're well enough, Dr Banner." Loki answered for them, turning back to Bruce. "What are your findings?"

Bruce eyed them for a moment, likely doubting Loki's assessment, but he still allowed the subject change. "The animals are being genetically altered. The alterations existed when I started testing them, so I couldn't identify the exact process, but this kind of extensive manipulation still left marks."

"What kind of marks?" Tony questioned.

"I performed a DNA test on each animal," he answered, pulling up a different screen which showed a holographic display, "and there is an additional strand of DNA which exists identically in each of them, but seems to create different effects." He took off his glasses and rubbed his forehead. "We have no record of anything like this existing and while we can assume it comes from the woman and whatever she did to them, I can't tell you what it was or how she did it. It also isn't reversible," and he paused to chuckle a little humourlessly, "but the animals seem healthy enough. In fact, if it wasn't for this extra DNA strand and the abilities it creates in them, I'd say they were completely normal."

*Shit.* Tony thought. *That is not a power I want running around out there.*

"Do you have any suggestions as to how she gained these abilities?" Loki questioned.

Bruce hesitated for a moment before he brought up a new screen, one that drew them both over to stand behind his shoulder. "It doesn't have the hallmarks of magic," Bruce told them, comparing the Animal Whisper's results against Loki's as well as recordings from Extremis and Wanda Maximoff. "But it also doesn't seem to be similar to *anything* we've seen before."

"Well," Tony remarked, his stomach sinking slightly, "that's nice and concerning."

"I watched the recordings taken of her attack," Bruce continued, seeming to ignore his comment, apart from the tightening of his jaw. "She seemed to have some control over them, even if just a means of persuading them to act."

"Much like Miss Maximoff," Loki commented, "or, to a lesser extent, the mind gem."

"But doing it seemed to be detrimental to her," Bruce added, taping the screen and pulling up a lovely recording of Tony getting pummelled by the birds that she'd sent towards him. The rhino was coming up soon and Tony wanted to touch his ribs in sympathy with his recorded self. "Look at her," Bruce told them, zooming in. "I wouldn't be surprised if using her powers are causing internal injuries. The blood in her mouth, the bleeding from her nose, it all started after she made the birds attack you. She keeps shuddering and looking ready to collapse until she disappears with the final bull."

"Her body was never designed to sustain such a thing," Loki murmured thoughtfully. "It's is often seen in magic-users who channel power far greater than they are trained to use. Something similar happened to Jane Foster when she was possessed by the Aether."

"So what are we saying?" Tony asked. "Experiment gone wrong?"

Bruce smiled thinly. "That would do it." Tony winced at the poor choice of words, but Bruce just waved his apologetic look off. "But she doesn't look familiar, and we know the top

minds in most fields.”

“*Legal* fields,” Tony corrected, holding Bruce’s eyes, and knowing exactly where they would need to start their search. “But SHIELD has its secrets, and they’re not the only ones.”

“You mean something like HYDRA.”

Tony nodded grimly before he called, “FRIDAY, see what you can find on recent lab explosions, or anything else that might scream ‘*mad scientist did a stupid thing*’, and while you’re there, search for anything that even remotely looks like Animal Whisperer in the last six months. I’m saying an animal does something odd, you flag it.”

“Yes, Boss.”

“Tony,” Bruce was already shaking his head. “I don’t know if we have enough data to be able to find her. She doesn’t seem to leave behind anything we can trace.”

Tony shrugged jerkily and had to quell the urge to pace. “We can give it a shot. Maybe we’ll find a squirrel with a flamethrower, that’s traceable. Either way, it’s better than nothing.”

“Anthony is correct,” Loki agreed, moving closer and placing a calming hand on his shoulder, making Tony realise just how much he’d tensed them. “We must do what we can, and I’ll need to examine the creatures myself and see if there is anything I can find that your instruments cannot.”

“And we need to decide on a long-term solution for them,” Bruce added. “We can’t just leave them sleeping here.”

“I don’t want to kill them,” Tony said firmly before turning to Loki. “You mentioned something about some friends off-world?”

“Yes,” Loki replied, “There are a few mages I am familiar with who may take them, or be aware of others who will. I’m certain we will be able to find homes for them in due course.”

“And what did you do with the worm?” Tony wondered. “Shit. I forgot all about that.” He winced. “Please tell me it’s not stinking up one of the floors of my tower?”

Loki chuckled slightly. “No, I have sent most of it to be stored in one of my unused dwellings until it can be destroyed. A small sample was placed in a jar for Dr Banner when I became aware he would be testing the creatures.”

Tony frowned. “When the hell did you do that?”

“Yesterday evening,” Loki answered with a shrug. “I saw no reason to wake you when it was a simple enough spell to perform.” Loki’s thumb began to stroke Tony through his suit in a soothing manner. “There was already enough on your mind.”

Tony didn’t like that. “We’re a team, Loki. It doesn’t matter what’s going on, you can always talk to me about it.”

Loki blinked, the only indication of his surprise before he smiled. It was only a small upturn of his mouth, but it displayed all of his gratitude. “On the important matters, Anthony, I promise I will speak with you.”

“Good,” Tony answered, intending to very firmly put his foot down on that demand. He wasn’t going to leave Loki hanging out to dry, no matter what bullshit was happening in his life; Loki could always come to him.

Loki had been left alone to deal with his problems for far too fucking long. He’d had people dismiss him and flat out not care and Tony wasn’t about to become one more person on that list. He refused. The world could be ending and he’d always have time for Loki, not only because Loki deserved to have someone listen to him, but because if Loki trusted him enough to ask for something, then Tony was damn sure not going to take that for granted and ignore him.

Loki was important to him, and Tony always looked after the people that mattered.

“I hope you will come to me too,” Loki murmured quietly as his hand moved until Tony could feel the tips of Loki’s fingers curving just over the collar of his shirt and brushing his neck. “I would like to hear of it, to be able to aid you.” His smile stretched a little wider. “As your partner.”

*Partner.*

The word echoed in Tony’s mind, unconnected for a long moment as he held Loki’s gaze and forgot that they weren’t alone, that Bruce was watching them and *believing* their ruse. Tony could only feel the teasing touch of Loki’s hand and the way the world had narrowed down to the man in front of him and the weight of the air between them.

He was only broken from it by the sound of shuffling feet. He glanced over at Bruce who was very pointedly looking away from them and focusing on the screen. Loki’s hand slid off his shoulder quickly, and before Tony could say something - *ask for it back* - the door to the lab was sliding open and Rhodey was stepping inside.

His steps faltered for a moment as he became aware of *something* having happened as he eyed everyone in the room. Casually, he questioned, “What did I miss?”

Tony cleared his throat, feeling uncomfortable and not sure why. “Animal Whisperer plays with DNA,” he answered while taking a slight step towards Bruce, putting further space between him and Loki. “We’re going to see if Loki’s magic can figure out more than that.”

“I doubt I’ll find alternate results to Dr Banner,” Loki answered simply, also moving to place them further apart. “But I may be able to find a means of linking the woman and her creatures to discover her location.”

Neither Rhodey nor Bruce were oblivious to their sudden separation and faint discomfort, but Bruce, bless him, was too fascinated by Loki’s magic to focus on it. He actually stepped closer to the mage and asked, “How exactly does that work?”

Loki was silent for a long moment and Tony was sure he was going to avoid the question, but Loki surprised Tony by doing more than just answering him. “You may join me if you like, Dr Banner. Anthony often watches my casting while FRIDAY scans my seidr.”

Bruce’s eyes flew wide and he wasn’t the only one. “You would let me observe you?”

“Yes,” Loki answered Bruce simply and Tony was shocked.

*Why the hell would he be willing to do that?* But Tony had barely finished the question before he was realising the answer. Loki trusted Tony and because Tony trusted Bruce, Loki was giving Bruce a chance - the same way he had with Rhodey. It was just like when he’d offered to minimise the overt displays of their relationship in front of Bruce. He did it, because he knew Tony would like him to.

Bruce was quick to make the same connection Tony had. “You’ll do it because I’m a friend of Tony’s.”

Bruce still looked a little incredulous as he glanced between them.

“Well,” Bruce murmured, “I suppose it’s only fair that I do the same.” He paused, a pensive frown furrowing his brow, before he turned to Loki, his voice coming out firm as he decided, “The Other Guy might not accept you yet, but for now, I’m willing to offer the same thing that you are; a chance.”

Tony felt pure relief rush through him and he couldn’t resist clapping and squeezing Bruce’s arm in thanks. “You won’t regret it, Bruce.”

“Don’t assume that yet, Tony,” Bruce told him ruefully. “I know that you’ll need to bind me, so let’s wait and see how the Other Guy takes to magic first.” Tony winced pre-emptively at the visuals *that* depicted as Bruce asked Loki, “How simple is it?”

“Quite,” Loki answered, a layer of tension having seemed to melt away at hearing that Bruce would be bound to the same silence as Rhodey and Pepper. He even moved closer to Bruce and began to explain.

Rhodey took the other’s distraction to join Tony, saying quietly, “I’d like to talk to you, Tony.”

Turning his head slightly to eye Rhodey warily, he remarked, “I thought you already were.”

Rhodey took Tony firmly by the arm and led him to a more secluded part of the lab. When they stopped, Rhodey let him go and turned to face him directly. His eyes were narrowed and worried as he asked, “Are you and Loki okay?”

“What? Yeah, of course we are,” Tony dismissed quickly.

Rhodey wasn’t fooled. “You didn’t look it when I came in.”

Tony winced a little, but was forced to admit, “Momentary weird. All gone now. Please continue with your next question.”



“*Tony.*”

He let out a rough breath and ran a hand through his hair. “It’s *fine*. I don’t know what it was, but it’s gone. Forget about it.”

“Are you sure that’s what you want to do?” Rhodey questioned him, oddly gentle and making Tony frown. “Forget about it?”

“What? Why wouldn’t I?”

The way Rhodey was watching him was deeply uncomfortable and full of assessment. He felt like Rhodey was sizing him up or trying to understand his brain through narrowed eyes alone. Tony had experienced that look a lot in his life; it usually followed a rather unwelcome realisation where Rhodey pointed out how, why, and where he was being either an idiot or an asshole.

He really didn’t feel like hearing that today, or even tomorrow. It had been a *long* couple of days. Surely he deserved a break?

“Can we not?” He requested, and it didn’t surprise him that Rhodey knew exactly what he was asking for. It also didn’t surprise him that Rhodey looked far from willing to let it go. His friend held his gaze for the longest time until Tony was almost squirming with it.

“You better get a handle on it before you’re back in public again,” Rhodey eventually told him. “You both looked ready to run away from each other. You can’t just opt out of this relationship after a couple of hours.”

“Did I say I was about to do that?” Tony snapped, feeling defensive, feeling *protective* and not a hundred percent sure why. He’d even clenched his fist and had to let out a rough breath as he released it. “Look, it’s just been a shit couple of hours, Rhodey. We’re tense, we’re stressed; give us a break.”

“And that right there is why I’m worried about you.” Rhodey placed a hand on his shoulder and squeezed. “This can’t be rolling off either yours or Loki’s shoulders that easily. SHIELD, the media, your relationship; I want to know you’re okay, before you both start cracking under the pressure. ”

Tony sighed before he gave Rhodey a terse nod. “We’ll be careful.”

“And don’t bottle it up,” Rhodey warned. “You need to talk about things; with me, with Loki, hell, with FRIDAY. But promise me you’ll *talk*.”

Tony barked out a laugh. “You’re the second one to ask me to do that. I wonder if Bruce will join in too, give me a three of a kind.”

“Tony,” Rhodey softly entreated, a world of concern in his voice and it made Tony crumble.

“I’m not going to avoid it forever,” he admitted. “I’ll go through everything tonight; the reaction to the conference, the footage I took of SHIELD.” He sighed. “Everything.”

“If you want me to be here, I’ll make a way. My superiors can wait.”

Tony flashed him a smile. “Thanks, Rhodey.”

Rhodey just nodded before flicking his attention back to the others. Tony looked over his shoulder and found Loki with his back to them. Tony could still see the faint glow of magic as Bruce watched him avidly while the binding spell was performed.

“How do you think he’s handling things?” Rhodey asked and Tony turned back, finding Rhodey still staring at Loki with a troubled gaze.

“Drained, but who the hell wouldn’t be?”

“Just keep an eye on him,” Rhodey ordered. “He might say that he’s alright, but I want to make sure.”

“Already planned to,” Tony promised.

He knew that Loki wasn’t a delicate flower that needed protecting; he knew Loki had handled a hell of a lot worse than a press conference, but he also knew how much the little things piled up. How the emotional wounds were so much harder than the physical ones. He knew how much recounting some of the worst things in his past had to have worn Loki down.

It was why Tony wasn’t going to leave Loki alone for the rest of the night.

“Good,” Rhodey told him, “because I’ll have to leave soon.”

“What? Why?” Tony demanded, startling from his thoughts to look at Rhodey with wide, aghast eyes.

Rhodey looked vaguely amused. “You didn’t think my superiors were just going to ignore the press conference, did you?”

Tony scoffed. “I’ve told you, turn off your phone and you won’t have this problem. You’ve already said you’ll ignore them for me.”

Rhodey rolled his eyes, but he didn’t get a chance to reply before Bruce was gently interrupting. “We’re going to head down to the animals now.”

Turning to them, Tony was surprised to find how close they’d become without him noticing. Still, he wasn’t complaining. “The binding worked? No Hulk on a rampage?”

“Evidently not,” Loki answered dryly, standing beside Bruce with his hands clasped behind his back. There was a newfound ease between him and Bruce and Tony could only grin in the face of it. *We’re getting there*, he thought happily. “Now, shall you both join us?”

Obviously, they both said yes.

The animals were on Loki’s magical floor of the tower; most of the space was taken up by Loki’s belongings which meant *lots* of books and strange items were lying around. It was a

paradise of intellectual curiosity, but Loki was fairly reticent about letting Tony get near most of it. He had numerous excuses like, *'if you touch that your hands will fall off'*, or *'be careful, it bites'*. It meant that he usually had to pester Loki with questions until he gave in and explained.

It honestly wasn't a terrible outcome.

The room that Loki had sent them to however was one of the few that he'd left empty of items. The animals were fast asleep on the floor and Tony was fairly sure one of the bulls was snoring.

Loki didn't waste any time and quickly explained the nature of his spell and what they had to do if they wanted to observe. It was pretty simple; don't talk to Loki, don't touch the animals, try not to be too loud. When Loki had received nods all around and knew his instructions would be followed, he went to the centre of the room. He then used a few quick gestures of his wrists to lightly drag the animals across the floor until they were arranged around him in a circle.

When he was finished, Loki sat down crossed legged and closed his eyes. He glowed a little green and so did the animals, but other than that, it was fairly unimpressive. Rhodey was the first to break the silence that had fallen around them.

"If Loki doesn't come up with something, we're going to have to hope that FRIDAY does." His mouth was a thin, unhappy line. "If this woman's able to manipulate an animal's DNA, I don't want to think about what she'll do to a human's."

Tony just smiled tightly. "Which is a very good reason to make sure she doesn't get the chance."

"I doubt she'll stay in the shadows for long," Rhodey replied pensively. "People like her never do."

"So next time she shows up, we just need to capture her. Easy."

The looks they both sent him showed as much confidence as Tony felt at the prospect of restraining her. The animals were also going to be a hell of a problem.

"You're going to need to create a sedative," Bruce told him, taking off his glasses and pinching his nose. "Not just for her but for the animals too. You won't be able to rely on Loki being readily available wherever she happens to be."

"What if we-" Rhodey started, but had to stop halfway through when his phone rang. He hissed something under his breath before pulling it out. Whatever number he saw made him grimace painfully before he moved towards the door. "I need to take this."

Tony opened his mouth, but Rhodey was already out the door, leaving Tony to stare after him and feeling his fingers twitch with the need to move, to act, to *defend*. He knew Rhodey could hold his own, especially with his superiors, but he didn't like seeing the stiffness that had overtaken Rhodey's spine.

He couldn't do anything for his friend though, apart from support him, so he shifted his attention to Bruce. It wasn't the first time they'd been alone together, but it was the first time they'd had more than a few minutes without something pressing down on them, or someone waiting to talk to them. It was Tony's best chance to even begin to *broach* some of the subjects on his mind, and, more importantly, to try to tempt Bruce to stay in the tower a little longer.

Bruce seemed to notice his shift in mood as he held up a warning hand. "Tony, I'm only here for long enough to help you stop her, nothing more."

"What's wrong with staying here with us?"

Bruce shook his head. "You don't want a problem like me on your plate." Tony opened his mouth to protest the hell out of *that*, but Bruce continued before he could, "And I don't need people knowing I'm here." He jerked his chin at Loki. "You're the focus of the world right now, Tony. I can't afford to be the same thing too." Tony physically deflated at that and it caused Bruce to sigh. "I'd like to stay and support you both, but we both know it's a bad idea."

"I don't," Tony answered petulantly. "I don't know it's a bad idea. You can hide a hell of a lot better here than you can in Thailand."

Bruce raised his eyebrows, looking completely unsurprised, if exasperated. "Of course you knew where I was."

Tony instantly assured him though, his voice firm and serious, "I made sure no one else did." The smile Bruce gave him was tight but thankful, and Tony hesitated for only a moment before he cautiously tried to bridge an issue he still couldn't wrap his head around. And it had been months. "She asked me. She wanted to know where you were, even before, when we were talking, but I-

"Don't, Tony," Bruce told him, hard and uncompromising, and with something pained barely hidden under the tension that had flooded through him at the reminder. He knew exactly who Tony meant. *Natasha*.

Tony backed off, but only for now. Rogers had been almost painfully supportive of their... *thing*, but Tony had just felt like a truck had come out of nowhere and hit him in the face. He'd been distracted by Ultron and the whole fucking mess that had come from that, but he'd still wanted to shout, '*how? what? why?*' as well as '*what the fuck?*' but he hadn't had the opportunity.

He was still determined to uncover the particulars of that, but not when Bruce looked ready to either clam up or Hulk-out over the subject, so Tony tried something else. "Is there anything else worth mentioning about the animals?"

Bruce gripped the offer with both hands. He was still a little twitchy, but his voice was almost dry as he recounted, "Well, I learnt that plucking a hair from a bull's tail will make it teleport in its sleep."

It was so unexpected that it made Tony laugh. He also double-checked, only to prove he'd counted them right. "Where the hell did it end up?"

Bruce sighed painfully. "A floor away."

"Oh, this I'm hearing the story behind," Tony announced gleefully. "How did you get it back here?"

Bruce was grinning as he began to explain, and Tony was completely enraptured. It was also hilarious to discover just how inventive Bruce could become when he needed to be.

Unsurprising, but still hilarious.

It didn't mean he'd dropped the Natasha issue though, not by a long shot, and while Bruce was happy to talk about more light-hearted things, the resigned look in his eyes told Tony that he knew it too.

Tony was just willing to refrain from certain battles, when it was necessary.

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They ended up discussing some of their more ridiculous experiments as they stood beside one another, but Tony couldn't shake his worry when Rhodey hadn't come back after ten minutes. He also couldn't stop checking to make sure Loki was still okay; he hadn't seemed to have twitched for the duration of the spell.

He hadn't known Bruce had been watching him do it until he remarked, "I wouldn't have expected him to be as considerate of me as he is." Tony turned back to him with a frown, but Bruce's eyes were still on Loki. "And he's attuned to you in a way I've only ever seen Rhodey manage. Pepper worked around you, but he works *with* you, and you work with him." He finally turned to look at Tony thoughtfully. "I never thought I'd see you find someone so matching."

Tony blinked, feeling startled and off-kilter at the other's words. He also felt slightly uncomfortable as he tried to think of a way to reply.

Bruce wasn't... wrong, after all. Not about Pepper, not about anyone in his life ever coming close to how well Loki fit with him, but Bruce thought they were a couple. He was judging their interactions through a different light and it left Tony... at odds with what to do about it.

He couldn't deny Bruce's statement, not without making Bruce confused and concerned. He also couldn't shrug it off without looking inconsiderate of everything Loki was to him, both imagined and real. He knew he could tell Bruce the truth now that he was under the binding, but Tony still hesitated over it.

*I don't want to do that without confirming it with Loki.*

It meant he had to be careful.

"Yeah," he told Bruce, using the excuse of looking at Loki so he wouldn't have to say it to Bruce's face. "There's more to him than people think." He swallowed. "And I've never met

anyone like him. He's kind of..."

"Perfect?" Bruce finished for him and it made Tony snap his head around to look at the other. Bruce was smiling with such open amusement. "He's allowed to be perfect for you, Tony, you are dating him."

Tony opened his mouth, not sure if more than an 'er' would even come out. He was also fervently hoping that Bruce would think he feared the depth and commitment of it, rather than have him work out Tony was lying.

*But he is perfect*, his mind whispered, and he stalled on that a little. Feeling the same discomfort he'd felt in the lab, because while Loki *was* perfect it was just as a person and as a friend. He wasn't... because they *weren't* and it wasn't... it wasn't *like that*. It was fake. *They* were fake, and it was just his brain messing with him after a long couple of days. That was all, nothing more.

Tony still felt vaguely unsettled though, and he was grateful when Rhodey came back into the room and could distract him. He was scowling angrily though, and that didn't bode well in the slightest. "I have to leave. I've been ordered to return back to base, I'm sorry, Tony."

Tony felt disappointment crash over him. "How long for?"

"I don't have a clue," he admitted, frustration rife in his tone.

"Why don't you come back tonight?" Tony quickly suggested. "Dinner and a few drinks. We'll all escape." Tony flashed a grin. "Pina coladas, what do you say?"

"I say I fucking hate pina coladas. Give me a real drink."

Tony let out a sharp laugh. "Scotch on the rocks. Done." He turned to Bruce. "Tell me I can put you down for more than tea."

Bruce looked like he was trying to fight a smile, but the sound of a ragged gasp made them all jerk their attention to Loki. The air around him and the animals seemed to shiver slightly like they were all looking at a mirage before Loki eyes snapped open. He looked a little foggy at first and had to blink a few times before his eyes cleared and finally focused on them.

A grimace caught at Loki's mouth and it made Tony instantly aware of the result before he'd even spoken, "I'm afraid I cannot trace her." He stood slowly, checking the animals with a glance before coming over to them. "She has left no echoes for me to follow, and I have learnt nothing that Dr Banner has not already discovered."

Tony hadn't exactly been holding out hope, but *damn it*, couldn't they get an easy solution, oh say, *once*? Tony gritted his teeth and breathed deeply through his nose, feeling frustration and disappointment filling him. "Fuck."

He didn't realise he'd said it out loud until Bruce was telling him gently, "We'll keep trying, Tony."

A firm hand also came to his shoulder, a touch he now knew as Loki's without having to look, but he still did. Loki's eyes were tight with unhappiness. "I'm sorry, Anthony."

"Hey, no, it's fine." He even stepped back towards the other. It meant Loki's hand had to move to his upper arm, but it allowed Tony to lean his back against Loki's chest. He was a wall of warmth and comfort and Tony had just needed it. Regardless of the uncertainty he'd shared earlier with Loki, regardless of Bruce's conversation having played momentary havoc on him, Tony just needed *Loki* and he wasn't about to fight it.

Tony closed his eyes for just a moment, only opening them when Loki's hand curled around his arm, taking a further grip and faintly encouraging him to lean more heavily against him. It was just like being on the couch with him earlier, and why did it have to be more than what it was? Why did he have to categorise it? This was how they did things and it didn't have to be anything more. They both liked it, why shy from it?

"Look, I have to leave," Rhodey said, making Tony blink back to the room. Rhodey's face was carefully blank as he watched them, but there was still something calculating lingering in his eyes. "But keep me posted and I'll be back tonight."

Rhodey didn't stay any longer, exchanging his farewells before leaving the room again and the tower. Tony didn't like letting him leave, but he also knew that was mostly paranoia at this point. Rhodey wasn't likely to be targeted and he could also take care of himself.

"Well," Tony remarked, forcing more negative thoughts and anxieties to the side, "do you think we need to keep the animals any longer or can we just start shipping them off?"

"I'll need to leave the planet to confirm that the animals can be housed with anyone."

"See, *this* is where my inter-realm phones come in handy, Loki." Tony twisted his head so he could catch the mage's eyes. "One text and you'd have your answer."

Loki gave him a withering look while Bruce just asked, confused, "You made inter-realm phones?"

Tony brightened. "I absolutely did. You should see some of the stuff I made him film."

When Loki sighed loudly, Tony not only heard it, but he felt it against him, and it was only for a brief moment, but Tony suddenly wished that Loki's hand wasn't on his arm. He wished it was around his chest and holding him closer, that he was wrapped in a hug and Loki was letting out the chuckle that Tony knew he was hiding under that exhale.

But, he only let it happen for a moment.

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Their conversations about the phones and the stories behind each photo soon lead to conversations about the bracelets Loki had got made for them. It had also meant moving away from Loki and heading back down to the lab.

Bruce was endlessly interested in everything they'd been up to during the early days of their partnership, and while they did still theorise and try to find out more on the animals, they were easily distracted. The next hour was filled with general chatter about magic and Tony even showed Bruce the magic book Loki had given to him. It was nice, it was *enjoyable* and Bruce seemed to forget all about who Loki had been, in favour of speaking with the man he *now was*.

It was exactly what Tony had hoped for and he couldn't have been happier.

None of them had wanted to burst that sense of relaxation, of *calm* that had come over them. Tony had also believed, like them, that they would have all day to work on the animals, to come up with theories that they'd test and develop. They'd thought they'd have *time*.

Unfortunately, in lives like theirs and with public revelations so recently given, they didn't have that kind of good fortune.

And maybe they should have expected it, but how the fuck could they?

They certainly didn't hear the sound but they *did* notice the energy spike. Bruce and Tony had looked at it with confusion, but Loki had gone stiff as a board, like he'd instinctively known or sensed what it was.

It was a moment later that FRIDAY had announced it to them simply, "Boss, the bifrost has just been used on the landing bay of the tower and six Asgardian soldiers are now present. Defences have been activated."

Tony stood completely still, completely *shocked* for a long moment before asking the room and the world at large, "What the actual fuck?"

## Chapter End Notes

:O

Soooo, was anyone expecting Asgard to rear their head? Whatever could they want?

Well, you'll have to wait and see! ;)



# Chapter 25

## Chapter Notes

I'm just going to stop saying "yeah, I should get another chapter up in two weeks", because that's obviously working *so* well, heh. So, let's just play it by ear, yeah? :/

But anyway, another update! I hope you like it :D

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

“No, I’m serious,” Tony continued when silence followed his pronouncement. “Why the fuck are they here?”

“I do not know, Anthony,” Loki replied, his voice terse and his body tense. “But I *doubt* they bring either good tidings or the blessings of Asgard.” He let out a rough breath and began to turn. “Wait here and I’ll deal with them.”

“Oh, no you don’t.” Tony darted out and grabbed him by the sleeve. It was already shimmering as he conjured his armour over it, but Tony didn’t let go, even when it tingled over his skin. Loki had stilled upon feeling his grip and was now glaring at him. Tony wasn’t about to give a shit. “Didn’t we already have this little discussion? Partners? Allies? Friends? You aren’t going *anywhere* without me by your side.”

“Anthony-”

“No,” Tony refused. “You’re not going up there alone.”

“I have to agree with him,” Bruce said, frowning heavily. “If they’ve heard what you’ve been saying about them than I doubt they’re here to be helpful.”

“And the fact that everything we’re saying about them is *true* doesn’t make me inclined to leave Loki alone with a bunch of homophobic jerks.”

“I can handle them, Anthony,” Loki told him, something tightly-coiled and defensive in his words.

It smacked of pride and probably some amount of protective instinct over Tony. It would have normally rankled him, but Asgard was a plethora of issues for Loki, so he was letting it slide. He also made himself loosen his grip, but he still stepped closer and spoke gently, calmly, “I don’t doubt that for a moment, Lokes. I’m sure you could wipe the floor with them in a single display of magic - and while I’d definitely like watching that, I still don’t want you going up there without me.” Tony could see another protest coming, but he cut it off by adding firmly, “I want to be there to watch your back, Loki.”

The words didn't seem to soften him. Loki looked like he was gritting his teeth if only to keep his next words something more than a growl. "They are dangerous, Anthony, especially to a mortal."

"I don't think Asgard's going to want be seen slaughtering me in my own tower." Loki flinched and guilt instantly blossomed in Tony's chest. "Loki, I-"

"You have no idea how very possible that violence *is*," Loki interrupted him with a hiss. His hand came up and forcibly removed Tony's from his sleeve. "I will not take the chance. While you remain here with Dr Banner, you are safe."

"And what about you?" Tony demanded, using the hold Loki still had on him to link their fingers and grasp him tightly. He searched the mage's eyes, worried and not above showing it. "What the hell will they do if they catch *you*?"

Loki's mouth might have pulled on a smile, but Tony didn't believe it for a moment. "I have broken no recent laws. I am, for the most part, free of any charges." He brought his free hand to Tony's wrist and tugged the bracelet that had been hidden under his sleeve. His finger stayed curled under it, pulling it slightly away from his skin. It made Tony's look down at the item, just as Loki had intended. "And I have a means of escape, should I be in need of it."

That wasn't reassuring enough and Tony didn't even bother to try and verbally argue it when he could make a much more blatant gesture. He tugged his hand away from Loki and held it in the air. "FRIDAY! Gauntlet!"

It took all of a moment for the item to come flying towards his hand. He was pretty sure he heard Bruce jump out of the way, but he didn't care. Tony felt it wrap around his wrist and hand, filling him with confidence, with *strength*. When he looked back at Loki, the mage looked unimpressed and far from conceding, but Tony just glared right back at him. "I'm not staying behind. Get used to it."

Loki let out a breath of pure frustration and pinched the bridge of his nose for good measure, obviously trying to control both his temper and his emotions. "I do not want you in danger," he eventually gritted out, but Tony wasn't won over by that confession.

"I'm always in danger." Tony told him. "And if you think this is *any* different to when SHIELD came knocking on my door and you stuck right by my side, then you're missing every single point of what we are to each other." He poked Loki hard in the chest with one gauntlet covered finger.

Loki dropped his hand from his face, revealing an expression of indignation. Tony ignored it. "We both have our betrayers, Loki, and I'm going to go up there with you and show them just how much they fucked up when they hurt you. I'm going to show them that this is a partnership, and that I *am* your lover, and that we're damn well not cowering from them."

He glared at Loki when he was finished, daring the mage to try and fight him on this, daring him to *deny* Tony the chance to stand by Loki's side. He knew Loki was used to working alone, especially around Asgard. He *knew* why Loki was digging his heels, but he need to

realise he didn't have to with Tony. They were in this together and nothing was changing that - especially not Asgard.

It took a good minute of staring, unflinching at Loki, but in the end, Loki let out a loud sigh that sounded far more fond than agitated. "You are utterly infuriating."

"Yes," Tony agreed instantly, "glad you're noticing."

Loki chuckled. "I will enjoy having you at my side, Anthony, but please do be wary. They will not have taken kindly to all that we have said and done."

"I love the smell of offended asshole in the morning."

"We *need* Asgard on our side, Anthony," Loki insisted even as he continued to fight a grin. "We cannot afford to be selective with our allies in the coming battle."

Tony's expression tightened, something sharp and dangerous catching at the edges as he spoke with bitter mirth, "Remind me to thank Thanos *oh so much* for putting us in such a lovely position. Spear through the foot, basket of poisoned muffins, that sort of thing."

"I'll be certain to deliver the spear *personally*," Loki assured, his eyes flashing a fierce green. It was enough to restrain Tony's disgust for the people who had landed on his tower, if only briefly. He didn't know the details of what had happened, but he knew Loki had suffered at the hands of Thanos. If Loki could put aside centuries of painful history with Asgard just to take Thanos out, then Tony could stomach it too.

"Alright," he sucked in a breath before letting it out slowly. "Let's get this over with and get them off my tower."

Loki squeezed Tony's hand briefly in response before letting him go. Tony instantly wanted to take the touch back, but he stopped himself. While *he* wouldn't mind walking up there and showing off their relationship in a really blatant gesture for all he knew that would make Loki look weak or something in their screwed up Asgardian heads. He'd have to let Loki take the lead on this one and hope for the best.

"Try not to insult them," Loki warned him. "Or threaten them."

"But I've always wanted to throw someone off a tower. It looks like fun."

Loki sent him a withering look. "And do *not* be impetuous."

Tony raised his eyebrows. "You're really lecturing me on that? Can I say pot meet ket?"

"And allow *me* to do the talking."

"Are you saying I'm not a fabulous negotiator? I believe I've won you over more than once."

A soft chuckle broke them from their bickering and they both looked over at Bruce who was watching them fondly. "When you're quite done," Bruce smiled, "we can go and see what they want."

Tony blinked. “*We?*”

Bruce’s smile might have widened a little but his eyes were hard and his expression had a very *Hulk-like* kind of threat to it. Tony almost wanted to swallow and take a step back. “I think Asgard should see firsthand that you *both* have people supporting you down here.”

Tony felt a large, darkly satisfied smirk spread across his face. He knew that Thor had told Asgard *all* about the Hulk. He’d even tried to get Bruce to visit, wanting them to see his battle prowess. The Aesir wanted to ‘*test their might*’ against such a ‘*formidable fighter*’. He couldn’t wait to see how they reacted to learning that Bruce was on their side, on *Loki’s* side.

He sent a quick glance to Loki and saw that he was just as thrilled with the idea as Tony was. There was also an added confidence to Loki’s posture, a certain weight taken from his shoulders. Tony knew why Loki might think that he’d have to go up there and face Asgard alone, it only meant that Tony would have to work even harder at erasing that expectation from him.

“Yes,” Loki answered him, an almost perverse glee in his voice. “I think that they should.”

They were quick to make their way to the penthouse after that. Tony and Bruce both automatically bracketed Loki with Tony standing close enough that their sides brushed. Loki shot him a brief smile as the doors shut and they began to ascend. Tony could still see the tension that riddled his frame and Tony searched for a way to minimise it, but he didn’t know what he could say to help.

*If they try to take you away from me, I’ll build a way to Asgard to get you back*, he thought viciously and meant every word. *I’m not letting you go.*

When the lift opened they could easily see the Asgardian soldiers standing with FRIDAY’s weaponry pointed at them. They were unhappy about it and one of them was trying, unsuccessfully, to reason with FRIDAY.

“I’m surprised he sent Fandral,” Loki murmured, looking at the Asgardian who was trying to do all the talking.

“Fandral?” Tony asked, tensing slightly. “Isn’t that Thor’s friend?”

“Yes,” Loki agreed, “but he is also one of the few Aesir who trusted my word and laughed at my pranks rather than condemning them.” Tony glanced at him, seeing a thoughtful frown on Loki’s brow. “He also seemed grateful that I survived my fall.”

“Oh, so he actually had a shred of decency?”

Loki ignored him. “Perhaps it is that which makes the Allfather believe I will be susceptible to his words.”

“Oh, so he’s a *pawn*?”

Loki met his eyes, his frown deepening. “I am not *oblivious* to his loyalties or shortcomings, Anthony. The Aesir follow their King blindly, for better or worse. Fandral is no different.”

“But you still considered him a friend.”

Loki’s jaw clenched, but he admitted, “Once, and before many things happened to change us both. He was the least abhorrent of the people Thor forced me to associate with.”

It only made Tony wince. Loki had picked the best of a rotten bunch and even that had been snatched from him in the end.

Tony knew what it was like to lose friends, recent circumstances only highlighting that more than ever. He’d like to think that Fandral *wasn’t* down on Earth to further stab Loki in the back, but he didn’t like their chances. Tony had ever faith that Loki could catch and avoid manipulations and traps, but he still worried.

He felt Loki’s hand come down and rest gently over the fist he hadn’t realised he’d clenched. He looked back from glaring at the Aesir to see Loki’s quirked smile. “Do try not to shoot him off the side of your building.”

“No promises.”

Loki let out a small huff of laughter, and not for the first time Tony was both impressed and vaguely horrified at how Loki handled the people in his life that had hurt him so badly. Granted, this wasn’t Odin and it wasn’t Asgard at large, but this was still a bright, glaring example of the prejudice and hate he’d received for most of his life. The fact that Loki could swallow that rage down for the sake of his own machinations spoke of a coping method devised after a lifetime of abuse.

It only made Tony want the Aesir back up in space and out of their face as soon as possible.

They quickly reached the door to the landing bay and it opened automatically for them. Fandral and the other Aesir all looked up and Tony wasn’t oblivious to the way the guards all gripped their spears tighter, glaring daggers at Loki. Fandral at least tried to smile at them, but it didn’t work very well, more tight and awkward than happy. “Loki.”

Loki’s face was blank, but his eyes were sharp. “Fandral.” He greeted curtly before asking point-blank. “Have you come to take me back to Asgard?”

The tension after his words was thick enough to cut with a knife.

“I come on the Allfather’s behest,” Fandral answered, his voice calm and carefully measured, “to ask that you and your...” his mouth jerked for a moment and his eyes darted to Tony, before back to Loki again, “*partner* come to Asgard.”

“My partner?” Loki repeated before Tony felt Loki’s hand slide sinuously up his back before resting lightly on his neck. Tony instantly tilted his head back into the hold, all without compromising his line of sight. “You mean my *lover*, Anthony Stark of Midgard?”

When some of the Aesir soldiers flinched and their lips curled like they’d smelt something rotten, Tony only smiled his most predatory smile and edged closer to Loki, almost plastering

himself to the other's side. Fandral looked a little pained, but his smile still stayed mostly in place. "Yes. The Allfather requests that you both come to Asgard."

Loki didn't look interested or swayed; his mouth was a thin line barely hiding his disgust at the notion. "We decline. Be on your way."

Fandral grimaced. "The Allfather will not let us return without you."

"The Hulk says that he will," Bruce spoke up for the first time, his tone pure threat. It was extremely gratifying to see the way that all the Aesir's eyes widened. One of them even glanced to the side, likely judging the distance a giant green hand could throw him.

"We do not come here to battle-" Fandral tried.

"Good, then *be on your way*," Tony told them pointedly, making a shooing motion.

Fandral looked away from him and Bruce, seeming to appeal to Loki as if he would somehow see sense. Tony doubted it. Odin had to learn, like Fury, that people didn't just come when he stamped his foot.

"Loki, you know as well as I that the Allfather will not be denied his audience."

Tony narrowed his eyes. "Excuse me, was that a *threat*?"

Loki's thumb stroked his neck, a gesture intended to quiet and sooth, before enquiring, "And what are we being summoned for? Surely he didn't send you here without further information than that."

"He wishes to speak of the threat to the realms," Fandral explained, ignoring Tony, much to his irritation, "and to discuss why you have aligned yourself with a mortal in this fight. He also wishes to address the... tales you have told this world."

"*Tales*," Loki repeated sounding somewhere between bitterly amused and quietly infuriated. "What say you, Anthony, Bruce? It seems my life's history is nothing but a gimmick to entertain your people."

Tony felt indignation and rage flood through him. He was gearing up to say something about it when Loki gently squeezed his neck; comforting and warning all at once. Tony almost had to bite his tongue to swallow the words back down the way Loki seemed to want. He didn't look at Bruce but he was half hoping the other man was turning green.

"He wishes to understand," Fandral began, but Loki was having none of it.

"He *understands* perfectly well, Fandral," Loki snapped. "He merely wishes to absolve himself of anything I say. He wishes to have my lover and I *cowed*." He glared with enough hate and malice to burn. "He will not have it. This world knows his deceptions and insults and he will not gain our good favour by *forcing* us to attend an audience."

He tilted his chin imperiously as if daring Fandral to contradict him. Fandral didn't, but he also didn't hold Loki's eyes as he sighed and reached into a pocket in his outfit and pulled out

a scroll. He held it between them while Loki eyed it as if it were poison.

“The Allfather requested I give this to you, should you refuse his request.”

Loki remained still for a long moment, his lips curled up in a sneer of distaste, but he still lifted his hand, sparks of green magic flying from his fingers and no doubt checking the document for any kind of curse. When he seemed satisfied he warily took it from Fandral and unfurled it.

His eyes skimmed the words at a rapid pace, his face flicking between fury, disbelief, and eventually settling on an unhappy frown. He closed the scroll and clenched his fist around it. “Anthony will not be leaving this planet.”

Tony almost pulled something in his neck with how fast he whipped it to Loki. *Did he just fucking agree?*

“The Allfather commands-”

“Anthony will remain here.”

Tony didn’t want to contradict Loki in front of the others, knowing how little they already thought of Loki, but oh was he tempted. He settled for clearing his throat pointedly until Loki looked at him. He hoped his glare spoke volumes about his thoughts on the matter.

Loki let out a breath before subtly encouraging Tony to step back inside the penthouse. “Please accompany us inside, Bruce. We have things to discuss before I allow Odin his audience. FRIDAY, please continue to give the Aesir your attention.”

“Yes, sir.”

Tony barely managed to keep his mouth shut until the doors were closed and they had relative privacy. He spun on Loki then and hissed, “What the *fuck* are you doing? What the hell did that scroll say?”

Wordlessly, Loki held it out to him and Tony snatched it. He continued to glare at Loki for a moment before unfurling the document with Bruce coming to stand at his side to read over his shoulder.

The letter wasn’t in Asgardian, which was nice, but it was some kind of Ye Olde script and Tony’s eyes were almost crossing by the third paragraph. It was as if legalese had decided to have a baby with Old English and produced whatever was on this scroll.

“So this is what?” Tony asked when he wasn’t getting anywhere fast. “A mandatory RSVP without the option to check no?”

“To some degree,” Loki answered. “He’s inviting us as guests of Asgard to engage in a negotiation of peace and alliance against the Mad Titan. He knows I am well versed in Asgardian Law through my own study and my time as King. He knows that to offer us passage to Asgard in this way assures us safety and diplomatic immunity. I cannot refuse this without imperilling the alliance with Asgard against the Mad Titan.”

“He’s doing anything possible to manipulate you into going up there,” Tony hissed.

Loki nodded. “Yes, and he could very well offer us nothing that would ever tempt us to ally with him, but while I am a guest he cannot harm nor order anyone to attack or imprison me. The magic in this decree would forbid it.”

“He must really want you on Asgard,” Bruce murmured.

“He wishes to look benevolent and show that he is not the spiteful and ruthless man that he is.” Loki scoffed. “He wishes to undo everything I have said, and,” he looked at Tony, “he likely wishes to bring you to Asgard in order to sever you from my influence.”

“Fat chance,” Tony spat firmly and made a genuine smile curl at the corner of Loki’s mouth.

“And it’s one we will not give him,” Loki agreed. “That’s why you will remain here.”

“Yeah, there’s no way I’m staying behind,” Tony disagreed.

Loki just sighed. “*Anthony-*”

“No way am I sending you up there *alone*.” Tony stepped closer, half tempted to grab Loki’s sleeve to make sure he couldn’t slip out of his grasp in some attempt to protect him. “If you’re going, I’m coming too. We did this before, and I’ll do it again.”

“Anthony-”

“How would you feel if I had left for SHIELD without you? If I had refused your help?” Loki’s cheek twitched and his mouth pulled into a grimace. Tony only further twisted that particular knife; it was easy when the words were entirely honest. “I felt *better* with you there, Loki. We started this because we wanted someone around we can trust. You’ve done it for me; I want to do it for you.”

Tony could actually see the moment Loki’s resistance cracked and all his reservations slipped away to make room for fond exasperation and resignation. “You are far too manipulative.”

“I’m the *good* kind of manipulative,” Tony told him with a grin as relief spread through his limbs knowing that Loki wasn’t going to keep fighting him on this.

“I don’t think this is a good idea,” Bruce told them unhappily and made Tony drag his eyes away from Loki. Bruce had his arms crossed and his face was drawn with worry. “They can’t be happy with you, *either* of you, and decree or not, there are too many ways this could go terribly wrong. You can’t even make use of your bracelets if you’re in the same place with the same danger.”

Tony winced a little at that, since Bruce wasn’t wrong. Loki however, didn’t look concerned; instead, he held out his hand and twisted it. Tony was a little shocked to find a simple metal bracelet appear and hover above his palm. Loki was smiling faintly. “I had intended to gift this to Rhodes, well aware that we might need a further person to call upon. I had intended to give it to him tonight.”



“You *sneaky little shit*,” Tony declared with glee, reaching out to pluck it from Loki’s hand when he gained no resistance. “When did you get him one made?”

“I prefer to have spares should the need ever arise. I began crafting it more specifically for him when I learned he was an ally worth investing in.”

“Awwh. He’s going to be so chuffed to hear that.”

Loki just chuckled before taking the bracelet back from Tony. “We will need to leave before Rhodes can arrive. Anthony, can you please inform him of the change of circumstance and that his bracelet will be sent to him presently?”

Tony grinned. “FRIDAY, you heard the man. Let’s get Rhodey on speaker.”

His ever faithful AI only took a few moments to connect with Rhodey. “Tony?” He sounded both uncertain and concerned. “What’s going on?”

“Just some Aesir on my doorstep and an invitation we can’t decline. Loki and I are heading to Asgard.”

There was a long silence on the other line. “Tell me I heard all of that wrong.”

“I’m afraid not, Rhodes,” Loki replied with a hint of amusement in his eyes. It was mostly drowned out by the words that followed though. “Odin has dangled the possibility of gaining the use of Asgard’s armies in the fight against the Mad Titan. We have little choice but to accept his request.”

“Because that’s not suspicious or worrying *at all*,” Rhodey remarked, flat and unimpressed.

“He has given significant assurances of our safety,” Loki answered, “but I would like to include our own protection.” He glanced down at the bracelet and it lifted to hover in the air. “I would have you hold out your left hand, palm up.”

Rhodey sounded confused as he answered, “Okay?” It was from one blink to the next that the bracelet disappeared. Tony could only assume it had landed when he heard Rhodey hiss, “Oh *fuck*.”

“You are aware of how Anthony’s bracelet works. Yours functions much the same, only it can pull both Anthony and I to your location. The functions follow the same pattern as Anthony’s but the light will be gold.”

Rhodey groaned lowly and Tony could imagine him running a palm over his face. “This is a bad idea.”

“Probably,” Tony admitted easily. “And it means we’ll miss dinner. You can still come keep Bruce company though? But we’ll try to be back soon enough.”

“Give Bruce one of your universal phones,” Rhodey ordered. “And Loki, send me one too. I want some way for us to keep in contact with you both.”

Loki tilted his head a little and not only did a phone appear in front of Bruce, hovering in the air, but Tony would bet that Rhodey had received one too. Tony grinned. "You should have our numbers in there," Tony told them, "but I'll give you a call after the meeting with Odin, let you know we're still alive."

"This is still a terrible idea, Tony," Bruce continued to insist, probably only beating Rhodey by a few seconds since Rhodey only made a strained sound of affirmation.

"Bad idea or not," Loki replied, "we have little choice. We will keep you informed of events on Asgard and you will keep us apprised of the woman and her animals. We will endeavour to return as soon as possible, but will leave at the slightest sign of her reappearance."

Rhodey let out a rough sigh. "Damn it. Fine, but take care of each other up there. If you don't Bruce and I will have to find a way to follow after you and drag your asses back to Earth."

Tony laughed, delighted and fond and even Loki let out a small chuckle. "Thanks, Rhodey," Tony told him. "Keep Earth in one piece while we're gone."

He didn't wait for another response as he had FRIDAY end the call. It still meant contending with Bruce but while he looked mulish, he didn't continue his protests beyond asking with a sigh, "Can you remove the worm before you go? I don't think we'll need it."

Loki nodded, and magic crackled over his hands once more. He also, much to Tony surprise, brought the sleeping rhino to rest at their feet. Tony blinked at it and looked at Loki curiously.

"We'll take it with us," he explained, "as a gift in thanks for Asgard's hospitality." Loki looked almost like he was trying to hold down a laugh at the idea and Tony had to wonder if there was some subtle insult he was missing.

"What about the others?" Bruce asked.

Loki pursed his lips. "They will have to remain until our return."

Bruce nodded. "I'll keep an eye on them."

When a brief silence fell, Tony took it as his cue to more or less take the, heh, rhino by the horn and suggest, "So, off to Asgard?"

Loki's mouth twitched towards a frown, but he agreed. "Yes."

He reached out for Tony who raised his eyebrow but came closer. Loki was quick to place his hand back against Tony's neck, a comfort and demonstrative affection that Tony didn't shy from. Loki then looked at Bruce. "Thank you for your support, Dr Banner."

"Bruce," he corrected easily. "And you both have it," he told him seriously, "I wasn't lying about that."

Tony grinned brightly while Loki's expression was smaller but no less pleased as he nodded at Bruce. "My thanks."

Tony followed it up by asking, “Hold the fort for us, Bruce. Oh and tell Pepper what happened, I guess. Hey, FRIDAY, have the news noticed the Aesir on my tower?”

“Several news stations appear to be filming from a distance.”

“Fabulous. Tell Rhodey and get him to make a statement. Emphasis how *nice* we’re being after being ambushed.”

“Yes, boss.”

Smirking, Tony glanced up to find Loki already watching him. “This is only going to look worse for them,” he told Loki. “So even if the trip’s a bust, we’ve got that.”

Loki didn’t quite smile, a nervous tension slowly creeping over him even as he requested, “Summon your suit.”

Tony didn’t hesitate and while it meant briefly losing Loki’s hold on his neck, he was quick to tuck the helmet under his arm before taking his place beside Loki and giving him a pointed look. Loki’s smile became a little more honest when he brought his hand back up to Tony’s neck in the way that he seemed to like for displaying their relationship to the Aesir. Tony glanced back to Bruce who was clenching the phone and watching them with a tight, worried expression. “Be careful.”

Flashing him a smile, wink, and a ‘*will do*’ Tony let the discussion end there. He also let the firm pressure on his neck lightly direct him out to the landing bay and the waiting Aesir. FRIDAY hadn’t removed the weaponry that had been monitoring them, but they hardly seemed concerned by it. Which was slightly insulting.

Loki only stopped them when they were a few steps in front of Fandral and despite the glares, Loki never removed his hand, he only seemed to tighten his hold further. “We will journey to Asgard in order to broker an alliance against the Mad Titan.”

Fandral looked relieved. Or he did, until a rhino suddenly appeared at his feet and made him jump back slightly. Loki was barely holding in his smile as he gestured at the sleeping creature. “And to show our goodwill, we honour Asgard with a gift; a creature of thick hide, and fierce battle prowess from Midgard’s lands.”

Fandral’s eyes had lit up and he bent down to touch the beast reverently. The other Aesir continued to look sour, but at least Fandral had the decency to turn to Tony for an answer. “What’s it called?”

He was *extremely* tempted to call it something like a *wobblegookhorn* just to be a complete shit. He settled on using a more technical, generic term. “Rhinocerotidae.”

Fandral only looked charmed.

Loki moved them to stand beside Fandral after that, but he hadn’t even risen from his crouched position over the rhino. When Loki stopped them, he made sure their backs were never to the Aesir soldiers.

“If you would activate the bifrost, Fandral,” Loki ordered him impatiently. “We have matters on Midgard we must attend to after this.”

Fandral continued to stroke the rhino’s sleeping form, even as he called, “Heimdall!”

It took the work of a moment for a beam of energy and light to blast down around them and suck them up with enough of a jolt for Tony’s breath to catch on a gasp. He felt like he was spinning and falling and being pulled to pieces all at once and he couldn’t get enough.

He laughed and leant back against Loki’s hand, the one firm point in a sea of impossible colours and incredible feelings.

## Chapter End Notes

Going up to Asgard?!?!?! Dun, dun, dunnnnnn! Will it be everything you've been worried about? What will happen?! Only the coming chapters will tell ;)

# Chapter 26

## Chapter Notes

So, this is a little later than I wanted, but I was having some difficulty with writing a particular scene, hopefully it's come out alright in the end :) Thanks for being patient with me!

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

They landed on Asgard with a jolt, the vortex ending abruptly, and Tony might have fallen if it wasn't for his armour and Loki's firm hand keeping him grounded. He was breathing heavily as if he'd just run a mile and his skin was tingling. It was like free-falling in the suit and he looked around the golden room with barely contained curiosity. The walls looked as if they were made with giant gears and since the place was practically *magic* Tony didn't know if that was for show or actually part of the mechanics.

*I've got to make me one of these*, he thought, giddy with the possibilities. He was so distracted by the technology that he almost missed the man standing solemnly in the centre of the room with a giant sword and a ridiculous helmet.

*Okay, Loki's reindeer one looks much better.*

"The Allfather awaits you," the man told them with a deep, highly disapproving voice and it made Tony remember the conversation he'd had with Loki early on about Heimdall. He still didn't know what their grudge was, but considering what he knew of Asgard, he didn't think he'd enjoy finding out about it.

Loki didn't bother greeting him, so Tony followed his example. It was an accident when he caught the other's galaxy-swirling eyes, but he instantly felt uncomfortable. They were faintly creepy and very knowing and Tony didn't like it one bit. Tony found himself thankful once again that Loki knew how to mask them from his supposedly all seeing gaze.

Stepping towards the exit to the circular chamber, Tony's skin crawled at being forced to walk with the guards behind them and Fandral in front; he didn't like being surrounded. His only consolation was that most of the guards were being forced to carry the rhino since Loki was no longer helping with its transportation.

He also had to admit he momentarily... forgot about everything when they left the bifrost site. His breath left him in a stunned exhale as he looked around him. The sky was a painting of stars and clouds twisting in artistic nebula. The *bridge* he was standing on was *streaking rainbow light* as it stretched out towards a golden city that twinkled in the light from the stars. It was *stunning*.

The sound of water rushing underneath them made Tony turn his attention from the city and when he dared to look behind them he saw that the water just... ended. It fell down off the edge of the world like a waterfall and Tony just didn't know which part he wanted to stare at or exclaim about more.

He *did* want to see what it looked like at the *edge of a literal planet*, but when he took a half step towards it he found Loki's hand preventing him. He glanced at him and found Loki's eyes were... distant and not quite looking at either him, or at the drop.

"I wouldn't get too close to the edge, Anthony." Loki murmured before slowing bringing his eyes to Tony, looking a bit too blank, a bit too haunted around the edges. "It's a long way down."

Tony's mind suddenly made connections he instantly wished it hadn't and he knew his face grew pinched with sympathetic pain. He stepped a little closer to Loki instead, trying to offer him comfort in any way that he could. "Yeah, okay."

He searched around for something to distract Loki. He didn't know what on Asgard would be a sore spot for the other, so he settled on the simplest of them all.

Flirting.

"So," he remarked, "if I wanted to blow off a meeting with the King and have a sexy tryst with a gorgeous Prince, where would I need to go?"

The question startled a laugh out of Loki and made him smile. Tony ignored the sounds of disgust from behind them to focus on Loki's answer. "I would hardly recommend that course of action, but..." he smirked, full of promise and tease. "I know a few spots, should we have to stay here longer than we'd like."

"I've always wanted to have sex on another planet," Tony continued mischievously. "It might be the *only* silver lining for being dragged up here."

Loki chuckled and lightly rubbed his thumb against Tony's neck in a gesture that made him shiver. "Here or not, my lovely Anthony, I'll be sure to reward you handsomely for weathering this journey."

"Maybe I should be giving you the reward?" Tony suggested, leaning a little closer and letting his voice go sultry, but making sure the guards could still overhear. "I'm sure you could use some pampering. The only question is; would you prefer my hands or my mouth?"

A loud cough from in front of them mostly drowned out the end of Tony's question and he looked forward, glaring at Fandral who was glancing over his shoulder with an uncomfortable expression.

Loki's voice sounded polite enough, but Tony could hear the threat underneath it. "Yes, Fandral?"

The Asgardian looked like he was searching desperately for a change of topic, his eyes darting around them before alighting on the bridge. He looked incredibly relieved when he looked back, catching Tony's eyes. "Thor says that you are a scholar much like his mortal. I had thought you might wish to discuss the bridge as she did on her visit here?"

Tony couldn't stop the way his eyes were drawn to the shimmering of the bridge that he was *literally walking across*. A part of him was straining with the need to get down on his knees and better examine it. He wanted to see if he could scrape off some shavings to experiment with back on Earth. He *wanted* to jump around and stick his nose into *everything* - but, he wasn't going to.

He *wasn't* about to let his guard down around people he didn't trust in the slightest. He *also* wasn't about to give Asgard any hint of his awe or excitement. Their infrastructure and their location might be absolutely fascinating, but he wasn't going to give them the satisfaction of showing it.

So he smiled tightly at Fandral and told him, "Yeah, see, the lightshow's cool and all, but when it comes to methods of transportation, I'm a bit more interested in learning about teleportation." He flicked his eyes to Loki to see him biting down a soft, amused smile. He looked back at Fandral and continued, "Seems a bit more impressive when he does it." He shrugged as best he could in the suit. "Anyway, Loki's already told me all the important parts."

Or he would, the minute Tony got him alone and pestered him for answers.

"I thought your armour gave you flight?" Fandral asked quizzically. "Why would you wish to have Loki teleport you?"

Tony blinked at him, completely incredulous. "I'm sorry, do you not understand how much *faster* and more *useful* teleporting is? Flying is the scenic route. You don't want the scenic route when you're trying to save the universe. I'd much rather have a *fabulous* mage who will bring me with him in an instant."

Fandral actually looked confused and almost contemplative. He was also staring at Loki as if he'd never had that pointed out to him before. It took great strength for Tony not to roll his eyes heavenward over the stupidity of it.

"That is why we have the bifrost," Fandral eventually said, but it was done slowly as if he wasn't sure of the words.

"Oh? And the bifrost is always going to be there? Is always going to be accessible? Technology fails. Creepy guys in the sky are sometimes busy. Badass space mages have a much higher success rate and are usually *right beside you*."

Fandral tilted his head, mulling over the words. "That is true." He even smiled a little. "Many a time Loki has been the one through trick and illusion to aid in our escape and victory."

Loki made a small noise, something Tony only heard because he was so close to him. Glancing over at Loki he saw him blinking and quickly wiping away the incredulity that had

plastered itself over his face. Tony wouldn't be surprised if that was the first time *anyone* had admitted that about Loki out loud.

Well, score one for Tony drilling some logic into at least one of them. It was too little too late as far as Tony was concerned, but the more Aesir who learned a little common sense, the less concerned Tony would be about Loki being kidnapped or attacked by them in the middle of the night.

Fandral, oblivious to Loki's reaction however, continued, "There was a great game where we would need to pick which of his illusions was the true one. Thor would often grouse about playing as he always had the worst luck of us all." Fandral turned to him with a smile. "Do you remember it, Loki?"

Loki narrowed his eyes, looking as if he was waiting for the metaphorical trapdoor to appear in their conversation. "I remember being called a liar when you could not guess correctly and being disinclined to play your game because of it."

Oh, Tony wasn't letting that go.

"So, you asked him to help you spot a magical fake and then you got mad when you were shit at it?" He looked between the two of them; Loki's thin lips and Fandral's surprised blinks. "Well, with an incentive like that, I wouldn't be playing either."

Fandral was grimacing heavily even as he said, "I did not believe you to cheat, Loki."

"No," Loki admitted, "it was but you and Hogun who never accused me of a lie. Hogun, because he has a better sense of illusion than any of you and..." Loki paused to stare at Fandral, his eyes and tone filled with that same suspicion, "you took me at my word in most things."

"Well, you did not always lie," Fandral said simply, as if that explained everything.

"No. It is only more *recently* that I seem to have earned that title."

Loki's voice had gone cold, his face an expressionless mask apart from the barely contained viciousness behind his eyes. "Or perhaps it is the lies of others that have made me embrace that which you have always believed me to be."

Fandral's shoulders had gone tense at the words and he went back to staring straight ahead. The guards had started whispering unhappily again and Tony felt like the air around them had gotten a few hundred degrees colder. The fingers at Tony's neck were also twitching slightly as if Loki was straining with the force of keeping them still.

Tony didn't know all the facts about Loki's time playing dead and masquerading as the King. He knew Loki had done more good things than bad, but he had a feeling that the Aesir didn't want to see it that way. Loki had told him once, smirking the whole time, that nothing he had done was *illegal* per say and so he couldn't be charged. Tony had thought he'd have been in trouble for attacking the King *for sure*, but apparently Loki had planned around that. The conversation had been early in their partnership, and Loki had been reticent back then, so



Tony hadn't been able to get all the details, but he was certainly going to ask Loki about it again when they were alone.

Fandral cleared his throat suddenly, breaking Tony from his thoughts. He looked incredibly awkward as he asked quickly, as if trying to fill the silence, "Anthony Stark, what does your gift the Rhinocerotidae eat?"

Tony blinked, not only surprised that Fandral had actually remembered and pronounced the name correctly, but that he'd picked that of all topics. "Erm. Grass?"

He looked at Loki, not even sure why, but without FRIDAY to fact check that, he couldn't be sure. Loki just looked fondly amused. "They will eat most vegetation, but grass is there preferred diet, though I would be wary at introducing them too quickly to Asgardian plant life."

Fandral seemed galvanised at the new subject as he began asking Tony questions about how they were cared for, where they lived and if they were fond of other animals. It forced Tony to sift through his very limited information about rhinos. Loki however, knew more than Tony had expected and could cover whatever Tony couldn't. Apparently Loki had done some research on all the animals that had ended up at Tony's tower. Tony didn't know *when* he'd managed it, considering how busy they'd been, but he was grateful all the same. It also helped give them something to talk about as they reached the gates to the city.

The city itself was fascinating. The glares and angry whispers they received walking through it however, were not. Loki kept his back straight and ignored it, instead casually pointing out different parts of Asgard and, when prompted by Tony, describing some trick or another that he'd performed there. Fandral even joined in, seeming oblivious to the hostility surrounding them as he spoke about the past, and for the most part, their long walk through the city was civil enough.

Tony was more than happy to just *look* at everything. He was on *another planet* and some of the technology that he knew Asgard had was enough to make him salivate and he was already making a list of things he wanted to question Loki about. But the closer they got to the palace, the more Loki changed - he got *sharper* and the air around him seemed to crackle with intensity.

It made further conversation fade away as Loki stopped giving anything but faint responses until the rest of their walk was simply spent in silence. This gave Tony more than enough opportunity to worry and wonder about just *what* Odin had planned for them - the Asgardian King was a piece of work and Tony knew to expect manipulations, arrogance, general asshole and a hefty amount of insults.

By the time they reached the golden palace in the centre of the city, Tony felt like he was heading into battle. There were royal guards throughout the halls and they all looked ready to stab Loki at the slightest provocation. The feeling of impending attack only got worse as they approached the great hall's open doors. The place was huge, with giant pillars on either side that only emphasized the high ceiling. It was also full of members of the Asgardian court. Tony could definitely see it for the power play that it was.

The golden throne in the centre held an old man with an eye patch who was draped in gold. He was imposing and looked anything but weak. He was also looking at them as if they were a source of great annoyance and disgust to him. Tony automatically put on his most vicious smile as they got closer and watched irritation etch itself further across Odin's face.

Loki's hand was firm against his neck when they stopped at the foot of the throne. Loki held him in place as Fandral knelt in greeting. Tony heard a gentle but still heavy thump behind him and could only guess that the other Aesir had put down the rhino to do the same thing. The lack of a bow from *them* quickly caused unhappy whispers to start from the other people in the room.

"Loki," Odin intoned, a world's worth of displeasure coating the word.

Loki just grinned in the face of it and when he spoke his voice was so full of artifice that Tony doubted anyone bought it for a moment. "How pleased I am to see you, Allfather."

He turned his attention to Tony after that, bringing up his free hand to rest over the armour covering Tony's chest. "May I present Anthony Stark," Loki said with a formality that seemed more mocking, "he is a valiant warrior and renowned scholar of Midgard, a Prince in his own right and my partner in an alliance against the Mad Titan." He looked back at Odin. "He is also my lover."

Tony could *feel* the change that swept through the air at that; shock and disapproval. Tony just stood a little straighter even while openly tilting back into Loki's hold on his neck. In response, Loki removed his palm from Tony's chest before sliding the one on his neck over Tony's shoulder, down his arm before wrapping around his waist. This settled them even closer together and Loki looked far too smug. Loki also kept his hands carefully positioned so that no one could miss or mistake what they were to each other. Odin's mouth just continued to look as if he'd bitten into a lemon.

"We also wish to thank you for your most..." Loki paused as if searching for a word, "*generous* invitation to visit Asgard." Tony's mouth twitched at that lie. "We also bestow upon you a gift," Loki absently flicked his fingers behind them but didn't look away from Odin once. "A rare and prized fighting beast from Midgard's lands. We present it with our gratitude, and we thank you for the compliment of being so highly sought as to be offered the might of Asgard in an alliance."

The whispers started up again at that and Tony had to wonder just how much Asgard's general public had known about why they were here and *who* had requested the meeting. His guess was that they hadn't known a lot. His theory was only confirmed when Odin stamped his fancy staff and ordered that everyone leave them alone. He supposed there was nothing like an uninformed public to help make his crappy ruling look good.

The room was slow to clear and Loki and Odin stayed silent during it, spending the time glaring at each other. Fandral had carefully requested permission to take the rhino to the stables and had received little more than a small nod of acceptance.

When they were finally alone, Tony was about ready to make a sarcastic quip just to break the tension, but Odin spoke before he could, "Do you intend to gain something from this

display, Loki?”

“Oh, I believe I gained what I intended,” Loki instantly parried. “And we did not call this meeting, Odin Allfather. Make us your offers.”

Instead of complying, Odin remarked, “Your behaviour on Midgard has been watched by Heimdall-”

“How scandalising for him,” Loki interrupted before purposefully stroking Tony’s hip. “I do hope that he enjoyed the view.”

Odin’s cheek twitched as if he was repressing a grimace or a sneer. “It seems you have found a place that falls easily for the falsehoods you favour.”

“I hardly needed to *lie*,” Loki snapped; his voice as sharp as a whip.

“And have you told this Midgardian the truth of *your* past?” Odin questioned, his gaze moving to look at Tony. “Does he know what actions placed you where you fell? Does he know the true colour of the one that he allies himself with?”

Loki’s whole body stiffened and his next words were a defensive snap. “And shall you share them with the *Aesir*?” Loki questioned. “Shall you tell your precious subjects what lies lurk in *your* past, Odin Allfather?”

“It is not the people of this realm that are in question,” Odin stated. “Lies fall more easily from your lips than any other words. You trick for advantage as much as for mischief. Do you trick this mortal for more than a place to reside? The history of this man would make him an elegant prospect for one such as you.” He looked Tony up and down. “A former shield brother of Thor and one you have had a chance to remove completely from his association. What more such opportunity could you have used? Your honeyed words often encourage wounded and rash decisions.” Odin’s eyes lingered on the arm Loki had tightly wrapped around Tony, “There are many things you might have talked this mortal into considering for nothing but your own gain.”

“This *mortal*,” Tony growled, “can speak for himself.”

“Oh?” Odin questioned. “And what do you know of the one beside you? Do you know the history of who you ally yourself with, Anthony Stark?”

“I know more about *him* than I do about *you*,” Tony argued. “So stop trying to tell me your opinion is the one I should trust. I picked him. What makes you think I’ll pick *you*?”

He was eyed *very* sharply for that. “And you have faith in your decision?”

The way Odin spoke made Tony feel like he was being pitied, like he was being looked at as some *poor mortal* that Loki had managed to con onto his side. Tony was *not* about to let Odin get away with implying that.

“I don’t need faith,” Tony told him. “I have facts and I have proof. The initial contract we had, well, that worked for both of us. But when the most talented and intelligent person I ever

met ended up on my side and became my friend, that was even better. When he turned out to be *just* as impressive in the bedroom, well, I'd be an idiot not to enjoy myself."

Tony turned to look at Loki, giving him an adoring expression and enjoying the way Loki grinned right back. He moved in close enough to press his lips to Loki's jaw in an affectionate kiss before he turned back to a stone faced Odin. "In fact, I suppose I have you to thank. I would never have gotten so lucky, if Loki had ever been happy up here."

He could practically feel the glee radiating off of Loki at his words and Tony was only inclined to continue fanning that flame. Sure, Loki had kept telling him they needed Odin on side, that they *needed* Asgard as an ally, but Tony wasn't about to let Loki get degraded and insulted right in front of him.

"How very loyal you are," Odin murmured thoughtfully. "A pity Thor could not hold your attention, but then, there are some matters in which he would not be so... *inclined*."

Tony smiled sharply at the thinly veiled insult. "Good for both of us. I'd hate to have to reject an advance from him by pointing out he is *nothing* like my type."

Odin continued to eye him for a long moment, possibly rearranging his opinions on Tony, more *likely* he was altering the way in which he was approaching the conversation. He'd started by attempting to attack their partnership and relationship, Tony could only wonder what tactic was next.

"A partnership with mortals holds little interest to Asgard-

"Oh?" Loki interrupted, "Then do explain your reason for calling us here."

"The Mad Titan seeks the infinity gems. He craves destruction and death," Odin said plainly. "You, Loki, have warned the realms of this and have assisted in securing three of these gems." His eyes narrowed. "You are *also* rumoured to have a fourth in your possession."

Tony flicked a sharp glance at Loki only to find him smiling ever so slightly. It neither confirmed nor denied the statement, but Tony was going to bet that the rumours were true there - and if they were then Loki had some *serious explaining to do*.

"The Nine are preparing for war against him." Odin continued before he tilted his chin. "You and your mortal will remain on Asgard. He must prove himself worthy of Asgard before he can be offered an alliance with us."

Tony's eyes widened and before he could ask the *uh, what?* that was going through his head, Loki was speaking, "He has been watched by Heimdall's gaze, therefore his worth cannot be in question. He is also a protector of his world, a world that was recently attacked. He cannot remain on Asgard for any extended duration."

"Midgard will be protected by Thor," Odin dismissed easily. "And Heimdall will watch it closer in his absence."

“*Thor* cannot perform the tasks required to protect it,” Loki argued. “The one responsible can only be discovered through means of Anthony’s science and my magic. She might yet prove a more significant threat if left idle.”

“I will have Heimdall locate the woman,” Odin told them simply. “Upon her discovery or any further attack, you may return - but Asgard will not offer an alliance to a mortal that it does not trust or know.”

Loki was gritting his teeth, looking quietly furious over the corner they were being backed into - and he wasn’t the only one. Tony wasn’t feeling anything near pleased.

“Anthony has business on his world,” Loki told Odin. “He is the Prince of an empire and cannot simply remain here indefinitely.”

Tony didn’t quite raise his eyebrows at the second time he was given *Prince* for a moniker, but it was a close thing.

“He will remain for seven days or Asgard will not consider an alliance,” Odin stated, cold and unyielding.

Loki looked beyond frustrated as he flicked his eyes to Tony. There were a million questions in that gaze and while Tony wasn’t exactly *keen* to stay on a planet ruled by Odin he wasn’t exactly giving them a lot of options either.

What choice did they really have if they wanted this alliance with Asgard? They needed Asgard on their side like they needed SHIELD.

He ended up shrugging slightly; doing his best to convey ‘*it’s up to you*’ and ‘*if it’s safe enough*’ and hoping Loki understood it. Loki must have been able to translate enough of it as he turned back to Odin.

“Anthony will only remain as long as his business or a threat to Midgard does not keep him from returning. The terms given in our invitation will remain intact during our time here and I will negotiate on our behalf should he be required to remain on Midgard.”

Odin didn’t look happy, his fingers tapping against his staff as he considered the proposal. Long moments passed before he gave a tight nod. “You will attend the feast tonight and the council will speak with you tomorrow.” A look of distaste crossed his face. “Loki’s old chambers may be used for the duration of your stay.” Shifting his attention more pointedly to Tony, he gave him one more deeply searching and hair-raising examination. “We will see just what you prove to be, Midgardian.”

He followed that final pronouncement with a clang of his spear and Tony felt magic rush over him in a way that made his skin crawl. He got the sudden and rather alarming feeling that he had just been made magically incapable of leaving the planet until the week had passed. Tony *also* got the feeling that Odin was far from done when it came to accepting their partnership as something he couldn’t twist or break for his own benefit.

Which was, oh say, *extremely disconcerting*.

"We shall inform Midgard of our extended stay and make preparations for the feast," Loki told him, his words not quite coming through gritted teeth.

Odin had barely managed a nod before Loki was turning their backs to Odin and walking away and out of the hall. They didn't bow, they didn't even say a proper and formal goodbye, but Odin let them leave, probably because he'd already achieved the one thing he wanted - keeping them on the planet.

Tony was having some difficulty seeing it as a *good* thing for them to be stuck here. Sure an alliance with Asgard's firepower was awesome. Being stuck on a hostile planet with Odin for continued company? Not so great. Try, very worrying.

He still waited until they were out of the hall to say anything. "So," he drawled, "that-"

"Did not go the way we wanted, yes, *thank you*, Anthony, I am aware," Loki snapped at him, fury and frustration plainly written across his face.

He looked like he wanted to blow something up and Tony retracted the gauntlet instantly so that he could place a hand on Loki's back in comfort. Loki hardly seemed to notice, but he also didn't shove Tony's touch off.

He decided that, at least until they got somewhere private, he wouldn't push Loki for any answers. He trusted Loki to keep them safe. He trusted that Loki wouldn't have accepted Odin's ultimatum if it wasn't going to be better for them in the long run.

They'd come up here for a reason and that was to have Asgard on their side when they fought Thanos. It wasn't ideal that they were stuck here, but hell, they'd both made their way through worse odds, and this time, they also had each other.

## Chapter End Notes

Odin. Was. A. Pain. To. Write.

Just putting it out there, heh. I've never really written him before, so getting him right was... difficult. Still, I hope you enjoyed the chapter! The two boys on Asgard for the week... what could they get up to? And, more to the point, what will *Odin* get up to?

I hope you like what's in store! ;)

**Edit:** The beautiful and lovely **araydre** has done art for this story and chapter!! It is beautiful and is already linked into the story, but here, have another [link](#) and go check it out :3

# Chapter 27

## Chapter Notes

Hi there! A bit of an early update because, well it's *slightly* filler-y whoops?

Also, my beta's laptop died so I've done this without her fabulous help so send her good luck wishes at getting a replacement soon! I did have the lovely HalyconFrost help me with most of the edits, but she's a busy gal so if you see any errors, they're probably me, heh. So please let me know :)

AND for everyone wanting a Loki POV chapter, you are in luck! You have one! I also plan on doing another one again soon, so just be patient a bit longer ;)

But without further ado, I hope you enjoy chapter 27! (Oh wow, has it really gotten that big?? Haha.)

Odin's actions were infuriating. His insults to Anthony and their partnership made Loki's blood boil and the demand that they remain on the planet had Loki gritting his teeth. Odin was doing little more than displaying his dominance and his presumed power over the situation and Loki despised swallowing it.

He also didn't like being on Asgard again. It made him tense and unsettled and he wanted Anthony nowhere *near* the place, but he knew it couldn't be helped. He had also known this had been coming.

It was why he wasn't unprepared.

Loki knew Odin far better than he wished to - the underhand tactics, preferred ruling methods and numerous other observations had allowed Loki to adopt his illusion of Odin so easily. Loki had known long before his illusion was pierced that he would be called back to Asgard eventually. His possession of an infinity gem and his... *particular* knowledge of Thanos made him invaluable.

But he had refused to let himself be a pawn again or to allow Odin to manipulate their meeting to his advantage. The key, of course, was making Odin *believe* that he was gaining what he wished. It had also meant... keeping certain things from Anthony. He hadn't wished to, but initially, it had been needed. Anthony had to react honestly in order for Odin to believe them and while Anthony was a skilled liar, Odin was not above searching out truth with his magic.

It was why Loki needed that very ruse to hold until they reached the privacy of his former chambers and he could explain. Hiding themselves from Heimdall would be simple there; he

had always masked his rooms and their presumed relationship should keep Heimdall or Odin from looking any closer. It granted Odin the comfort of his arrogant certainty and granted Loki the freedom to explain himself to Anthony before they enacted the rest of his plans.

He had to hope that Anthony would understand his reasons.

Anthony's hand was a warm weight against his back, and his support since the moment they'd stepped foot on Asgard was invaluable. Loki had been filled with a burning desire to simply *embrace* the other man on numerous occasions, to pull him close and express his gratitude in such a simple but heartfelt gesture. But like everything else, it would need to wait.

Anthony was staying quiet as they made their way through the twists and turns of Asgard's palace. They were as familiar to Loki as his own palm, and he could navigate them with ease, but to Anthony, everything was new. He was flicking his eyes in every direction, trying to absorb all that he could. He did tense automatically whenever he spotted one of the patrolling guards, but beyond a dark glare that Loki returned, they were left alone.

When they finally reached Loki's chambers some minutes later, he was faintly amused to find his wards had remained undisturbed. His mother had maintained his chambers after his so-called death and even during his time in prison. When he was free, Loki had spent his time as Odin utilising them and strengthening his protective spells. Odin, in the months that had followed his discovery, had obviously been too busy to bother untangling Loki's spellwork. It was one of few things that worked in Loki's favour.

It was the matter of moments for Loki to adjust his wards to include Anthony before he let them inside. His chambers were just as he had left them, and he felt a twinge of nostalgia and bitterness at coming back to them. There were disturbances from his time as Odin, but for the most part, it remained a reminder of his past: a time before the revelation of his true parentage, when he was fractured by the truth and became incapable of calling Asgard anything like home.

He was so lost in thoughts and memories as he gazed at the room that his projected rage faded for a more truthful, unseen tension. When Anthony spoke into the silence, the sound made him startle. "The rooms in my tower are better."

The moment he processed the words, it drew a laugh from Loki. He glanced over to find Anthony was smiling easily, but Loki could still see the worry in Anthony's eyes; worry for *Loki*. He knew the comment had been intended as a way to break the tension, but Loki still had to agree. "Yes, they are."

Where his rooms on Asgard had been filled with all manner of wealth, the items had been collected to fulfil a certain visual, and while some of them had been chosen by Loki himself, most were there to catch the eye and remind anyone who set foot inside that he was an Odinson: a Prince of Asgard. The rooms were designed to look *Asgardian* regardless of Loki's own desires, and he'd always been conscious of making sure that they remained that way.



His floor on Anthony's tower, by comparison, had been made specifically for *him* and was filled with things that Anthony knew he would like. Anthony had gone out of his way to make him feel comfortable, *at home*, and he'd done it far more easily than Asgard ever had.

"No offense or anything," Anthony told him, stepping away from Loki and out of his armour as he explored the immediate area. "But this isn't the kind of room I pictured for you."

"Oh?" Loki enquired, watching Anthony as he looked around. There was a confused pucker between his brow and a displeased curve to his lips.

"Well, yeah. I mean; there's the green and gold and the bookshelves full of magic texts, but everything else is kind of... impersonal?" He ran his hand over the back of a chair and glanced at the fine intricacy of a handmade rug before looking back at Loki. "I feel like this whole place is... I don't know, a bad attempt someone made at trying to be you?"

Loki smiled tightly. He was both pleased at Anthony for noticing and stung that he was the first one who *ever had*. It was what made him more willing to be truthful as he let his eyes travel over the room and all the memories that it contained.

"It was an attempt," he explained. "It was *my* attempt to model myself, even in my own quarters, into something more palatable to those around me." Anthony's face had fallen by the time Loki looked back at him, but Loki waved a hand dismissively. "It matters little, Anthony. I liked my chambers well enough when I was younger and have long grown out of caring about them. Besides, is it not your tower that I now call home?"

That at least, made Anthony smile even as he questioned, "Yeah, and any grand plans on getting back there in one piece?" He looked Loki up and down, his eyes narrowed suspiciously, and his mind working furiously. "Because you look a hell of a lot less bothered about being up here than you did a minute ago."

"Yes," Loki admitted, feeling unexpectedly... uncomfortable with admitting it, "I was not entirely truthful with you."

Anthony's mouth became a thin line, and he crossed his arms defensively. His face was beginning to close off, taking his good humour and confidence as he remarked flatly, "You lied to me."

Loki quickly stepped forward, closing the distance and placing a hand over Anthony's crossed arms. "It was something I had intended to tell you, but the arrival of Asgard at your tower forced me into a position where I could not explain myself without risking a plan I had spent years arranging." Loki only felt his nerves increase when Anthony remained unmoved by his words. "Truly, Anthony, I never wished to keep it from you; I'd simply had no need to share it previously when I could not be certain it would ever come to pass. When Fandral arrived, it was unexpected, and I couldn't allow Odin to become aware that his attempts to unbalance and keep us on Asgard were actually in our favour."

Anthony remained silent for a long time after Loki was finished, but at least he didn't shrug off Loki's touch. "You wanted us to be stuck up here?"

“I *wanted* Odin to seek an alliance with us. I had suspected that he would require us to stay as it is common in diplomatic meetings. I did *not* however, expect him to demand your presence as well.” Loki’s mouth twisted. “He regards Midgardians with little respect, and I had intended to use that to my advantage-”

“I wouldn’t have let you stay here *alone*,” Anthony interjected firmly, and that sharp denial and stubbornness eased some of the tension from Loki’s shoulders and let him breathe a sigh of relief.

“Yes,” he squeezed Anthony’s arm gently. “And it is truly better that you are here to discuss the alliance and stand by my side.” He couldn’t stop his small smirk. “It will be good for you to meet the other dignitaries as well.”

Anthony eyed him warily at that. “*Other* dignitaries?”

“I did many things while perpetrating my illusion of Odin, and creating stronger relationships among the realms was one of them.”

Anthony blinked at him. “But those relationships were with Asgard and Odin, not you.”

“And if they believe that Odin is inviting them for a discussion on new alliances against the Mad Titan, they will not question it, and they will not refuse, just as Odin cannot deny them when they arrive.”

Anthony’s eyes cleared. “You’re going to drop the rest of the realms on him. You’re going to *make* him ally with us as well as the rest of the worlds.”

“I am not,” Loki corrected, “*we* are.”

“Holy *shit*,” Anthony said before following it with an incredulous laugh. “He’s going to be so pissed. Fuck.” He shook his head, looking thoughtful and slightly impressed. “Can you really pull this off?”

Loki raised his eyebrows. “Do you doubt me?”

“Honestly, no, I don’t.” Anthony still looked a little disbelieving, but Loki just felt warm from Anthony’s words. “When are you going to bring them here?”

“Tomorrow. It will be too difficult to arrange tonight, and this will also allow us the chance to discover what Odin’s plans will be. It will prepare us in case he attempts to still utilise them once the ambassadors arrive.”

“And we when become ambassadors for Midgard, everyone will stop focusing on us. We’ll become part of a larger crowd,” Anthony realised, making rapid connections. “We’ll also get the benefit of not being tied to Odin and his whims; with multiple realms invested, he can’t afford to play games or withhold Asgardian forces when we need them.”

“Precisely.”

“And you couldn’t tell me because that Heimdall guy was watching?”

“His gaze followed us from the moment we arrived on Asgard,” Loki agreed, “it is only here, hidden by my wards, that he cannot see our actions.” Loki licked his lip. “It’s why I tried to keep you from accompanying me. I could not tell you, I could not risk it. I hope you understand why I needed to-”

Anthony shook his head. “You told me the second you could. You tried to *keep* from lying to me. You also didn’t hide it, and you justified yourself legitimately. You told me the truth like a *real* friend and ally.” Anthony grinned at him and uncrossed his arms; his body relaxed and open once more. “You also made being here feel less like a trap and more like a really spiteful way to piss off Odin while getting exactly what we want. You gave me *trust*.” Anthony let out a happy sigh before reaching up for Loki’s arm and gripping it tightly, his smile as bright as a star. “Seriously, you are the *best*.”

Loki didn’t know how much tension he was holding until that very moment when it all released. He felt better, knowing that Anthony understood, but he still wanted to clarify, to *promise*. “I assure you, Anthony. I will never lie to you unless-”

“Hey, hey,” Anthony stroked his arm in a soothing gesture. “You’re not in the same category as them. You won’t *ever* be in the same category as them if you explain it to me like you did now – the same thing I’ll do for you. We don’t keep malicious secrets, and we don’t *aim* to hurt each other; that right there, Loki, is why we’re friends and why you’ve got *my* trust.”

He squeezed Loki’s shoulder before pulling back, but the air felt... heavy, pregnant with something soft and delicate. It was something that Loki didn’t want to press to strongly only to have it burst, but before he could try anything, Anthony was turning away and moving towards the nearest chair, breaking whatever moment had been building between them.

“Now, come on,” he said, “explain the rest of the situation and plan to me. I’m going to have to call Bruce and Rhodey and listen to them freak out; it would be nice to add something comforting by the time they wind down.”

“It will be best if you don’t tell them anything about our plans until after the ambassadors have arrived. Heimdall will likely watch them for any betrayal on our part. Your tower might be protected by my spells, but it will be easier if nothing can be passed on through them even accidentally.”

Anthony scowled, but he still nodded, accepting Loki’s reasoning. He flopped into the nearest chair before blinking and beginning to wriggle. Loki watched him, greatly amused as Anthony attempted to get himself comfortable. “Are you quite well?”

“It feels like five different fabrics have merged together, I’m trying to figure out if I like it or not.”

Loki chuckled lightly before moving to another seat so that he could sit opposite Anthony. He leant back against the chair before steepling his fingers as he waited. He found himself unwilling to rush Anthony when the sight and sounds were so entertaining and relaxing to observe. Anthony was acting as if he hadn’t a care in the world, as if Loki’s word was a strong enough reason to dismiss his worries about being on Asgard while he trialed the varying furniture.

It made Loki smile softly.

He knew that there was little time to waste and that he had numerous things to do in order to have everything go according to plan. He *also* knew that Anthony was only behaving so ridiculously just to make him laugh.

And despite the many things pressing down on them and needing quick completion, the only thing Loki wanted and cared to do at the moment was to watch Anthony complain about Asgardian furniture and postulate about his own far more superior decorating choices.

Loki couldn't safely say why such an innocent moment meant so much to him.

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Despite taking Anthony only five minutes to settle, it took them a great deal more to discuss the entirety of Loki's plan. An hour quickly passed as Loki described the invitation he had pre-designed while portraying Odin. It was simple enough but terrifying in its implications for the Nine Realms should the Mad Titan invade.

He also showed it to Anthony and explained that he had masked his magical signature so that if anyone checked, it would confirm that Odin was sending it. The downside was that while Loki could send the invitations from the privacy of his chambers, he wouldn't know of their success until the following day.

If the realms accepted, then they would have little to worry about once the ambassadors were on Asgard. Their time would be spent in numerous political meetings as an alliance between them all was discussed. Odin would be well aware of what they had done by then, but he would be unable to reverse it or expose them without placing himself in an unflattering light. He simply couldn't afford to be seen as excluding the realms from such important discussions about Thanos.

The true problem, Loki had to admit, laid in having the ambassadors all arrive on time. Loki was fairly certain that the nature of the discussions would make them accept and arrive quickly, but he had still made sure to fill the letter with every implication that the invitation was an offer that they simply *couldn't* refuse.

Anthony had been impressed, fingering one of the invitations and reciting some of his favourite lines back at Loki, *the fate of the Nine Realms will depend on these discussions and The Mad Titan is amassing a power far too great for any one creature*. He did also pause to say to Loki, his eyebrows raised and a bitter twist to his mouth, "One ring to rule them all stuff, huh? And I can just guess who's going to be walking into Mordor."

But before Loki could answer him, Anthony had asked another question, and Loki had gone on to explain what they would need to do in the time before the arrival of the other realms.

Hiding their intentions from Odin would be crucial, but it would be particularly difficult with Odin watching them closely. Loki knew Odin would be intent on severing their partnership by any means necessary. It meant that navigating the evening's feast would be tedious, and he'd made sure to warn Anthony of the many things Odin might attempt. Separating and interrogating them was a virtual certainty, attempting to prove that they weren't lovers was a

possibility and even continuing his attempts to make Anthony give up his partnership with Loki in exchange for a sole alliance with Asgard wouldn't be impossible.

Anthony just seemed irritated by Loki's many theories and suggestions, especially the ones that pertained to Odin degrading and mocking Loki's sexuality and life choices. Anthony had ended up grumbling under his breath as he paced to try and work off some of his restless, frustrated energy. He remained, regardless of any of Loki's words, completely unwavering in his loyalty, and Loki enjoyed basking in it.

It was while he was watching Anthony pace - he had ceased his ranting at least, scowling instead and obviously running over everything he'd just learned - that there was a knock on the door. Loki glanced over his shoulder while Anthony went tense. It only took a quick check of his wards to confirm who was there.

He stood, his lip curled in distaste as he explained to Anthony. "Odin has sent someone to design your clothing for the evening."

Anthony took a step closer to him so that his arm was lightly brushing Loki's in support. "Let me guess: the apprentice who doesn't know his way around a sewing machine?"

"He will not *touch* the fabric that will decorate you," Loki snapped before stalking forward. He paused briefly before reaching the door, waving a hand to send Anthony's armour to rest beside the wall and away from the door. He also magically mussed his clothing and hair while creating a noticeable red mark on his upper throat.

Pulling open the door, he gave the man on the other side his most unimpressed glare and saw the Aesir swallow thickly. His eyes also lingered on the mark on Loki's neck before darting to the floor. "The Allfather has requested that I design clothing for-"

"*He* may have requested you, but I did not. You will send for Hertha as I will accept no other outfitting Anthony or myself."

The man looked surprised and uncomfortable, darting his wide-eyes back to Loki. "I- she is busy. She is-"

"You will tell Hertha that I have requested her," Loki demanded, his voice a sharp order that had the Aesir flinching. The reaction boded well; it meant the rumours of him had continued despite his absence. "You will do it immediately and tell her that I require her at my chambers within the hour."

Loki barely waited long enough to see the Aesir nod and start to stutter out a reply before he was shutting the door on him, leaving the Aesir to follow Loki's orders. He waited just long enough to make sure he was leaving before he turned back to Anthony.

Anthony had his arms crossed and his eyebrows raised. "And you're going for terrifying overlord of anger, why?"

"Because I am no longer a Prince that they must obey," Loki admitted simply.

“And fear is a good motivator to make them listen to you?” Anthony questioned him sceptically.

“Until we are considered dignitaries that they must respect and treat with humility than they will be inclined to ignore and refuse us,” Loki explained while making his way back towards Anthony. “This is something that they did even when I was a Prince.” He shrugged a little stiffly. “When I was a child, fear of Odin kept them from insulting me in public. A suitable application of my own powers when I got older did the same. They would rarely talk out of turn because of this so as not to incur our wrath.” When Loki took his seat again he felt remarkably tired. “The power that either of us holds here is minimal, Anthony, and I cannot have them understand that or our plans will be drastically hindered.”

Anthony seemed to notice his weariness because he lost some of his own tension and the accusatory slant to his mouth. He stepped closer and looked down at him, worry making him frown. “Are you okay, Loki?”

Loki chuckled a little humourless and tilted his head back on his seat to better look at Anthony. “I’m well enough.”

“Yeah... but being up here can’t be doing wonders for your stress levels.”

Anthony wasn’t wrong, but Loki was trying *not* to think about it. It was like an itch under his skin being back on Asgard, a painful reminder of his past at every corner. Anthony’s presence was... helping, but he still felt uncomfortable, tense. He was trying to ignore the emotions churning through him and the way a large part of him wanted to burn the planet to the ground. The rest could never bear to do that in respect for his mother.

It left him conflicted and trying to ignore everything he was feeling. His conversations with Anthony, his earlier admittances to Midgard, it only furthered the way he felt... raw. The care and friendship he received from Anthony as well as Rhodes and Banner, their horror and disgust at his treatment and their ability to give concessions over his invasion of their world - it only threw to light the sharp contrast he had received from Asgard, from Odin, from *Thor*.

Oh, Odin had been forced to pardon him eventually and admit what had happened to him, but it had fallen bitter and unhappy from his mouth.

His time with Anthony had granted him an acceptance he’d never known before, not only of his sexuality and his magic, but of *himself*. Anthony appreciated him for who he was and while he already felt drained from his small time on Asgard, it helped to have Anthony at his side.

“Loki?” Anthony asked again, and he felt Anthony’s hand come to rest on his shoulder.

He blinked away from his thoughts to find Anthony had moved to stand beside him. His concern had only grown and Loki smiled faintly. “I will not enjoy my time here, but it is a small price to pay for the alliance we seek.” But when that didn’t seem to comfort Anthony, he added firmly, “I will be fine.”

“And what if you aren’t?” Anthony asked quietly. He glanced down at Loki’s wrist where the bracelet rested. “You’ll tell me, right?”

“Do you worry I will fall to pieces somewhere?” Loki asked a little wryly.

“I will give up an alliance with Asgard to make sure that you *don’t*,” Anthony promised him, nothing but conviction in his tone.

Loki’s breath very nearly caught at Anthony’s stubborn determination to simply *protect* him, and Loki had to take a moment to compose himself. A smile was still curling at his mouth as something unfurled in his chest; warm and fond. He said his next words teasingly, “You would ruin years of planning and the protection of the Nine for a single person?”

Anthony however, remained utterly serious, keeping their gazes locked. “If that person is one of my best friends, then hell yes.”

Loki let out a small laugh and shook his head. “You are being ridiculous, Anthony.” When he saw stubborn resolve slip over Anthony’s features, he quickly added, “But, I will tell you if I find myself having difficulty here. We can then return to these rooms for few hours, discard our many acts and speak freely.”

Anthony remained silent, eyeing him for a long moment and judging his sincerity before he finally relaxed. He squeezed Loki’s shoulder before letting him go and stepping away. “Okay. Good.”

Loki instantly missed the touch, but he ignored the feeling to stand. He gestured for Anthony to follow him further into his chambers so that he could become aware of the layout. He explained it quickly as they moved; the main room was a sitting area designed for any guests he wished to host and comprised the majority of his chamber.

The connecting room was his sleeping quarters and had an ornate archway they needed to walk through. The room was spacious with a large bed big enough for three grown Aesir. It was covered in furs, pillows and throw rugs. There was a private bathing quarters to the left through another archway and a balcony to the right, the doors of which were currently closed.

Loki’s attention lingered briefly on the bed when they stepped inside, an embarrassed flush fighting its way onto his cheeks. He was able to force it down for the most part, even while turning to Anthony. “I’m afraid you will need to share a bed should we wish to maintain our ruse.”

Anthony just raised his eyebrows, looking amused. “What? Am I supposed to have a problem with this?”

Loki shrugged, feeling tense for an entirely new reason. “It’s not an unreasonable concern.”

It was true that Anthony seemed unconcerned with touching him for the sake of their ruse, kissing him even, but this would still be something quite different. Anthony knew that he’d had at least one dream about the other man and had made his ridiculous *photo collection* in response. But how would Anthony react if Loki had a similar dream while lying beside him?

The very thought made Loki feel mortified, uncomfortable, *nervous* - but if Anthony shared any of those concerns, he didn't show it. Anthony snorted as if the whole thing was ridiculous. "Yeah, Loki, it's not a problem for me. The only issue we're going to have is if you try to kick me out of the bed for being a cuddler."

Loki stared at him, certain it couldn't be that simple. How could Anthony take such a situation so easily? *How?*

*Because he is Anthony*, his mind told him, resolute and somehow, it just made Loki... relax. He *knew* Anthony had shared a bed with Rhodes, he knew Anthony did not care about his sexuality. It seemed not even this could bother him. *But what if you have other dreams?*

"Loki?" Anthony asked, noticing the way he'd grown quiet, *pensive*. Anthony's hand touched his arm, drawing him back to the room.

His smile came out a little tighter. "It has been a long time since I've shared a bed with another and my dreams are unlikely to be pleasant tonight. Perhaps it would be best if I retire to another -"

"Hey," Anthony interrupting, holding his gaze and telling him gently. "We'll share." He quirked a small grin. "Just, you know, don't stab me with a knife if I try to wake you up from it and we'll be fine. Okay?"

Loki couldn't say for certain that very situation wouldn't occur, not if memories of Thanos assaulted him, not if his time in the void left him gasping and hollow. Loki forced down a shudder before giving Anthony a brief, sharp nod. He then stepped away from Anthony, directing him towards the balcony; he needed air and a way to distract himself from his darkening thoughts.

He gripped the ornamental doors before pushing them open; Asgard lay before him but he hardly glanced at it. Loki stood to side so that Anthony could step through and so that he could watch Anthony's reaction as he saw the view for the first time.

Anthony's eyes went wide with awe and his jaw slack with astonishment. He all but stumbled to the railing, pressing hands against the ledge as he stared out over the city. It was a view Loki had spent centuries admiring; Asgard was spread out before them elegant and golden while stars twinkled in the distance and the bifrost rested at the edge of the world.

Anthony was staring at everything with such wonder and Loki found himself leaning against the doorframe and simply watching him, a small smile on his lips.

Loki couldn't help wondering how different his life would have been if someone like Anthony had grown up on Asgard beside him - if they had chosen *him* rather than Thor. But then, would they have even done that? Would he have been one more Aesir that didn't understand or appreciate Loki?

He supposed he would never know and really, it was pointless to speculate.



Shaking off his thoughts, Loki came to stand beside Anthony and leant against the balcony. He let his shoulder brush against Anthony's before he skimmed the city, searching for a more amusing aspect of his life on this planet. He found one soon enough and pointed down at the city.

"There is a parade held every few decades and walks through those streets. When I was very young - perhaps fourteen by your standards - I had seen it twice before and had no interest in attending again. When forced to do so, I decided to trial a spell I had recently discovered on the horses that were in the procession."

Anthony glanced at him, suspicion in his eyes, but humour in his grin. "What did it do?"

"Made them all defecate."

Anthony laughed, sudden and loud. "Holy shit."

"Quite," Loki remarked with amusement. Anthony just continued to laugh. "It was a monumental effort to clean up the mess," Loki continued, "I was, at the time, not yet known for such dramatic mischief and got off quite lightly for it."

"Which only made you want to do it again," Anthony picked out easily. He was still smiling as he flicked his eyes over the city before bringing them back to Loki. "What else did you do to make this place bearable, oh, God of Mischief? Regale me with your greatest achievements."

Feeling himself unwind the way he always did beside Anthony, Loki moved a little closer just so that he could feel the heat from Anthony all the way down his side. He let out a soft, content breath before he began to reply - enjoying the way Anthony's eyes crinkled when he laughed, the way he sometimes pressed his face into Loki's shoulder, trying to muffle his humour, the way he looked at Loki like there was nowhere else he'd rather be.

It only made Loki want to pull him even closer, but Loki refused to think about why.

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They remained on the balcony and talking for ten minutes or so as Loki recounted numerous pranks he'd pulled over the centuries. When his tales finally petered out, it left them standing there, resting against each other and staring out over the city.

It was peaceful, calming and Loki found himself thinking less about the view and all its memories, and more about the man beside him.

The silence however, was eventually broken.

"You ready to send out the invitations and call Rhodey and Bruce?" Anthony asked.

Loki blinked and looked down at him, frowning slightly. "Was I not before?"

Anthony sent him an extremely dubious expression. "I think you were in need of at least a *few* minutes of decompressing." He sighed a little and looked out over Asgard, wrinkling his nose slightly. "I think we both were."

Pulling away from Loki, Anthony only paused long enough to grab Loki's upper arm before dragging him back into Loki's chambers. Surprised, Loki let it happen. "Now, the sooner we get the invitations to them, the better, right? It gives them more chance to arrive on time?"

He looked at Loki expectantly, but Loki was still rather thrown and growing increasingly suspicious about Anthony's actions. When Loki answered him it was done cautiously, "... Correct."

"Okay. How about a quick call to Rhodey and Bruce first to break the bad news? You can always send the invites in the background while I'm calming them down and explaining things." Anthony started to reach into his pocket to pull out his phone, but Loki grabbed his wrist, holding his arm in place and staring at him with narrowed eyes. Anthony just gave him a look of confusion. "What?"

"Did you delay our actions simply to be certain that I was well?"

Anthony shrugged easily, not even bothering to hide it. "Of course I did."

"Why?" Loki demanded.

But he knew the reason. Anthony was caring, compassionate and unwilling to stand by and let his friends suffer. He would put the alliance on hold if it meant checking to make sure Loki was okay. It was in his nature, but.... something inside of Loki needed to push, needed to *know*. It craved a deeper answer than what his mind was telling him was true.

Anthony just looked at him with a puzzled expression. "Because you're my friend."

His response made Loki let him go, feeling stung and unwilling to look at why. Anthony didn't seem to notice his reaction as he pulled out his phone and began to dial Rhodes or Banner. Loki could only watch him, feeling uncertain and uncomfortable for an entirely new reason, one that he was reluctant to put it into words. Because for the first time in their partnership the answer that Anthony had given him was one that Loki no longer wanted to hear.

*No. It means nothing, Loki told himself firmly. There is nothing else that it can mean.*

He couldn't afford for it to be otherwise.

# Chapter 28

## Chapter Notes

Soooo we got a long chapter today! Lol. I know none of you are probably complaining but I wanted to fit a lot in and refused to split the chapter early. So. Yes. Long chapter. Heh.

Also. Can we all *thank rightsidethru* who has come in very generously to fill my role of beta!! She is absolutely fabulous and very, very helpful at knocking this draft into shape! Thank you so much! :\* ♥

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

Tony wasn't quite tapping his foot as he waited for Bruce to pick up, but it was a near thing. It wasn't that he was impatient to talk to Rhodey and Bruce - though, they all did have a lot to discuss - rather, Tony needed to expel some of the nervous energy that was still lingering inside him.

He was on Asgard, about to help Loki seriously piss off Odin, and they were going to start brokering an alliance with *other worlds* against a threat so powerful that Loki was willing to speak with Odin in the first place.

They also needed to come out of it with their body intact, rather than skewered by Asgardian soldiers.

No reason to be concerned or worried at all, right? Sure, he trusted Loki to know what he was doing, but it was still ever so slightly unnerving.

Tony also knew that with Loki back on a planet that had caused or been the catalyst of at least two thirds of the mage's nightmares, Tony was going to have to watch the other like a hawk to make sure Loki was handling it as well as he claimed he was.

He'd done his best so far to try and steer Loki's thoughts away from the darker places it could end up in. Tony had also made sure to tell him that they could *get the fuck out* at any time, but Loki was as stubborn as he was. It was just like when they were stuck at the SHIELD compound: Tony had refused to leave until the contract was completed - and now Loki was doing the same thing here.

The conversations about Loki's mischievous escapades had helped them both, at least, and Tony loved hearing about what Loki was like in his youth. He liked hearing about the decent parts of Asgard: the technology, the royal library, and the landscapes that Loki, even now, was still fond of.

But it didn't mean that either of them could linger in good memories and ignore what they needed to do for very long.

Tony was still surprised that Loki even needed to *ask* why he'd tried to help the mage unwind. They did it for each other, because that was what friends did - or at least, what they *should* do for one another. It was part of the Tony Stark Friendship Experience and if Loki still couldn't accept that, then Tony would just continue to be patient with the other man while further emphasising the knowledge that Tony would *always* be there to support him and fight by Loki's side.

Loki had allies now.

He had Tony, Rhodey, and Bruce - and Loki didn't have to fear their betrayal or their sudden departure when he needed them most. This wasn't just a contract anymore; this was friendship and Tony would stop at nothing when it came to the people he cared about.

Which, speaking of allies... Tony heard the call pick up, followed by a worried, "Tony?"

He grinned. "Hey, Bruce. How's Earth?"

"How are *you*?" the other parried instantly and Tony could just picture the frown on Bruce's face. "You've been gone for hours."

"Yeah, sorry. Time between the realms isn't always reliable. Plus, Loki was showing me around his old rooms. We'll be staying in here for a week so, it was best to get the tour first."

Tony flicked a glance to Loki, seeing the unimpressed look he was being given. But what was the point in being subtle? Better to do it without padding -like ripping off a bandaid.

"Did you say a *week*?"

Tony winced. "Oh, hey, Rhodey. Didn't know you were there... and that I was on speaker."

"How the hell did you get talked into staying a *week*?" Rhodey demanded, furious, concerned, and probably five seconds from finding Thor and demanding he be taken up to Asgard to join them.

"Look, I know this probably sounds bad, but-"

Tony was cut off by Loki placing a gentle hand on his shoulder. Tony looked behind himself to find Loki's other palm held out before Tony's face. He could hear the others calling his name through the phone, worried at his sudden silence, but Loki just asked, "If I may?"

Shrugging, Tony flipped the cell onto speaker before handing it over to the other. "Sorry; Loki wants to say hi."

"Rhodes. Dr Banner."

"Loki, what the hell-" Rhodey began, but was quietly and firmly cut off.

“Odin is offering Anthony and myself - and through us, Midgard - an alliance with Asgard. Negotiations such as these - as you are undoubtedly aware - take time. It is standard for guests of the realm to reside in the palace while such contracts are created.”

There was a moment’s silence before Rhodey, casual tone barely hiding his tension, remarked, “That would be reasonable, great even, if I trusted Asgard in the slightest.”

Loki let out a small huff of breath, amused at god knew what. “You have your bracelet, Rhodes; and should we be in any danger, I assure you that we’ll use it.”

“Do you think Odin is being genuine?” Bruce questioned, sounding both thoughtful and uncertain. “Does he really intend to produce a contract either of you would be willing to sign?”

Loki and Tony exchanged a glance, and Tony couldn’t stop the way his mouth tipped up into a mischievous, *conspiratorial* smile. Loki soon matched it; he was also the one to answer. “I spent many centuries on the side of Asgard, watching the numerous ways that Odin brokered such deals. His tricks and his attempts to outmanoeuvre us will not come so easily with such knowledge at my disposal.”

“He’s bound to know you just as well as you do him,” Rhodey warned, but Loki dismissed the statement easily.

“Odin spent very little time watching me, much preferring to keep me out of sight and mind. I was Thor’s shadow, and that dismissive eye now gives me an even greater advantage. Odin does not know me. He knows the man I pretended to be and, even now, he still struggles to discover who I am and what danger I pose to him.”

“*That’s* what we’re doing up here, guys,” Tony added. “We’re showing Asgard exactly what they lost when they overlooked Loki. We’re showing them all the good he could have done, all the *badass space mage* they could have had on their side. This is the ten year highschool reunion, and we’re about to kick the ass of every damn jock who decided to pick on the wrong target.”

Loki was grinning, bright and delighted, at Tony when he finished. The look in his eyes said that Tony was five seconds away from being hugged - and Tony was more than willing to encourage that. He enjoyed hugs, especially from people he was close to. Loki, however, had a tendency to be more reserved in his affection. He accepted Tony’s touches greedily enough, but very rarely instigated his own unless it was for the ruse or to comfort Tony.

Stepping closer, Tony didn’t hug the other, but he did bump their shoulders together and let the touch linger as Rhodey responded to Tony’s previous comment. “Are you sure you guys are going to be safe?”

“Safe enough,” Loki answered before Tony could. “And to ensure that very protection, I will leave you to speak with Tony; I have some spells to perform.”

“Be careful up there,” Bruce told Loki, while Rhodey added on a, “Call us, whenever you need to.”

Loki gave a faint smile before handing the phone back to Tony and left the bedroom to head back out to the main room shortly after. Tony just turned the phone off speaker and placed it up to his ear; he also stepped closer to the archway and leant against the wall, curious to see the spell that Loki planned to use to send out the forged invitations.

There was a moment's lull in conversation before Rhodey asked, "You off speaker?"

"Yeah."

"How is he?"

Tony let out a soft sigh. "Good as can be expected. Better even."

Bruce quickly pinpointed the concern that Tony hadn't stated. "That worries you."

Tony stepped back a little, still keeping Loki in sight but lowering his voice to try and avoid being heard. "How many times you heard me say 'I'm fine'?"

"Too many to count," Rhodey answered, probably around a grimace.

"I'm watching out for it," Tony assured them. "Hopefully, he really is okay. Either way, I'll be glad to get back to Earth when the week is over."

"On that," Rhodey began, "what happens if Animal Lady strikes again and you're up there?"

Tony rolled his eyes. "Odin thinks that Thor can handle it." He was gratified to hear one of them snort. "But Loki still made him agree to send me back if anything threatens Earth. Heimdall, the giant eye in the sky, is also going to look out for her. Maybe we'll get lucky and he can give us a location."

"Maybe," Rhodey allowed, but he didn't sound hopeful. "SHIELD has asked about Asgard - Thor too. He's even tried to follow you guys up but so far he hasn't been allowed off the planet. Do you know why?"

Tony blinked, surprised at that. "No idea. Kind of liking it, though." He tapped his fingers against his thigh in thought. "See if you can convince him to stay on Earth, make up something about defending the planet in our absence. I don't care. But I think we all know that having him up here isn't going to improve things for us."

"I'll see what I can manage," Rhodey told him dryly.

"Knew I could count on you."

"The media is repeating the footage of you leaving with the Asgardians pretty regularly too," Bruce informed him. "There are a lot of theories flying around about why you've been called up there."

"Anything entertaining? Please tell me there was a good joke about anal probing?" He heard a snigger and a long-suffering sigh and could easily pinpoint who had done which. Mostly,

though, he didn't care about that; there was something more important to focus on. "How are they taking to Loki?"

There was a decently long pause from the other end and it made Tony grow tense.

"There's still some work to do," Rhodey eventually admitted. "Pepper is looking to set up more interviews when you're back. For the most part, people have accepted that he isn't out to harm Earth and is apologetic about the damage he's done."

"But some people still want to blame him?" Tony picked out, catching what Rhodey didn't want to say aloud.

"Not many, but there are enough." Tony lips pulled into a thin line. He'd known that they wouldn't be able to solve the problem overnight, but he'd still been hoping for more. Hoping that'd they'd get back to Earth and at least *one* planet wouldn't be calling for Loki's head.

"Steve came out to support Loki," Rhodey continued.

Tony practically choked on his next breath. "He *what?*"

"Yeah, the reporters wanted a statement and he spoke on behalf of SHIELD and the Avengers. It was pretty generic when he spoke off their script - but, at the end, he endorsed Loki. Steve said that he'd personally spoken to Loki and could see the difference between who he was before and now. He also said that he knew the details about what Loki went through and that, if soldiers could be forgiven for their actions while being brainwashed, so could mages."

"How did the media take *that?*"

"He influenced a few fence sitters," Bruce answered. "Got you more support. He also reignited the people who wanted to jail Bucky, getting them to start drawing unflattering parallels. It's a continuing debate." He could hear the dry sarcasm in Bruce's voice as he continued, "In comparison, the two of you dating is considered rather minor."

*That* made Tony's perceptions waver. The one thing that Rogers could always be counted on was his stalwart protection and dedication to Bucky. The idea that he'd put himself and Bucky in a position to receive such harsh backlash was... odd.

Maybe Rogers was trying to curry favour or grab at forgiveness; hell, maybe he thought it was the right thing to do. *Or maybe Bucky put him up to it* - because that was one of the things Tony had learned to respect about Bucky Barnes. He didn't shy away from his past; instead, he took responsibility, even when past events had been out of his control. Bucky was *willing* to let justice be served on him. He wanted to repent for what he'd done.

Rhodey had ended up being the one to tell Tony about what happened with his parents. Rhodey had visited Tony at the tower and explained the truth, telling him that he didn't have to work on Bucky's arm if he wasn't comfortable with it. He didn't even have to *see* Bucky if he didn't want to.

It had taken him a week, a lot of alcohol and a slightly smashed part of the lab to come to terms with it - but in the end, he'd agreed to meet Bucky.

The so-called Winter Soldier had barely been speaking to anyone but Rogers, but when he saw Tony, Bucky had offered Tony a shot at him for what had happened to Maria. Not a punch, or a fight - a *shot*. He'd offered Tony repayment in the worst, bloodiest, way possible. Tony had been shocked, shaken - *appalled* and he sure as hell hadn't taken it. He'd loved his mother and, yeah, he'd felt *furios* and *horrified* at what had happened to her, but he knew it hadn't been Bucky's fault. Not really.

He'd asked Bucky questions instead; things that he hadn't even known he wanted the answers to and came out of the conversation shaky and emotional. But Bucky had answered him honestly with everything that Tony had wanted to know. It hadn't been a... good conversation, but it had clarified things for him. Bucky was a puppet as much as Loki had been and he carried the weight and the guilt of his past on his shoulders. Tony knew from firsthand experience how much of a penance and punishment that weight tended to be.

But Tony made himself shake off the thought, the *similarities*, between them all and focused back on the present.

"Well, that's nice," Tony finally answered, doing his best to dismiss and shrug off the labyrinth of thoughts and possible meanings that had sprung from hearing about Rogers' actions - at least, for the moment. "We'll see how much it helps by the time we're back." Making his way towards the other room once more, he went to check on Loki, if only to further distract himself from the turn their conversation had taken... only to pause, gape and murmur in wonderment, "*Woah.*"

"What?" Tony was instantly questioned by his nervous friends.

"Sorry, it's nothing. Loki's just... doing a spell."

Except that it *wasn't* nothing; Loki was sitting in the centre of the room, seemingly relaxed, in a typical meditation pose with his eyes closed. He was surrounded by floating letters but, one by one, the area behind each letter shifted like water - only for an image of some place, some *other planet*, to briefly appear. Almost immediately after, the letter fell through the portal, which closed behind it seconds later.

Tony found himself walking closer, unable to resist the temptation of peering into the various windows that led into other realms. The locations always seemed be different, and Tony could only assume that the spell was locating certain individuals and dropping the relevant letter wherever the hell they were so that it could be found and read instantly. Tony was getting a glimpse at numerous planets pretty much simultaneously and he just wanted to hang up on Rhodey and Bruce so he could examine them more thoroughly.

"Uh huh," Tony distantly heard Rhodey say. Tony had to admit his attention was pretty divided - and most of it was *not* on the two friends who were currently humouring his distraction. "And how much of your attention have we actually got now?"



It took Tony a few moments - more than he was honestly willing to admit - for the words to actually filter through. "Uh. Some?"

He heard both of them laugh, but Bruce was the one to order him, "Go spend time with Loki, but call us if you need anything."

Tony made himself tear his gaze away from the fascinating images in front of him, although it almost physically pained him to do it. "You're sure? Everything's alright down there? You don't want me to pick up any souvenirs while I'm away?"

"Just come back in one piece, and we'll be happy," Rhodey told him.

Tony grinned in response. "Trust us. We know what we're doing."

"You say that like it's suppose to do something other than worry me."

Tony just laughed, bright and wickedly amused. Rhodey just huffed a breath, well used to Tony by now and likely knowing that to continue questioning Tony wasn't going to get him anywhere. Rhodey's worrying however, wasn't about to stop. "Look out for each other and call if you need us. We can find a way up there if we have to."

Tony smiled, and it was far too soft around the edges to be anything other than fond. "Promise, though let me know if you need Iron Man and I'll make my way back down. In the mean time, Iron Legion is at your beck and call. Got that, FRIDAY?"

"Yes, Boss," his AI confirmed.

"Awesome," Tony answered cheerfully. "Then I'll catch you all in a week. Look after Earth for me and don't feed the 'bots after midnight!"

He heard Rhodey grumble at him and was sure Bruce was shaking his head in exasperated amusement, but Tony didn't bother to let them add anything else before he ended the call and slipped the phone back into his pocket. He then turned his attention to the mage sitting on the floor and the numerous letters still to be sent.

Tony hoisted himself over the nearby not-couch and sat down on it, leaning forward to watch with fascination as the newest letter fell through space and magic to land somewhere in the nine realms in order to further their plans.

Tony found watching Loki work was just as interesting and exciting as sitting down and creating something in his lab.

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It took Loki another fifteen minutes to send out the last of the letters, and Tony found himself watching avidly the entire time. He found himself almost... disappointed when the last one dropped away and Loki sucked in a breath before opening his eyes.

When Loki swayed a little on the spot, though, Tony's attention immediately shifted to concern; he also jumped off the couch and came closer, resting a careful hand on the other man's shoulder. "Hey, you okay?"

Loki turned to him slowly, looking momentarily disoriented before he blinked it away. He also shook his head before bringing a hand up to it, looking as if he was already fighting off a headache. “I am fine, Anthony. Merely more drained than usual; masking my magic while projecting another’s is difficult. It also does not help that I must hide the nature of my actions from Asgard, lest they catch on and circumvent our plans.”

“Anything I can do to help?” Tony asked, his brow creasing in worry for the other. “I’d offer to get you some tea or food, but I doubt I’d be able to find the fridge.”

Loki smiled faintly. “Thank you, but I’ll be fine. How did the conversation with Dr Banner and Rhodes go?”

“Good,” Tony summarised, because, for the most part, it was. “They did say that Asgard isn’t letting Thor up here. I asked Rhodey to make sure he stays put, even if they Odin does change his mind. Any reason you can think of why Odin might be rejecting Thor’s calls?”

Loki pursed his lips in thought. “Odin is not oblivious to Thor’s shortcomings. His plans for us are likely vast and require careful movements. Thor does not make it easy for one to manipulate with... delicacy.” His mouth twitched into a somewhat bitter smirk. “It is not always ideal to use a hammer when a dagger is far more efficient and subtle.”

“What a shame that Odin threw out all the good weapons for me to be able to find,” Tony told Loki with a pointed smirk.

Loki just let out a soft chuckle before pushing himself off from the floor. It forced Tony let him go and to stand as well. Loki was finally steadier on his feet, so Tony didn’t have a reason to reach out for him again.

“Sooo... I was watching your little postal portals - which is how I want to send all my physical mail now, by the way - and I was wondering which one was for the woman you mentioned a while ago—the one who used to work for Thanos?”

“She did not work for him - not exactly,” Loki corrected. “She was his adopted daughter, and I have not invited her, nor her associates.”

Tony’s eyebrows shot up. “Okay; what and why not?”

Loki shrugged. “As to the first: the specifics I’m not certain of, but I believe she discovered the truth of his goals and has since sworn to stop him as for the second, I did not send her an invitation as she and her group will have little interest in working with Asgard. I will seek a separate alliance with them and as myself.” He tilted his head, eyeing Tony thoughtfully. “Perhaps you should attend as well; one of the group is part mortal and I believe you might get along.”

“Part... mortal?” Tony asked, not quite sure how to take that announcement.

Loki nodded. “Yes, but he is hardly the strangest among him. There is a rather annoying raccoon that talks far too much.”

Tony just stared at him. “Talking raccoon. *Right.*”

Tony was trying to figure out exactly which question to begin with when there was a knock on the door, making them both turn to look at it. “Ah,” Loki murmured. “Hertha.”

He moved away from Tony, walking swiftly to the door and opening it. He stood to the side almost immediately, inviting in an older woman with a stern face. She looked Loki up and down but, unlike the disgust Tony was used to seeing, she seemed to linger more on the hems of his shirt - as if cataloguing it for faults.

Loki shut the door behind her before making a gesture at Anthony. They didn’t bother with greetings, Loki simply started to make his demands, “My specifications you already have, but he will require formal wear created. It will be done in gold and red.”

Loki made another, absent gesture and an ornate mirror with a stool in front of it appeared out of thin air. Hertha stepped forward, still without saying a word, while Loki motioned for Tony to go stand before it. Seeing no good reason to refuse, Tony made his way over. Hertha took his arm when he was close enough, urging him to stand on the stool even as she rubbed the fabric of his clothing between her fingers.

When she finally spoke, her voice was gruff and her eyes narrowed. It made Tony think of the (many) angry school teachers from his youth. “He will not look well in leather.”

“He will look handsome in *anything*,” Loki promptly corrected her, and Tony was surprised to see the faint smile that she shot Loki in response.

“He will have similarities to yours?” She questioned while circling Tony. “His height shall force changes to be made.”

Tony sent her a narrow-eyed glare. “Are you calling me *short*?”

She ignored him, instead taking his arms to force them out from his sides. The motions were rough, no nonsense, and made Tony feel like he was about to be frisked. “Cape?”

*No capes!* Tony wanted to say on instinct, but he forced it down. He was probably the only one who’d understand the reference, anyway.

Loki, though, seemed to agree with him. “No.” The trickster’s fingers lingered on his shoulder. “A jacket. However, allow an addition should one wished to be hooked.”

Tony’s mouth kind of ran away with him before he could think, and he looked over his shoulder to meet Loki’s bright green gaze. “That means I could steal one of yours, right?”

Loki chuckled and, likely for the benefit of Hertha, he leant forward to brush his lips against Tony’s hair and murmured, loud enough for her to hear, “I rather like that.”

Tony just grinned and leaned slightly into the other’s touch.

Unfortunately, Loki didn’t get to stay there for long before the palace tailor was gesturing for him to move away so that she could continue to run assessing hands over Tony. He felt

something not unlike a ruler get lightly slapped against his shoulder blades, making him jerk slightly in surprise. Hertha didn't seem concerned and when she came around to his front, he did find a small, wooden ruler in her hand. She was using it to press against various portions of his body and, as the fitting continued, Tony had to blink a few times when it changed shape in front of his eyes.

The process only took about ten minutes overall as he was jerked from side to side, but otherwise pretty much ignored as Hertha exchanged casual commentary with Loki about what the hell his outfit would look like. Tony wasn't normally inclined to sit still and say nothing, but being poked and prodded by a tailor was one of those few and far-between times. Under normal circumstances, he would have his StarkPhone in hand and be scrolling the internet; this time around, however, Tony made do with just listening to Loki and trying to visualise what, exactly, the mage intended him to wear.

When Hertha finally moved away and slipped the ruler back into some mysterious pocket, she coolly informed Loki, "They will be brought to you tonight."

Loki nodded and she gave them both one in return before turning on her heel and making her way out of the room. Tony waited until the door had shut to round on Loki. "Okay. So it seems she likes you."

"Yes," Loki agreed. "I enchanted many of her items in my youth, increasing her speed and her efficiency. She has always appreciated that." He smiled a little. "She also completed much of her training in Alfheim and grew used to their more... *enlightened* practices. She is one of the few who would not care for us being lovers, as you saw for yourself."

"Huh," Tony commented absently, thoughts whirling about while he stepped off the stool. "So that's why you asked for her."

"She is also the best at her craft and, therefore, the only one I will have dressing either of us."

Tony couldn't help his smirk or the way he cooed, "Awwh! Only the best from my boyfriend!"

Loki rolled his eyes at the response, but still answered him seriously: "You are a Prince, Anthony, and you should be dressed as such."

Sobering at that claim, Tony asked him curiously, "You keep calling me that up here. Why?"

"Because in wealth, influence, and power, Anthony, you *are* a Prince. You are also a fine warrior and revered scholar. You are someone that Asgard would consider royalty far more than any other on your planet - therefore, I will make sure that you are treated as such."

Tony fucking *preened* at that statement and he couldn't even be bothered to stop himself from doing so. He puffed himself up, blatantly peacock-like, and smirked as he watched Loki's conviction change to something half amused and half a grimace. "Prince Stark. Or, wait, maybe Prince Tony? Or are you going to insist that I use Prince Anthony? Hey, does that mean I can change my name to reflect my *universal* status as Earth royalty?"

“I do not believe your Midgardian rulers would recognise you as a Prince the way that Asgard and the other realms might,” Loki answered dryly, which cut through some of Tony’s enthusiasm.

“Right, because Asgard is backwards in how they value things.” Tony sighed a little. “Well, I suppose I’ll just have to settle for being a Prince’s consort; that’s pretty universal, right?”

Loki couldn’t quite quell his snort in time and it only made Tony grin in accomplishment at a job well-done.

“Perhaps,” Loki allowed. “But, on the subject of which, perhaps I should explain some of the things you will be required to know at the feast--what with being my highly adored consort.”

"Hah! Lay it on me, babe. There isn't a formal event yet that I've haven't mastered the tricks of in a night." Tony paused thoughtfully for a moment before a sly smile curled one corner of his mouth. "Chosen to *use* that information, of course, is a different story entirely."

Loki raised a dark eyebrow, but still gestured Tony over to one of the chairs. The mortal plopped down, making himself comfortable and waited for what he expected to be a relatively short lesson to begin. He’d seen Thor eat, after all; how many rules could there possibly be?

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The answer to that very stupid and very naïve question?

A lot. There were *a lot* of rules when it came to formal Asgardian feasts. Most of them involved being highly respectful to the royal family, but Loki told him to ignore most of those unless it was making sure the servers adhered to them with Tony.

He was glad he had a good memory since, even though the Aesir were pretty straightforward in their interactions, there were still at least sixty etiquette rules that Tony absolutely needed to know. Loki also took the time to repeat his earlier warnings about Odin.

Really, the only upside to the whole horribly boring and stressful conversation was the way he kept side-tracking Loki with questions about Asgard. Specifically: the Bifrost, the Rainbow Bridge, and the other things that made up the technological data mine that Tony wanted to dive right into.

Loki, for the most part, could answer his many assorted questions. However, when it came to the more intricate, less magical workings of the various devices Tony wanted to know about, the trickster simply couldn’t answer them. In the end, Loki promised to take Tony to the royal library once the other dignitaries arrived - so Tony was more than willing to wait (and to maybe scan copies of a few books via his phone once he had access to the apparently very impressive library).

Talks about Asgard’s technology eventually turned to discussions about how the Aesir’s society encouraged its populace *not* to learn how things worked and *not* to read about the history of the realms - which then eventually spiralled into a conversation about Loki’s time masquerading as King.

It turned out that Loki's years of watching Odin rule, reading everything he could get his hands on, and his desperate desire in his youth to show that he *could* be a good King had armed the mage with everything he needed to not only to restore some sense of order to the realms after the Convergence and the attack by the Dark Elves, but he also knew enough loopholes in the law to overthrow Odin and seize the throne quite... legitimately.

Loki was, for all intents and purposes, still considered a son of Odin. It meant that he could challenge Odin's right to rule and, if Odin was defeated, take his place as the new King. Loki had done everything according to the book so that not only would the power of Asgard accept him as the rightful ruler but, when he had finally been discovered, he couldn't be charged with any actual crime.

Oh, he'd still been forced to flee-what with no Aesir wanting him on the throne - but, despite the populace's fury at being fooled and their dislike of the fact that he'd *done a good job*, they couldn't actually put him in prison for it.

That had to be the *biggest* irritation to the Asgardians, and the smug smirk on Loki's face when Tony gleefully pointed it out, had more than proven that he damn well knew it and had probably designed it to end exactly that way.

Of course, Loki hadn't done it entirely to infuriate everyone. He'd been working to manoeuvre the realms closer together in preparation for Thanos while keeping the Infinity Gems out of his reach. The rumour that *Loki* had an Infinity Gem however, turned out to be a lie. Loki had been in possession of one-but had instead carefully hidden it with the help of the Guardians of the Galaxy and had bound all of them, including himself, to silence on the location.

It had been an enlightening few hours of conversation.

When they were eventually finished, Loki looked a little worn around the edges and Tony felt much the same. He'd ended up forcing Loki to lie down on the couch so that Tony could proceed to drape himself on top of the other with his head pillowed on Loki's chest - just like they'd done after the press conference.

Loki's fingers had come up to play with Tony's hair, and while they couldn't listen to classical music like they had the last time, Loki has instead flicked his fingers in a languid motion and an illusion had sprung up around them of a field beside a babbling brook. Tony had felt a lot of tension leave Loki as they simply lay there, listening to the soft, murmuring sounds of the forest.

Tony had very nearly dozed off when a sharp, sudden knock had made him startle upright and had shattered the illusion, drawing them back, rather abruptly, to Loki's slightly darker chambers.

Loki turned his head, frowning slightly and twitched his fingers to light some torches that Tony *hadn't even noticed* which filled the room with a soft, amber glow. He also lightly pushed at Tony chest which forced Tony to crawl off the other to stand. Loki wasn't far behind, but instead of opening the door, he barked loudly, "Come."

The door opened a moment later and Hertha stepped inside, shortly after, she was followed by two female attendants who were each holding a set of clothes that were carefully laid over their arms. Loki stepped forward and Tony did the same, eyeing the items curiously. The clothing being held by the woman on the left was definitely Loki's: green, gold, black, and lots of leather. Tony's own set was much brighter with various materials comprised of deep, blood red, gold, and rich shades of brown.

Hertha made a gesture for the girl with his clothing to step towards him. Tony shot Loki an uncertain look, but Loki didn't seem bothered by the situation. "She will dress you," Loki informed him, his gaze flicking to the bedroom. "Perhaps in the other room? I would like to wait and see you in full majesty."

Tony raised his eyebrows, amused at the other's answer, but shrugged and beckoned the girl to follow him. "You might want to be sitting down," he called back to Loki, arrogance and teasing both apparent in his voice. "I'm sure it's going to be impressive."

"Of that I have no doubt," Loki replied back easily and with just a hint of heat. Tony grinned over his shoulder before stepping away from the arch of the door.

He turned to the girl, who didn't look older than twenty. She was keeping her eyes averted as she placed the items on the bed. There was a simple tunic, leather pants, and a jacket that was a lot like Loki's with its high collar, long sleeves, and intricate designs. Hell, there were even *boots*. They were the standard thigh high leather ones that were found up here in Asgard and Tony just hoped - probably in vain - that they came with socks.

When she finished, she softly requested, "Shall I undress you, sir?"

"Yeah, no, I can do that part," Tony answered while shrugging out of his clothes.

Modesty, after all, was for suckers... and apparently boxers were for people who weren't about to wear leather pants. Catching movement out of the corner of his eye, Tony managed to grab the pants and pull them on before his helper could. There were *some* limits. It still took him a moment to work out the not quite a zipper, not quite Velcro way the Aesir had for closing their pants, but they went on easily and fit him not unlike form-fitting jeans - so all and all, not that uncomfortable.

Tony let her handle the rest of the outfit, up to and including the numerous buckles, straps, and ties that came with the boots, jacket, and shirt. She even threaded her hands through his hair, doing something that made him think it had just been casually styled.

She stepped back after she was finished and ran her eyes over him. Tony couldn't help doing the same in a mirror similar to the one Loki had conjured in the other room. His outfit was... different than what he was used to. Nice, though. It fit him exceptionally well and he could see why Loki had wanted Hertha to make it. The material was thick but not heavy or hot. He could wear it quite comfortably and it didn't limit his movements.

Smoothing down his tunic over his chest before lightly fingering the material, Tony looked back at the attendant only to find she was staring rather intently at his pants. He found himself trying to fight down a smile. He let it happen for a few seconds before he cleared his

throat lightly. When she caught his gaze in the mirror, she blushed before hastily looking to the side.

His smirk spread across his face then; Tony Stark, universally sexy.

The thought only made him curious to see what *Loki* would think, though. If he'd thought Tony was attractive before, would Aesir chic only make him look even better? Or would Loki still prefer the casual shirt and jeans combo?

Well, there was only one way to find out.

It only took a couple of steps to reach the archway of the room and look down at the others. Loki had obviously pulled on his finery, but his back was mostly to Tony so he couldn't see much, beyond the similarities to his own outfit. However, they fit Loki well. The clothes looked *good* on him: natural. It was like a more formal version of what he'd worn before throwing Tony out a window all that time ago.

Looking at the other man like that, surrounded by attendants and in the middle of his royal chambers, Tony got a sudden idea that he couldn't suppress.

"What do you think," he called out softly, "my handsome Prince Loki?"

Loki had stiffened momentarily before he turned abruptly to look at Tony. His expression was... pretty impressive. He'd been shocked at first but then he'd run his eyes over Tony like he was examining every individual thread and then wondering which item to take off first. His eyes were filled with nothing but appreciation and *definitely* attraction. He looked like he wanted to jump Tony, and Tony wasn't quite sure if that was the ruse or Loki's libido talking.

There was also that particular glint in his eyes that seemed to always show up if Tony called him any kind of rendition of '*my Prince*'. It made a smirk catch at the corner of Tony's mouth.

"*Very* fine," Loki responded after a few long seconds, his voice slightly rough. He started to come closer and Tony moved to meet him at the same time. Loki's hand came up, only the slightest hesitation before he caught Tony's cheek against the palm of his hand. His eyes didn't linger on Tony's face, though; they continued to drop to Tony's outfit like he was marvelling at the sight of it. "You look... *stunning*, my Anthony."

Tony's grin grew even wider. "We look a perfect pair then."

Loki swallowed thickly and dragged his gaze up to Tony's. It was the look on Loki's face, combined with the numerous eyes watching them, the *reputation* they had and the instinctive need to *react* - it had Tony pressing forward before he could think or second-guess it and catching Loki's mouth in a kiss.

He could feel Loki's initial startle. He could *also* hear the shocked gasp of at least one of the attendants. It was enough to make Tony break away even as he brought his hand to Loki's hair, tangling his fingers in the silky strands. He trailed his mouth along Loki's jaw, up and over his cheek to rest beside his ear.



“You look like you want to unwrap me,” Tony whispered. “Not that I have a problem with it. But how passionate do you want us to get?”

Because if they really were a couple and Loki really *was* looking at him the way he had been before, then there was no way Tony wouldn't have tried to drag them down onto the nearest flat surface. It was fine if Loki did want to employ a ‘*look, don't touch*’ rule on Asgard, but surely a *bit* more confirmation on their relationship could only be a good thing?

They wanted to be believed, after all.

“Leave us,” Loki barked sharply in command while one of his hands found Tony's hip, sliding it sinuously and in a way that probably painted only *one* picture to the women in the room.

Tony just made sure to press himself even closer, practically leaning on Loki while using his free hand to trace the patterns and buckles on Loki's jacket before sliding his fingers teasingly underneath the leather to touch the material of the mage's tunic.

It wasn't until the door was firmly shut that Loki's hands disappeared from Tony's body and he attempted to step back. Tony did *not* let him go far. He did catch Loki's gaze, watching carefully for any of the carefully hidden discomfort and embarrassment that usually cropped up whenever Loki was physically attracted to him.

Thankfully, those emotions weren't as prominent as he expected, but Tony didn't know if that meant Loki was simply growing used to Tony not being insulted by his attraction, or that his reaction to Tony's clothing had been more of a projection for the ruse than anything else.

“I'm not unhappy or uncomfortable with you, Anthony,” Loki told him, sighing slightly before lightly patting his hip reassuringly. “I'm merely... thoughtful of the question that you raised.”

“Which one?” Tony asked, still not letting the other man go.

Loki just looked amused with any lingering attraction carefully masked. “Exactly how passionate we are going to be.” His humour faded, though, as he grimaced. “Odin will look for any chance to disprove us and nothing would please him more than learning you are only pretending to be my lover.”

“So we make sure he doesn't find out,” Tony told him firmly in reply. “We do everything to show them that I'm your Midgardian Prince and that I'm not leaving your side for nothing.” Wrapping his arms around Loki's waist, he sent the other a besotted, wide-eyed look while pressing himself closer still. “Okay, pumpkin?”

Loki looked like he was fighting down a chuckle. He did bring his hand forward, tucking two fingers under Tony's chin and lightly tilting it upwards. The gesture was intimate enough that Tony could almost believe he was about to be pulled into a kiss. “Very well, little vegetable.”

Tony blinked, snorted and tried not to smile. “Vegetable? You couldn't come up with something better than... wait... did you just call me *tiny*?”

This time, Loki didn't quell his chuckle, especially when Tony pulled away from him, affronted, and punched him in the chest. It did nothing, of course, but *little fucking vegetable?* Oh, Loki was going to *pay* for that.

## Chapter End Notes

\*casually fixes aspects of Civil War\*

\*casually talks about a bunch of plot points that had been lingering\*

*\*casually makes them kiss again\**

Ahem. Hope you liked the chapter! :D

# Chapter 29

## Chapter Notes

Is this late? What? Pssh. Noooo. Of course not... \*scratches the back of her head and looks around awkwardly\*

Ahem. Let's just ignore that though. For now, let's enjoy the fact that there is a new chapter, yay!! Let's also thank the awesome Amara1783 and rightsidethru who are going to both be working their magic betaing skills on this story from now on! Couldn't do it without you lovely wonders. Thanks so much for all your help. ♥

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

“Come now, Anthony, don’t pout so.”

The teasing remark just made Tony glower at a widely grinning Loki who had taken a seat on the lounge. He was patting the space beside him, trying to encourage Tony to sit down and discuss the feast. Tony would normally have acquiesced and joined him but...

*Little. Vegetable.*

It was true that a lot of his outrage was exaggerated, but Loki had only laughed at Tony’s punch and smirked at his grumbles over what would be a better and more *acceptable* nickname. The mage had even very lightly patted the top of Tony’s head mid-rant and cooed, “*poor little vegetable.*”

The asshole was having too much fun at his expense.

... And maybe a part of Tony was feeding the flames of Loki’s good humour by holding an imaginary grudge just so that Loki would laugh at him like that; relaxed, delighted and fond. It wasn’t the first time Tony had put up with an exasperating nickname just to make a friend happy - the list Rhodey had for him was *long*, after all.

Loki also knew his anger wasn’t real; it was obvious by the lightness in the mage’s eyes, the ease in his countenance. He knew that Tony wasn’t actually upset with him, if he was, Loki would be apologising rather than poking and prodding to see if he could ruffle Tony more.

He patted the seat again while continuing to grin at Tony. “Will you not come sit beside your handsome Prince?”

Tony snorted. “More like my discourteous, *insulting* ass of a friend.”

Yet, despite his words, Tony still made his way to plop down beside the other man, grimacing briefly as he fiddled with the coat that had tried to jab him in the back of his thighs with

numerous metal pieces. Loki had just huffed out a laugh and reached out to help Tony smooth the unfamiliar material with deft fingers so that Tony could sit down comfortably.

When Tony was as relaxed as he was going to be, he looked over at the mage and allowed himself a brief sigh, knowing this would wipe the smile off Loki's face, but also knowing that they couldn't put it off forever. "You told me about etiquette. You never elaborated as to how *we* as a couple were going to act at the feast."

"Ah," Loki breathed, some of the relaxation falling from his posture as Tony expected. It made his faint sprawl become something stiffer and more wary. "Well, I suppose that depends on many things."

"One of those things better not be my '*willingness*' to flaunt our relationship, because that shouldn't even be in question right now."

Tony's answer made a hint of Loki's smile come back. "No, I'm well aware of that. My consideration was more towards keeping too many tempers from flaring. Thor is not the only Aesir to react violently to things that offend and disgust him. We may be protected guests, Anthony, but I wish to see our plans succeed far more than receive some temporary satisfaction at horrifying a few irritating and impolite Aesir."

"But the satisfaction would feel *so good*," Tony almost whined - wistful and disappointed at the many things he wanted to do but knew weren't actually possible.

...Well, not yet, at least - maybe when they sprung their *surprise guests* on Odin.

"Patience, Anthony." Loki told him fondly, as if reading his mind, "We will have more freedom once the ambassadors arrive."

Tony tapped his fingers on his thigh thoughtfully. "Okay, but what exactly does that mean for us until they do? Are we going to hold hands? Kiss? Are you going to sweep me into a romantic dance in the middle of the room or cup my ass so Odin can get a nice eyeful?"

"I thought I was suggesting that we try not to *unduly* aggravate them," Loki remarked dryly.

Tony pouted at him. "Killjoy."

"We will have plenty of time to cause Odin frustration and embarrassment at a later date - for now, I believe it would be best to... minimise some of the more dramatic displays of affection you are fond of. The touches and conversations we've had thus far around the Aesir have done exactly what was needed: spread knowledge of the nature of our relationship, but anything further might prove more of a hindrance than a help."

"We might just look like we're showing off, rubbing their noses in it," Tony realised, "like it's nothing but an act."

"They will be disinclined to trust me as it is," Loki agreed, "and we do not want them doubting this."

Tony's mind was turning over the situation, thinking rapidly and quickly snagging on the only option that would work. He looked down at Loki's hand before reaching out for it and linking their fingers. Loki startled slightly, glancing down at their hands with faint confusion. "Anthony?"

"You're right," Tony told him. "We need to stop the dramatics. We want this to be believed, but all they've seen so far is the posturing and the show. They need to see the softer side. They need to believe we're a *couple*."

Sliding a little further down the couch, Tony let their sides press together and put their clasped hands on his thigh. "That means, we need to act like one."

Loki had started off frowning; looking unsure, but Tony watched how that quickly made way for understanding and consideration. "You'd have us increase our affection through simple acts." Loki flicked his attention to their hands. He also reached out and lightly straightened the collar of Tony's jacket, his fingers skimming the skin of Tony's neck. "You would have us look the part, by acting as if we simply cannot stop these little gestures."

"If I'm your Midgardian consort; your boyfriend and your lover, this is the display they're going to expect to see from us." Bringing up their hands, Tony turned them so he could brush a feather-light kiss to the back of Loki's. "It's not just about sex with us; it's about something deeper. So if we're falling in love, we need to act like it."

Loki blinked, his green eyes filled with surprise. "...In love?"

"Well, yeah," Tony replied with a light shrug. "Neither of us do things by halves, right? If we're dating, it's going to be something serious between us."

It took only a moment for Loki to let out a soft little laugh and look down at their hands. "Well," he remarked, before bringing his eyes up to Tony's. There was a bright spark of mischief in them that Tony adored seeing. "I suppose that should be easy enough to fabricate; I am a master of illusion, after all."

Tony made a sound of faint outrage while Loki just looked like he was trying not to laugh. "Excuse *you*? I am loveable, you asshole. You are *lucky* to be dating my fine ass."

"I thought I was supposed to be interested in more than just your *ass*, Anthony," Loki riposted with a sly smirk and raised eyebrows.

"Well, a good way to *keep* getting access to that ass is to lower the insults and up the compliments."

"Oh, dear, I'm terribly sorry," Loki was quick to reply, adopting a tone of contrition that Tony didn't buy for a moment. "However shall I apologise to my exceedingly lovely and handsome mortal?" Loki ran his free hand up Tony's arm, the touch barely felt through all the leather. "Shower you with gifts perhaps: fine clothing and time in the Asgardian royal library?"

Tony made a hum of pleasure and relaxed back against the couch in a lazy, provocative sprawl. "Mm. Sounds good. What else would I get?"

“Jewels, perhaps? Gold?” Loki suggested, shifting on the couch until Tony ended up between the mage’s legs with Tony lying on the couch being loosely straddled by the other. Loki was watching him closely, looking for discomfort, but Tony only felt relaxed and comfortable. “All the drapings befitting a beloved and cherished consort.”

“Don’t forget the plasma gun schematics,” Tony told him while reaching up to lightly loop his arm over Loki’s shoulders and behind his neck. “A guy needs his toys to work on when his *Prince* is busy making marvels with magic.”

Loki grinned at him, his eyes sparking at the title. “I’m sure that could be arranged. It may require breaking a few laws, but I would be willing to do so for you.”

“Well, aren’t you the romantic.”

“Only for my darling, tiny, vegetable.”

Tony’s smile fell. “Okay. And now you’ve ruined it.”

Loki just laughed at him, not stopping even when Tony pushed at his chest and made Loki get off him so that they could sit on opposite sides of the couch. Loki was still giggling while Tony was torn between enjoyment at the sight and resignation.

“You’re never going to stop calling me that, are you?” Tony asked rather uselessly, already knowing the answer.

The satisfaction in Loki’s gaze answered before the mage even needed to. “Lovers do adopt endearments for one another, Anthony.”

“Yeah. *Romantic* ones,” Tony insisted with a scowl. “If you start calling me ‘baby corn’ or ‘tiny tomato’, I am going to break up with you.”

Loki chuckled under his breath, his grin never fading. “Then I shall be certain not to use either of them.”

Tony sent him a withering look. “And I didn’t exclude any of the other vegetables with that, did I?” He sighed dramatically. “It’s always the loopholes with you.”

“A trait that you only find endearing,” Loki pointed out smugly.

“Well,” Tony admitted fondly, “it was what got us together in the first place.”

Contracts. Deals. Friendship.

It had only taken one conversation to start them down the path that had led them here. Tony didn’t relish the betrayal by the Avengers, but it had got him Loki in the end, and that made it kind of... worth it. He knew who to trust now, knew who the best person to have on his side was.

“Mm,” Loki hummed. “And you surprised me greatly with that offer for an alliance. I had not expected I would ever be someone who would tempt you.”

“Now you know better,” Tony told him firmly. “Now you know I only ever pick the best.”

Loki’s smile was smug and content as he relaxed back against the couch; their legs brushing slightly where they met in the middle. “Another trait that we have in common.”

“So I guess us teaming up wasn’t a surprise after all.”

Loki raised his eyebrows. “Are you suggesting it was *fate*?”

Tony’s mouth twisted at the implication of something so... *cheesy*. But. Well. “Maybe I’m suggesting we finally found the other needle in the haystack.”

“Well, aren’t you the romantic,” Loki drawled in a mockery of Tony’s earlier words. “*Needles*, Anthony? How... quaint.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Alright. You want more?” He put on his best dramatic voice. “*You*, Loki, are my world. My bright light. My shining star in this bleak, mortal world I live in.” Tony leant forward and grasped Loki’s hand, holding it tightly and putting as much sincerity into his tone as possible. “I am certain we were simply *meant* to meet when we did, that the stars aligned to have you coming to my tower and us creating a contract. We, Loki, were *meant to be*.” He paused. “Oh, and the first time you fucked me, every firework in the general vicinity exploded.”

Loki barely quelled his snigger in time.

“Oh yes, much better, darling,” Loki told him, he also used his freehand to lightly pat Tony’s cheek, the gesture somewhere between patronizing and affectionate. His eyes though, were laughing. “You sound like a suitable lovestruck consort.”

“Excellent, just what I was going for,” Tony quipped before relaxing back against the couch and letting their hands come apart. “So how much longer until we have to go to this shindig? Do we have time to dig around in your bookshelves?”

“Perhaps an hour, and there is not much to find. Anything of importance I had taken with me and now resides at your tower,” Loki told him. “Although...” he trailed off and his eyes skimmed one of the shelves. “Actually, there is something you might enjoy.”

He stood with elegance and dignity and made his way towards the shelf. Tony was certain he was far less grandiose in his movements, what with how he almost tripped and landed face first on the floor after a part of his jacket got caught on a strap from his boot. He righted himself before Loki noticed, thankfully, but he made a mental note to take better care when it came to his numerous buckles.

Stepping over to the mage, he found Loki skimming his fingers over the spines. He made a small ‘*ah*’ when he found what he was looking for before handing it to Tony who instantly flipped open the cover. He blinked at what he found. “Is this a book on *metalwork*?”

“Yes,” Loki answered. “Slightly outdated as it was from study I undertook in my youth, but it is still quite advanced for your world. I think you might enjoy it.”

Tony barely heard him, humming something wordless in response as he quickly began reading the introduction that discussed the ways that each realm created their weapons and why it was different. It was only the first page and he was hooked; it was *fascinating*.

He didn't even notice Loki shake his head fondly before lightly resting his hands on Tony's shoulders to gently direct him back to the couch where he could sit down. Tony was too enraptured by the words of scholars from across the universe. He was also fascinated by the very neat, frequent notes in the corner of the margins that a young Loki must have made when he'd been studying this very book.

If those scrawls also made something warm and fond flare to life in Tony's chest, well, he was too distracted to acknowledge it.

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Tony couldn't have said how long he spent reading, but when Loki's hand came down on the book and tried to tug it away from him, Tony growled and tried to pull it closer. It made Loki laugh and stop tugging, but he did keep his fingers splayed over the words.

He looked up at the mage to find him grinning. "I have tried to get your attention five times."

Tony blinked a few times as he processed Loki's words. *Oops*. He made himself close the book before apologising sheepishly, "Sorry."

"I'm glad you're enjoying it." Loki also gestured behind himself at a workdesk that had been cleared apart from a small tower of tomes, a quill and some parchment. "I've selected a few others you might enjoy."

Tony almost twitched with the need to go rushing over to them and seeing what they contained, but something in Loki's posture and expression made him still. Loki must have noticed his concern as he explained, "You have spent the entire hour reading, Anthony. It's time to leave for the feast."

He grimaced heavily. "Shit. Sorry."

Loki waved it off. "I spent the time contacting the mage I've mentioned to yourself and Banner. She has agreed to take the remaining animals as well as any others we might encounter while seeking out the woman who is creating them. I have promised to visit her with the animals after our time in Asgard is complete."

"Well, that's one less thing to worry about, I suppose," Tony remarked, rubbing a hand briefly over his face.

It didn't stop his nerves from mounting at the prospect of the feast though and all the hundreds of things Odin would likely throw at them in order to try and disprove their relationship, sever their partnership, and wrangle an alliance out of them that would only benefit Odin and never benefit them.

There were just too many ways for it to go wrong for them. He just didn't want to show Loki how much he was worried about that. Loki had enough on his shoulders, including every



damn demon that was ever formed while living on this backwards, bigoted planet. Tony wanted to be a pillar of strength for him, not something else that Loki had to be concerned about.

Pushing himself into a standing position, Tony left the book on the furniture and stood close enough to Loki that they were almost touching. He deliberately took Loki's hand so that he could link their fingers.

Tony flashed Loki a smile before telling him, "Ready for our grand entrance?"

"Are *you*?" Loki parried, the very worry that Tony had been trying to prevent in his tone. It seemed Loki hadn't missed a thing and it made Tony sigh a little regretfully.

"Am I concerned Odin is going to make this a really shitty evening? Yes. Am I worried that I'm going to snap and say or do something that I shouldn't and get myself thrown into Asgardian jail? You betcha. Is that going to stop me from going out there and acting like the best boyfriend you ever could have found? Not in the slightest."

Loki smiled almost fondly, he was definitely amused. "Anthony, if one of us were to be thrown in jail this evening it would not be you."

The sheer thought of that sent a jolt of rage and panic rushing down Tony's spine and he gripped Loki's hand tighter. "Over my dead *body* will they be sending you down there."

"I truly doubt it will come to that for either of us," Loki assured him. "We may get escorted off of Asgard and we may leave here with any alliance between us and the Aesir in ruins, but as long as we take care with our words and actions even that is unlikely. Truly, we will be fine."

"You say all of that like I'm not going to be continually tempted to tell them exactly what I think of them."

"I know that you will," Loki agreed. "I also know that for the success of our plan, you *won't*."

Loki said it like a statement of fact, one that showed his complete faith in Tony's ability to be diplomatic when he needed to. Loki *trusted* Tony utterly and that made Tony feel completely overwhelmed with warmth, pleasure and the strong desire to prove the other man *right*.

Tony wanted to keep living up to that trust, to make sure Loki never doubted that he would be there to have the mage's back. It was that unwavering confidence that made Tony squash his worries, it made him stand tall and tell the other, "Then hell yeah, I'm ready for our entrance. Let's go give 'em a taste of the rainbow."

The bemused expression Loki shot him only made Tony fight down a smile. "... You speak of the Midgardian rainbow flag, yes?"

He said it cautiously as if he wasn't sure he was grasping the whole meaning behind the quip. But, well, explaining how skittles and internet memes also fitted into his remark was probably better suited to a different time. One where Google was also handy.

So Tony settled on a vague agreement, "Eh, for the most part."

Loki at least, seemed willing enough to drop it. Probably well aware by now how quickly Midgardian vernacular and pop culture references could lead him down a rabbit hole that wasn't always easy to climb out of entirely unscathed.

"Then let us depart." Taking a step towards the door, the hold Loki had on his hand meant Tony was lightly tugged until he began to move with Loki. It took far too short a time for them to reach the door to Loki's rooms and to step outside.

The hall was lit with torches and while opulent and full of an illuminating glow that should have been welcoming and warm, Tony managed to feel the complete opposite. There was no one around but everything suddenly *felt* hostile, like he was being glared at from the shadows - and considering there was an all-seeing eye hovering at the bifrost, Tony wouldn't be surprised if it was that disapproving gaze that he could sense; making him feel like a bug under a microscope.

"Is it just me or have we got a very nosy bridge guardian watching us?"

Loki sent him a sharp look. "You are aware of his eye?"

"I can feel a general sense of foreboding and disapproval. Just like walking into a room with dear ol' Dad. The only thing lacking is the disappointment and yelling, really."

"That is... unusually perceptive," Loki remarked, watching Tony thoughtfully. "But, I suppose I should not be surprised. You continually exceed any expectations given to you, Anthony." Tony could only smirk smugly, which just made Loki roll his eyes. "*Mortals* are usually not aware of Heimdall's eye or they simply do not know how to name what they feel. Even the Aesir have grown complacent and have learnt to dismiss the feeling. *You*, Anthony, are far wiser than that and know it for what it truly is." He tilted his head a little. "Perhaps it is a natural sensitivity or perhaps it comes from time among magic-users and the instincts of battle that allow you to perceive it as a potential threat. It could be either or it may be both. Regardless, your instinct is correct: Heimdall is watching us."

Tony scrunched up his nose, beyond irritated. "Doesn't he have something *better* to do?"

"Apparently not," Loki answered while leading Tony through the palace corridors. "He has likely been ordered by the Allfather to keep us from mischief and to watch us for lies."

"Because Odin can't do that himself? We're going to be in the same *room* as him."

"Ah, but we are not there yet. Heimdall's gaze is also far-reaching and far more difficult to disrupt."

"Yeah, but not impossible," Tony insisted. "*You* can hide us from him."

Loki smirked smugly. "Yes. A feat not many can boast and one that infuriates them greatly."

"So why do they even bother?" Tony almost growled, irritated beyond measure by that stupid prickle he could still feel on the back of his neck. "I thought he had a universe to watch? Hell,

I thought *Odin* said he'd be on the lookout for Animal Whisperer? Surely whether or not we're fucking in the corridor isn't the most important thing to them right now?"

Instead of responding verbally, Loki just brushed his lips gently to Tony's temple. It was a soft, fond gesture, but Tony also felt something... soothing wash over him, sweeping the feeling of mounting agitation away with it.

Tony frowned and turned to Loki when he pulled back. "What did you do?"

"Muted the feeling and made us less... distinct to his eye. I would have done it sooner, but I didn't realise you would feel it so keenly while we were on Asgard."

"But he's still watching us?"

Loki nodded. "He will likely continue until we are at the feast and Odin can watch us himself while enacting whatever plans he has concocted in order to sever us."

Tony didn't think, he simply tightened his hold on Loki's hand and shifted even closer, their shoulders brushing as they walked.

"And we won't let him," he said firmly before glancing over at Loki, holding his eyes and making a promise he refused to break.

They were walking into Loki's mottled and painful past. They were walking into a room full of *his* betrayers and the people who only ever saw the worst in him. This was Loki's SHIELD and Tony would stand firm by his side in the face of it.

They'd walked out of SHIELD with a contract, now they just had to do the same with Asgard. Loki had been his strength and his voice of reason on Earth, now it was Tony's to return the favour - to be his *partner*.

Tony didn't know if Loki could see everything he wasn't saying, but all Loki did was smile. There were no nerves in his eyes, nor any of the anger or tension he'd been presenting upon being forced to remain. There was only calm focus as his thumb came to lightly stroke the back of Tony's hand.

It was all the confirmation and assurance that Tony needed and as they reached the more populated areas with guards posted in the corridors, they fell silent. There was little to say that they hadn't already discussed, or couldn't say where anyone could hear them.

They knew the plan, they knew each other, and with their hands linked and their bracelets circling their wrists; they were as ready as they were going to be.

... Okay, so, yes, the feast was *supposed* to be in the chapter. Seriously it was in my notes and everything but they just kept talking. So. Yes. Fluffy, flirty, filler chapter it is! Hopefully you like it and *hopefully* I get the next chapter up soon. Which should have the feast in it. Guh. I *hope* so :/

(And yes "little vegetable" is now a thing considering how many of you loved it XP)

# Chapter 30

## Chapter Notes

Ahh! Look at this! I got this posted around the time I wanted to! Yaaaay! I hope you all like it :D

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

There were few times in his life that Tony had ever felt truly unwelcome.

Sure, a lot of people at MIT hadn't liked him or wanted him around. Stepping into a conference room or fundraiser in those first few months after giving up manufacturing weapons hadn't always been pretty either. But it had been *nothing* like this.

If Tony Stark's name was slapped on the guest list or his tech was slapped on the table, there was always going to be people in the room who were happy to see him; who wanted a piece of him.

This... this was the first time in his life where Tony had felt such a genuine, physical air of displeasure from a whole room.

There were three huge wooden tables in the centre of the room that could easily sit fifty people, yet despite the size of them, the room wasn't crowded. There was plenty of space to walk around and socialise and frankly, the whole thing made Tony think of Harry Potter.

There was even a separate table that faced the room and was on a platform higher than the others. Just like Hogwarts. It was obviously the table meant for the royal family. It was covered in an elegant tablecloth with exquisite embroidery. The goblets, plates and cutlery shined and were studded with gems and laced with gold.

Every eye turned towards them as they stepped inside; the disapproval and aversion to their very presence was almost palpable.

Fortunately for them, it only served to make Tony stand taller, prouder and smile with sharp teeth and challenging eyes at anyone brave enough catch his gaze.

Loki, by contrast, acted as if didn't notice or care about the dislike emanating from every Asgardian pore. He did let go of Tony's hand, but only so that he could wind his arm around Tony's waist in a casual, affectionate gesture as he led them between the tables.

The hall wasn't as large as the place they'd been led into when they'd spoken to Odin, but it was still ridiculously spacious.

The other tables, by comparison to the royal table, were just plates and goblets on wood. There was a clear distinction between who was a royal and who was merely a *courtier*. There was also a clear line drawn between who was a courtier and who was *not*.

Their table, for instance, was bare but for two plates, two goblets and very little finery on any of the items. Odin hadn't gone so far as to get the chipped cutlery from the servant's quarters, but it was a *hell* of a slap in the face.

Tony was hardly surprised that the rest of the Aesir weren't showing them any respect if this was the kind of attitude they saw from their *King*.

Loki didn't do anything about it though; he just walked past their table without even glancing at the items. He just kept them moving, bypassing multiple groups of Asgardians who all looked as if they'd smelt something rotten. Tony just made a point of wrapping his own arm around Loki's waist and cupping his hip.

When Loki finally stopped them, it was beside one of the tapestries that hung from the walls. They displayed Asgardian symbols that Tony was familiar with from examining Thor's armour and some of the objects he'd brought to populate his former rooms in Stark Tower. There were other images as well, things that Tony took to be symbols of the royal family as well as depictions of battles won. Usually by Odin.

It was all very... self-congratulatory and arrogant.

Granted, Tony did have a giant tower with his name plastered on the side for all to see... but this was *different*. This was oppressive. It wasn't like Tony painted every room of his tower red and gold before stringing up publicity pictures and artistic impressions of his feats as Iron Man across every available surface.

Just. No.

In fact...

Turning to Loki, Tony lowered his voice slightly to remark, "If I ever get to Asgardian levels of overbearing ego and superiority, please do me a favour and throw me out another window."

The smallest hint of a smile curled Loki's mouth. "You are not a fan of this opulence, Anthony?"

"Not when it's done like this, no," Tony stated simply before tilting his head slightly and looking at Loki, pondering an alternative path Asgard could have taken, and not for the first time. "But I think it *could* be done well - with the right person designing and ruling it." Loki blinked a few times, seeming surprised by the words and unable to comprehend the meaning, so Tony made it a little clearer. "I would love to have seen what *you* did with it."

Loki swallowed a little thickly before his smile became a little tighter.

“Poorly, I think you’ll find,” he answered. “I am not the ruling type, as so many have pointed out to me.”

*There’s no version of this where you come out on top.*

“It’s hard to do the right job when you’re working with the wrong tools,” Tony told him firmly. “Playing masquerade? Forcing yourself to be something and someone you’re not? Yeah, both of us fucking *suck* at winning a game by using someone else’s rules.”

He paused but only long enough to smirk. “But playing by our own rules? Rewriting the way the game is played because it was designed before we arrived and by people so much less inventive than us? Loki, we fucking *excel* at fixing the problems far less qualified people leave behind for us to deal with. Do I think you’d be a good King? No way. I think you’d be the *best* King.”

Loki grinned at him, bright and *thrilled*. He also brought his free hand to cup Tony’s cheek. “What rulers we would have made; Kings of men, ruling side by side.”

Tony just leant into the touch and smiled. “Still time, right? Earth’s got problems and we’re the best people to fix ‘em. Might not be a golden realm, but we’ve got diversity, acceptance and innovation on our side. I’m a Prince of Midgard, right? Shouldn’t be hard to get that status fudged and upgraded a little in the eyes of the universe - that way, all you’d have to really do is marry me.”

Loki barked out a laugh. “Was that your proposal, Anthony? I do hope not. I expect something better than *that* if I’m going to agree to it.”

“You want poetry, huh? Romance, flowers, declarations of adoration and love?” Tony quickly clarified. “A huge spectacle with everyone hearing my universal wish to have you as mine forever?”

Loki just grinned throughout his description. “Quite. See to it that you do better next time.”

Tony was barely able to smother his chuckle in time. “Got it, babe. I’ll head back to the drawing board. Sketch out some plans and book it in the calendar: grand romantic marriage proposal, take two.”

Loki’s response was to lean forward and press a very light kiss to Tony’s forehead, almost brushing his hairline. Tony just closed his eyes slightly and leant into the touch. It was nice, *soft*. It was the kind of thing he might have done to Pepper when they were dating but rarely got himself. It made Tony want to sigh a little, to relax into the feeling of being cherished and looked after... and why couldn’t he?

They were lovers right? That was *exactly* what he was allowed to do. So Tony did. While he wasn’t actually leaning on Loki he was still standing close. Loki’s arm was still wrapped around his waist while Tony’s hand had drifted to simply rest against Loki’s side. They were facing each other, practically lost in their own world. The rest of the room could hardly exist for all the attention they were giving it.

When Loki pulled back from the kiss, Tony knew it had only lasted for a few seconds, but it still felt like it had been for much longer. He grinned down at Tony before asking, “Would you like something to drink?”

“Depends,” Tony remarked with a suspicious look, “what would I be having? I’ve seen what Asgardian liquor does to mortals.”

“You may have faith in me,” Loki assured before shifting his attention from Tony.

He also dropped his hand from Tony’s cheek to gesture at a nearby servant. The server noticeably hesitated and glanced around as if trying to avoid the request before grudgingly making his way over.

“How may I assist?” he asked quietly, pointedly looking away from the affectionate nature of their embrace.

Loki made a gesture with his hand and green magic sparked from his fingers. The thin tendrils of magic curled together, then disappeared, leaving two floating goblets in their wake. Tony just sent Loki a pointedly fond look at the display of magic.

The server’s eyes were wide and taken aback as he looked at the goblets. They *were* stunning. The chunky gold items from the royal table looked garish in comparison. The ones Loki had conjured were of fine grained warm golden hued wood with green and gold filigree highlights.

The goblets resembled twisting trees with an intricately detailed root and branch structure. The leaves of the tree reached the very rim of the cup while the roots seemed to fall away and off the base. There were nine points on the trees branches that glowed in differing colours. The goblets almost looked *alive*; as if there was an innate power in the carving. The server took them with almost reverent hands, unable to take his eyes from the items.

“We will have wine,” Loki told him simply and the server gave a sharp nod, swallowing thickly before sketching a bow and rushing off to get the requested drink.

When he was gone and they were alone again, Tony commented casually, “Nice goblets. That guy was certainly impressed.”

Loki’s smile was a hidden, satisfied thing. “Yes. They were made by perhaps the greatest carver that the Nine Realms has ever seen.”

“Nice,” Tony answered, impressed. “How long have you had them?”

“A very long time,” Loki told him, chuckling softly, his eyes lost in memory. “They were a gift.”

“Oh yeah?” Tony prompted gently, eager to hear a *nice* story from Loki’s past. “What happened?”

“Well,” Loki began with a wry smile. “I insulted an old woman who proceeded to offend me in return. We argued for some minutes until, when she was besting me, I eventually made her



laugh with a ridiculous attempt at an affront against her family.”

Tony was trying not to grin. “What? Her mother was a hamster and her father smelt of elderberries?”

“Not quite,” Loki told him, quirking an eyebrow at the suggestion. “But, I believe it was the confused reaction I gave to my own statement that caused her to laugh. She said she had not had someone be so honestly rude to her in centuries. She found it refreshing and promised me a reward for making her laugh. I was sceptical, but she assured me I would enjoy it, I merely needed to visit her the next day.”

Tony was stunned. “She carved those in a *day*?”

The mage laughed. “No. She carved them over many weeks. She kept making me return every day, promising they would be ready and drawing me into conversation about magic, the nine realms and countless other topics.” Loki’s eyes held nothing but fondness. “She was a sly woman and insulted me constantly.”

“But you liked it,” Tony realised, seeing it for the comfort it had been. “You enjoyed someone being honest about their thoughts, when you couldn’t trust that from the Aesir.”

Loki nodded. “It took me some weeks to comprehend it, but yes. It took her three months to carve them, and when she finally told me my reward was ready, I didn’t wish to stop spending time with her.” His eyes fell from Tony’s and a pensive frown formed on his brow. “But, she knew I was to leave Alfheim soon to return to Asgard. She wished me well and gave me the goblets. It was only then that I became aware of who she really was.

“She advised me that there would be others in my life who would understand me, I would merely need patience.” He smirked. “The same patience that had allowed me to return for three months to an old woman who kept promising me a gift that was never yet ready.”

Loki had to pause the story there as the server had returned, holding out the goblets. Loki unwound himself from Anthony to take them before dismissing the servant. Loki then turned back to Anthony and held out one of the goblets, a spark of green jumping from his fingers before he informed him, “I made it safe for you to drink.”

Taking the wooden goblet carefully, Tony lifted it to eye level to better see the detailing. It really was stunning, even more so for knowing the story behind it and the *hope* that the old woman had given Loki; the hope that there would be someone out there waiting for him who would understand him, befriend him, *drink from these goblets* with him.

Tony licked his lips. “How often have you used these?”

“This would be the first time.” Tony jerked his gaze up to Loki only to find the mage’s green eyes were filled with fond amusement. “Are you really surprised, Anthony? She did tell me to wait until someone of worth had arrived. You know as well as I, Anthony, how few people of *worth* have been in my life.”

Tony looked back down at the goblet; at the stunning artistry and thought of the way they had come to be carved; of a young Loki who'd found solace and friendship in an old woman who'd only seen a lonely, angry boy in need of something to wish and strive for.

He could also see the centuries that had followed where the goblets had done nothing but collect dust, waiting for a companion that Loki could feel comfortable and confident enough to share them with.

And then Tony had come along.

The thought made a small part of Tony want to squirm, it also made his chest blaze with warmth - it made him feel *proud*.

"Well," he told Loki with a wide grin. "I'm glad to be here; showing off goblets that are going to make the universe envious, being your *partner* and the first person who's lucky enough to share these with you." He very lightly, very gently brought his goblet forward to tap against Loki's in a toast, careful not to damage the wood. "I'm glad to have someone else of value in *my* life too."

Silence fell after Tony's words as they simply stared at each other, smiling softly and holding each other's eyes. The air was weighted, filled with emotions and thoughts that were only warm and comforting. Looking at Loki like that, Tony just wanted to tilt up his chin, let them fall into the kiss that would have fitted the moment perfectly.

... But they were in the middle of an Asgardian feast. They'd also decided to limit themselves to *subtler* displays of affection. So they didn't kiss. Loki just softly told him, "I'm glad to have you here with me, Anthony."

They then took small sips of their wine. The flavour was sweet, like plums and strong enough that he knew he wouldn't be able to drink many glasses without feeling the effects. It was nice though, and he was about to say as much when a loud clanging of metal on stone made Tony look over his shoulder.

Odin was standing at the head table, his eyes narrowed and his face distinctly unimpressed. Tony was really hoping that irritation was because of them. It made him feel all smug and happy inside.

A gentle touch to his arm made him look away and back to Loki who started to lead him languidly towards their seats. Tony was quick to notice the others had more or less scurried to be seated while their slow, unhurried pace was at odds with the dutiful subjects. Tony just took another sip of his wine and happily took his time.

When they finally reached their otherwise empty table, Loki flicked his fingers and sent the prearranged cutlery to places unknown, replacing them with a beautiful set reminiscent of the ones Tony had spotted on the royal table, but far more refined with simple rather than extravagant elegance. He also pointedly drew out Tony's chair with magic, to which Tony had to bite down on a smile. It was only then that Loki allowed them to take their seats.

Tony was faintly surprised the mage hadn't changed the rest of the table into something more stylish as well, but Tony supposed there was a good reason as to why he'd left it.

"Do prepare yourself Anthony," Loki murmured softly, "for you are about to hear Odin Allfather give his speech to begin the meal. I do wonder how often we will be mentioned."

"Hmm. That could be a fun game," Tony remarked casually, "a sip of the wine for every not-so-subtle jab."

"Now, now, Anthony, I thought the goal was for you to *not* become drunk."

Tony had to bite down on a smile even as he shot Loki a faintly amused look. After all, what did they have, if not bitter amusement and pretending that they didn't give a damn?

"Alright, how about every time he actively glares at us. Surely we can raise our goblets and toast him every time. I'm sure he won't be annoyed by that at all."

Loki laughed softly and told him with far too much approval, "How mischievous of you, Anthony.

But instead of trying to discourage him, Loki just took a firmer grip on his goblet and leant back slightly, letting devilry dance in his eyes. Tony copied the mage and waited for Odin to start.

He *really* hoped that they got to wink and raises their glasses at his failed attempts at discomforting them at least a few times.

Odin had risen to stand, the room completely silent as his subjects looked up at him with adoring eyes. Tony just gave his most bland, uninterested expression.

"Welcome, honoured guests," Odin spoke, looking directly at the Aesir and nodding pointedly at a few of them. He did *not*, however, glance at them. Tony mentally started up a tally of insults. *One*.

"You have heard that the threat of war is upon us. The Mad Titan seeks to bring harm to the worlds under our protection. The Crown Prince, Thor, currently protects Midgard from those who would seek to attack its weaker borders." A strong cheer rose at that and Tony couldn't stop himself from rolling his eyes. *Two*. "In light of this threat, my estranged son has returned, seeking Asgard's assistance in stopping this danger."

Tony could hear the unhappy grumbles and was quick to notice sharp glares directed their way. Tony just smiled widely, though he would have *preferred* to raise his middle finger in response to Odin's blatant twisting of the facts. He settled for lifting his goblet and giving his first '*fuck you*' toast of the night.

"I have agreed to listen to their appeal. Loki and the warrior of Midgard Anthony Stark shall remain on Asgard while their worth is tested." Odin's eyes finally shifted to them. "We will see if redemption and honour is truly Loki's new path, or if he is simply seeking new ways to prove his dishonourable and *cold* nature."

Tony felt Loki tense minutely against him, but when he flicked his eyes to the mage nothing showed on his face; he was watching Odin with a smirk, as if the remark hadn't affected him. He did raise his goblet and Tony happily did the same; toasting Odin and all of his backhanded insults before they both took a drink.

Odin kept any annoyance he might be feeling off his face. "We will see if time on Midgard has helped him to mend his ways and, to what degree Asgard can trust its might and support with him and this Midgardian."

It was with that final, ominous shot that Odin turned back to the Aesir and concluded his speech. "Take pause on what you see and hear. The days they spend with us will be the time in which we will judge their worth. Let tonight be a first judgment on the truth of their words."

He finished with another clang of his spear on the floor before taking a seat. A wave of applause followed as well as a series of whispers and narrowed-glances in their direction. Servers also began to run forward with large plates of food.

Tony just leaned towards Loki and asked, "Did he seriously just give an entire room of Aesir permission to try and prove that we're lying?"

"Well," Loki remarked dryly, looking over at Tony. "When one has a virtual army of buffoons willing to grind down our lies and our resolve for him, why would he not utilise it? We will be all the easier for him to break after hours of their company, will we not?"

Tony tried not to snort, but he didn't think he managed. "Sounds like fun." He waited just long enough for Loki to be taking a sip of his drink to say, "I can't wait for them to learn exactly how well I can follow orders when it's *Prince Loki* who's telling me to kneel."

The sound of Loki choking on his drink and the sudden clatter of goblets on the nearby server's tray made Tony smile with smug satisfaction.

How he loved a good innuendo.

---

The dinner itself was pretty easy after that.

They ate, they chatted absently and Loki gave him little tips if he looked like he was about to screw up Asgardian etiquette. Sure, the tension in the air was thick enough to choke on and Tony wasn't oblivious to the fact that when they finished eating they were going to be the subject of an inquisition - but he tried to keep their minds off it.

Tony bitched about the bland, meat-oriented food, partly to make Loki chuckle, and partly because Asgard didn't seem to know what spice actually was. He also bumped their shoulders together and asked Loki about the food on other worlds. He asked about other, happier stories from Loki's past while brushing his fingers over the intricacies of the goblets and hearing more about the woman who had carved them.

All and all, it went a lot better than it could have.

When the meal portion was over and people had started standing, walking around and congregating in groups, Tony wasn't surprised that someone came over to join them. He *was* surprised that it was Fandral and that he actually sat down opposite them at the table.

"Fandral," Loki greeted impassively, but with a very faint frown that marked his confusion and suspicion at the other's presence.

Tony hadn't even *noticed* that the swordsman had been in the room.

"Loki," Fandral greeted, "Anthony. I was hoping to speak with you."

Loki's mistrust didn't fade. "What for?"

A hint of sheepishness entered Fandral's eyes even as he requested, "I hope to have you wake the Rhinocerotidae. I have tried all manner of things, but with your magic aiding it, the animal sleeps on."

Loki actually seemed faintly amused. "And how did you attempt to wake it?"

Fandral laughed a little, his self-deprecation obvious, but it was minimised by an easy, lounging posture and the good-humour in his eyes. "With many tricks, some of which you taught me long ago. I suppose I should have known better than to attempt to best your magic and your skill."

"It does not take much to keep an animal in slumber," Loki dismissed, but Fandral wasn't having it.

"Perhaps," he agreed, "but you have always been gifted when it comes to them."

Loki sent him a sudden, sharp glare. "If this is your attempt at *enticing* me into a favour, you are doing it poorly. I am only becoming more likely to deny your request for assistance."

Fandral raised his hands in a show of surrender. "It was not an attempt to mock you. The affinity you have for charming wild animals to your side is well known and remarkable. I merely hoped you would help me again."

"And yet I have been mocked," Loki all but growled, his grip on his goblet tight. "They call upon Loki when they have no other option and jeer at my use of seidr after I have solved their petty problem. I could not deny a request to help an injured or terrified creature, but I have never *once* missed the way my *affinity* has been the source of many a cruel joke. Did you not all laugh for days when you saw that the twisted tales you gave the Midgardians had made it into their myths?"

Fandral had physically recoiled at the barbs that Loki shot him, looking shocked briefly, before the expression melted into guilt and discomfort.

"There were jokes," Fandral admitted slowly, "ones that I should not have laughed at. It was the folly of youth, but not something I had thought would so offend you."

Loki's glare was vicious. "I am supposed to find *humour* in a world believing that I was mounted by a stallion and gave birth to a *foal*?"

Tony winced and so did Fandral. He'd heard about that myth; it, and a few others, had been spoken about with relish at the SHIELD compound in the wake of the invasion. Tony had always taken it with a grain of salt, but he'd also never been game enough to ask Thor.

"I did not start that rumour Loki," Fandral said quietly, staring at the table rather than looking the mage in the eye.

"No, but I did not see you *disputing* it either."

Fandral didn't say anything immediately and Loki just took a sip of his wine, looking away from the swordsman and scanning the crowd. He was full of tightly-coiled tension and Tony reached out and placed a hand lightly against Loki's knee under the table.

He felt Loki's leg startle slightly but he otherwise didn't react but to look at Tony curiously. Tony just smiled softly and lightly squeezed his leg in comfort. Loki didn't quite relax, but he did smile a little in gratitude for the sympathy and support.

"I am sorry," Fandral said softly and made them look away from each other and to the Aesir. He was staring at Loki, sorrowful and repentant. "I should have taken more notice of your displeasure and unhappiness. I should not have allowed the jest to become so encompassing."

If Loki was surprised by the apology, he didn't show it. He did stare at Fandral for a long moment, calculation heavy in his narrowed eyes, but Fandral didn't flinch. He merely continued to hold Loki's gaze with his own regretful one.

Loki was the one to look away in the end, remarking flatly, "You were one of many Fandral. I grew used to such treatment long before you involved yourself in it."

It wasn't forgiveness, that was blindingly obvious, but Loki's rage wasn't as hot or as sharp. It had been briefly tempered and Fandral knew enough about Loki to sense the difference. He also didn't try to search for more from the mage; rather he changed the subject.

He cleared his throat before asking Tony, "How are you finding Asgard?"

Tony smiled sharply. "Well, so far everyone I've met has either insulted me or my lover, so..." he shrugged.

Fandral winced, and while a part of Tony didn't want to take pity on him, Fandral also seemed to be the most courteous of the bunch. He could turn out to be working on Odin's orders and trying to sweet-talk his way close to them, but, it couldn't hurt to see what happened, especially if it turned out he was genuine.

"But, Loki's promised to show me around," Tony continued. "Maybe that way I'll see some of the nicer parts."

Fandral latched onto the topic with relief. "Oh? Where do you plan to go?" He suddenly brightened, looking at the mage. "The markets are in the city this week. You were always

fond of perusing their wares, Loki; I'm sure Anthony would be the same."

"Yes, I had noticed they were being set up," Loki remarked neutrally. "We'll see how the discussions with Odin go and if we have the time available to spend an afternoon or two there."

Fandral grinned suddenly. "Do you remember the day where I was injured and could not go on a hunt? You let me follow you to the markets and we spent a day among the stalls!" He laughed suddenly. "Do you remember the trick you played on the man who tried to cheat me?"

Loki actually smiled, it was brief but it had been *real* and honestly amused. "I remember teaching him to take better care on choosing those he wished to swindle."

"Oh?" Tony questioned, eager to hear a story that *didn't* end in tragedy or bitter memories. Loki seemed lost in another *good* memory and Tony was keen to encourage it. "What happened?"

Fandral, bolstered by the lighter mood that had descended over the table, happily turned to Tony and began to explain, "I sought a trinket for a young lady I was very fond of. The blue would have matched her eyes--"

"The necklace had purple gems, Fandral," Loki interrupted with an amused smile tugging at his mouth.

Fandral blinked, surprised. "Ah. It did? Well, it would have matched her *dress*."

Loki just rolled his eyes, hiding his small grin behind a sip he took from his goblet. It was a gesture that made Tony believe that once, a long time ago, Loki and Fandral had shared many teasing discussions like this. He could imagine that there had been a time where Loki was fondly amused of the swordsman and that Fandral had been an easy, light-hearted companion.

It also made Tony wonder if there wasn't a part of Loki, buried very deep down, that longed for that friendship back again.

Tony didn't know if it was possible, if Loki would violently oppose the idea for fear of it backfiring, but Tony was sure they could at least see what this trip to Asgard brought; after all, Fandral had wanted help with the rhino. Surely that could give them a chance to work out exactly how much of Fandral's presence was an attempt to mend bridges or an attempt to spy for Odin.

He supposed only time would tell, but Tony was really hoping that if there was going to be one *decent* Aesir on this planet, it was going to be the swordsman.

For now, at least, Tony settled in to listen to a story of mischief and watch as Loki interrupted Fandral to correct him and only gained the blond's laughter and agreement. He watched as the two men forgot, for a moment, the numerous traps and bitterness that laced their former friendship.

## Chapter End Notes

...Was the whole feast supposed to be in this chapter? Pssh, whaaaaat? Naaaah. They didn't just fucking *keep talking* and *make up some random goblet story or anything*. Puh. No way.

... \*sweats nervously\*

p.s. I'm Fandral trash and need more of him in fics. So, you know.

p.p.s. I do love the (surprise) goblet story so very much. And a lot of the other talking that happened which caused the split feast chapter. Just, you know, whoops. ^^;;



# Chapter 31

## Chapter Notes

Well. Almost but not *quite* two months between now and the last update. Um. Whoops?

For what it's worth, I was having a shiiiiit time in rl thanks to the stress, ridiculousness and overworked job I was in; THAT I AM NO LONGER IN! YAY! \*throws streamers and dances\* So because of this *awesome* news (as you may have noticed) I've been posting more and able to finish things (including my next OC lgbt novel, yussss!) and so hopefully that will mean more steady updates of this story! :D

Anyway, just wanted to let you all know that and also to ask that you please read the end of story notes for a few other updates. Apologises again for the wait, but I hope you like the chapter! (And send lots of love to Amara1783 who got this edited and back to me *within 24 hours*. Such a champ!)

As always, thank you for reading!

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

The conversation with Fandral couldn't have lasted for longer than fifteen minutes before they were annoyingly interrupted. The chatter had been light-hearted, fun even and filled with stories about Loki's past on Asgard. Tony had noticed though, that very few tales took place earlier than the last few decades and almost all of them had Fandral and Loki together, but rarely included anyone else.

There were two mentions of Hogun accompanying them, one brief, pained mention of Loki's mother that was hurriedly moved away from, and a collection of tales surrounding a female mage Loki had once known and whom Fandral had briefly attempted to court, begging Loki for assistance in the task.

It was only when the servant had approached their table that Loki had immediately stiffened; his expression closing off as all the good-humour vanished from his face.

"The Allfather wishes to speak with you," the servant said, the man's eyes flicking to Tony before back to Loki. "*Only* with you."

Tony's hand, which hadn't shifted from where it rested on Loki's knee, tightened instinctively and he narrowed his eyes at the servant. He didn't have the slightest intention of leaving Loki alone with the asshole King, but before he could say as much the mage's hand slipped under the table to squeeze Tony's own before gently encouraging him to release his hold.

No one could see what he was doing beneath the table and his cold tone and narrowed eyes belied the way Tony knew he was already readying himself to leave. "The Allfather has a

reason for excluding my partner from his request?"

"He wishes to speak with you privately," The servant merely repeated, unflinching but with a hint of disdain. His chin was also tilted in a way which Tony could very easily read as: *as is his right, and you will obey.*

Tony's knee-jerk reaction to such an order and assumption of obedience was to completely defy the one who thought they could control him. It took a lot of willpower to bite down on that urge and let Loki run the show. They both knew that outright defying Odin wasn't a smart move; they were much better off stretching his orders to the breaking point but still complying enough that he couldn't destroy their plans for the dignitaries.

It was a fine line to tread, but Loki was a master at dancing his way across it without missing a beat. Loki had spent his entire life causing mischief inside the parameters of Asgardian society. While he might have a more hostile crowd than usual, the former prince still knew his way around the archaic laws and rules of the Aesir. This was Loki's show; Tony was merely an accomplice in the act the trickster had long laid out.

"Very well," Loki agreed. "I will attend to him when I have concluded my current discussion." He followed it with a dismissive flick of his fingers before turning pointedly away from the servant and towards Fandral. "Where have you stored the rhinocerotidae?"

There was distinct discomfort on Fandral's face at being drawn into such a blatant disregard of the King's orders, but, to his credit, he replied easily enough, "I have placed him in the stables."

Loki nodded, ignoring the unhappy servant who, in the end, had no choice but to retreat with one final glare at Loki.

"He will likely be violent upon his awakening," Loki told the swordsman, "but," he smirked slightly, "you have always enjoyed a challenge."

Fandral automatically brightened. "You will help me to rouse him?"

"It will depend on how long we must remain with the Allfather," Loki sent Tony a brief furtive glance then, a smile not quite tugging at his mouth before he turned back to the blond, "but I am sure Anthony and I will have some time to assist you tomorrow."

Tony had to repress his own grin, well aware of the mess that their plan would cause in Asgard tomorrow and planning to relish in it. He also had to admit that getting away from the palace and Odin's ensuing fury for a little while would probably be a good thing.

He could think of worse things to do than help Fandral with the rhino as they puzzled out the swordsman's motivations.

"I would be grateful if you did," Fandral said enthusiastically before some of his cheer dimmed and he glanced towards the royal table. "But, perhaps he will not allow it, if he is displeased with you."

Tony couldn't help a glance in the same direction. Odin might not have been acting as if his orders were being defied, talking casually with courtiers and the like; but there was a general air of displeasure lingering under the surface. It was something Tony had witnessed in his youth when Howard had been quietly furious but was forced to stand, laughing and smiling next to his son. Tony knew it was only a matter of time until Howard could get them somewhere quite or out of the public eye; any place where he could belittle, criticise and furiously snarl at Tony for his every defiance or flaw.

"There is very little Odin can *stop* me from doing, Fandral," Loki told him, his tone a little colder and his hand, very pointedly coming up to cup the back of Tony's neck in a gesture of possession and bold affection.

Fandral stiffened a little but he didn't look away from Loki or from the act of intimacy. "In that you are right, but you were always the one to advise that a hint of contrition aids a lifetime of schemes."

Loki actually twitched a little, looking purely shocked. His face even slackened slightly and he didn't seem able to catch himself in time before asking, disbelievingly, "You *remember* that?"

When the swordsman smiled it was easy-going and genuine, almost fond as he wistfully recounted, "It was the single time you had me assist you in a trick." He laughed. "We were caught, but escaped with little but a scolding due to your quick suggestion." His grin grew a little wider. "It has also proved useful to me when winning the hearts of a lady or two." He winked before quickly sobering. "Your counsel has always been wise, Loki, and I have had good cause to think highly of it."

Loki stared at him for a long moment, his face having smoothed to something blank after being initially caught off guard.

"My counsel has never been listened to except under duress," Loki spoke lowly, his entire body stiff. "You should know better than to speak so smoothly to Loki the Liesmith." He leant forward slightly, his words a hiss to a wide-eyed Fandral. "You have no friends beside you with which to mock the trickster mage, and should you now run back to your King, you will have little secrets to give." He made a sound of disgust and sat back. "Your time at this table has been wasted, little spy."

"Loki!" Fandral slapped his hand on the table, sounding frustrated. "I did not insult you! I did not lie!" He gave an agitated growl. "Nor did I come here on order of the Allfather! This is why it is difficult to speak with you! You do not believe a good word that is said!"

"When they are so rarely spoken and only given to follow a jeer, one learns to *distrust* them," Loki snapped. He chuckled darkly. "And why else would you come here if not to do the bidding of your King?"

"I came to ask for help with the rhinocerotidae! I came to speak to the man that was my friend!" He glared at Loki, looking ready to push away from the table and leave. "I came to know the Midgardian thought of so highly by Thor and by *you*." He shook his head. "But I should not have come at all."

*Shit*, Tony thought. Not only was this going terribly badly for any kind of mending friendship, but Tony wasn't oblivious to the fact that if Loki had to go and speak to Odin, Tony sure as hell didn't want to be alone getting slowly circled like an undefended animal by Asgardian vultures.

Reaching out, Tony put a hand over Loki's wrist in a soothing gesture while saying to them both. "Okay guys, timeout. Let's take a chill pill and a couple of deep breaths."

Loki *glared* at him; Fandral at least, stayed put. Tony slowly started rubbing his thumb over Loki's wrist. He also focused on the mage first, the biggest, most prickly and most defensive part of the problem.

Tony leant in close, putting his mouth by Loki's ear as he whispered, "Keep him from hearing our conversation."

He felt the mage hesitate for a moment before a small tingle ran over the engineer's skin and Loki gave a small nod. Tony quickly began to speak and assure him, "I am completely on your side, Loki. If you want to tell him to stab himself with his own sword after everything he's done to you, I will happily be putting the blade in his hands."

In response to his words, Loki slowly began to relax a little. Tony just kept up the soothing gesture with his thumb. "Is he probably lying and working for Odin? Sure. Could he be telling the truth and just wanting to catch up with you? Maybe. No way will we find out the truth if you send him away now."

Loki gave a grunt of displeasure, turning his face a little further away from Tony, but not completely separating them; which, yeah, Loki still wasn't happy, but tough shit. "I also really hate to break it to you, but he's the best person for me to be left with when you go talk to Odin."

*That* made Loki turn to look at him, their faces were only inches apart and Loki's eyes were narrowed and calculating. Tony just gave him a lop-sided grin. "So, can we not send away my only potential ally in this place if I'm going to be separated from you? *Please?*"

He put extra emphasis on the last word, widening his eyes even and giving his best, mocking interpretation of a damsel in distress. It had the desired effect of making Loki snort with amusement. He still didn't look overly pleased, but he still sighed and gave a small nod of assent.

"I do not trust him," Loki stated coldly.

"Great, neither do I," Tony replied cheerfully and the mage's smile pulled a little wider. He squeezed Loki's wrist again before letting him go. "And we can cut him loose tomorrow before or after we wake up the rhino. I don't care, but right now, he's useful."

"You consider him nothing more than a pawn, Anthony?" Loki asked, the last of his tension and agitation seeming to melt away. Tony knew it was still there, buried deep inside, but at least his immediate anger with *Tony* seemed to have faded.

Tony grinned. “Absolutely. So don’t sacrifice him just yet, there’s still a game to play and he might just come in handy.”

“Very well,” Loki agreed before Tony felt the telltale sign of magic over his skin. It made him glance back at Fandral who was watching them with an expression that looked somewhere between confused and mystified.

Loki pushed away from his chair almost immediately and looked across the table at the swordsman. “Fandral, Anthony wishes to continue speaking with you. I will return upon speaking with the Allfather.”

He nodded at the blond, lingered just long enough to brush the back of his fingers over Tony’s cheek in affection before he was turning and walking towards the royal table.

It left the two of them alone for the first time, but before Tony could quip something light-hearted, Fandral was remarking, “I have never seen someone so easily calm Loki.”

He looked both bewildered and impressed.

Tony just flashed him his best magazine smile. “I know the right things to say.”

“So it would seem,” Fandral agreed and there was a hint of something frustrated and wistful there that made Tony think that miscommunication had always been one of the biggest failing points in Loki’s friendship with the blond.

It didn’t mean it could be fixed or that Fandral wouldn’t turn out to be more than a sacrificial piece in their plans but... Tony was willing to give it a try.

“So, any other good stories you have about Asgard or Loki?”

The Asgardian grinned and happily began to rattle off some new tale about the trickster as Tony listening absently and watched him very carefully; but Fandral only seemed happy and fond. He could just be a damn good liar, but Tony didn’t think so.

He also knew it would take some careful nudging and subtle directing, but Tony was fairly certain he could manage it.

The engineer smirked a little; *swordsman to e6*.

Maybe Fandral could prove himself as more than just a pawn on their chessboard.

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Unfortunately, Tony didn’t get a chance to talk to Fandral for long before other people started drifting over. He was introduced to a bunch of courtiers as well as Volstagg. The redhead was everything Tony expected only even more annoying; he was loud, uncouth, and touched Tony’s shoulder with a heavy hand that still had a bit of meat under at least two of his nails.

“Take heed, Anthony Stark -” he’d said, looking almost pitying. Tony had just wished Fandral hadn’t been dragged away by a silent, glaring Hogun. “Thor speaks of you and your

great deeds as a warrior. You value your world, but do not forget that Loki's tongue is of silver. He discards all that no longer hold use to him; his bargains do not often go fulfilled."

The twitch of Tony's eye might have been the only physical manifestation of his anger, but inside he was seething. "So," Tony summed up, "you're saying I'm whoring myself out for my planet and that either way Loki's going to betray me in the end?"

His flat statement made Volstagg startle and allowed his hold to loosen enough to shrug the Aesir off. "I warn you, as I would warn any friend of Thor's."

*Well, I'm not exactly Thor's buddy so fuck off.* It took a lot for Tony to swallow those words down. He was more than aware that making himself the public enemy of Asgardian's Number One Hero was not going to do him any favours.

The engineer made himself mentally count down from ten to give himself time to cool down before he replied. *Rhodey would be so proud.*

"Well, thanks for the warning," Tony bit out, "but I can tell you that my planet is the *last* thing on my mind when I'm in bed with him." He glared at the stricken Aesir. "I also know he won't betray me, because I've never given him a *reason* to."

*Okay,* Tony corrected as he pushed up from his chair, grabbing his goblet as he did, and walked away from the redhead to go find Fandral or Loki. *So maybe Rhodey would only be a little bit proud.*

The biggest problem, Tony quickly found, was that not only was Loki still in a battle of wits with Odin - the air almost crackling with intensity - but Fandral was in the centre of some kind of drinking contest and before he could make his way towards either of them Tony was intercepted. He was surrounded, much quicker than he expected, by at least six Aesir who all decided to take their chance to interrogate Tony knowing that he had no allies by his side.

They had the misfortune of bombarding Tony when he was still quietly infuriated by Volstagg's remarks and not about to suffer fools nor people who wanted to manipulate or insult him. Tony had spent his entire life weaving and weathering harsher political and social climates than their paltry attempt. They were also drastically underestimating him and Tony very nearly grinned with vicious, dark glee; a wolf presented with a room full of sheep.

The Asgardian Court didn't stand a fucking chance.

And it was almost beautiful to watch. It was almost *child's play* to twist their words into a Gordian Knot they had no hope of undoing. It was also intensely satisfying to force many of them to bow out of the conversation, unable to best Tony or catch him in a lie.

It made something dark and deeply pleased spread through Tony's chest knowing that he could stand in Loki's defence and know that there was *nothing* the Aesir could do to contradict or counteract him.

It was only a shame that Loki was missing it.

The thought was only made all the more prominent when Tony heard an almost crackling noise. It was almost lost in the background but it also made all the hairs on Tony's neck and arms stand on end. He'd glanced over at Loki on instinct, only to see the mage standing as tense as he'd ever seen him and saying something sharp and low to Odin that was instantly countered. Tony heard the crackle again, a sound that no one else seemed to be aware of but that the engineer was familiar enough with to work out what it was; Loki's magic.

It didn't Tony long to piece together why he could sense and hear it but no one else could; the trickster's magic liked Tony - the mage had said it himself - and when everything and everyone on Asgard was Loki's enemy; why wouldn't the trickster's seidr seek out, even unconsciously, the only person that could offer Loki comfort and support?

Tony barely noticed or cared about what he said to the remaining courtiers as he extracted himself from their conversations and clutches to make his way towards Loki and the royal table. His attention was so intently focused on the mage that he was barely glancing at anyone around him, focusing instead on moving as quickly as possible towards Loki.

He didn't anticipate being intercepted by a woman with dark hair and a flirtatious smile. "I have heard a lot about you, Anthony of Midgard."

Tony gave her a tight, distracted smile. "That's me; the famous, mortal celebrity."

The engineer went to walk around her and continue towards the royal table when she lightly but firmly gripped his arm; her Asgardian strength meant he was almost jerked backwards with the motion as he turned to look at her with faint disbelief and a lot of annoyance.

If she noticed his expression, she didn't react to it. She merely shifted her hold to take more of coy grip, the motion suddenly looking as if Tony was the one offering his arm and leading her somewhere. The engineer's expression only morphed into one of growing distaste.

He tried, at first, to casually pull himself free of her grip, but she just held him firmly in place, her pleasant smile never shifting. "You are a brave warrior, a true hero on your world." Her other hand came up to gently stroke his bicep, her dark eyes on his, her smile trying to entice him. "A very *handsome* warrior."

Tony just narrowed his eyes at her, feeling the same disgust he'd felt on Earth when he'd been dating Pepper and men and women had still tried to sleep with him. "I'm a *taken* warrior."

When she frowned, it was more of a pout than anything that looked truly offended. "I'm sure no one would mind if we merely... went elsewhere for a while." She pressed her body closer to his, her bust quickly being pushed up and emphasised by the position. Her next whisper was beside his ear and a seductive purr and a promise the engineer didn't believe for a moment, "No one need know, Anthony."

Tony was trying very, very hard not to say something he would regret. It only became more difficult when he glanced up at the royal table only to meet Loki's blank, green eyes. He saw the mage quirk a single eyebrow before Odin was speaking and Loki was drawn back into talking with him.

The engineer could only imagine what new remark Odin was making. Tony could only imagine that this *woman* whoever she was had either been recruited by Odin or simply wanted to undermine his relationship with Loki.

It took a level of calm that Tony hadn't known he possessed before this moment to reach down and begin trying to force her fingers to loosen their grip on his arm. When it didn't seem to be working, he looked up at the woman and told her stiffly, "Remove your hand from me."

"But, Anthony-"

"No," Tony told her firmly, steel entering his voice and anger starting to spread across his face. "I am here with Loki. I *am* Loki's. I don't want anyone else in my bed but *him*." He looked down his nose at her, adding, "I also don't find knowingly flirting with someone in a committed relationship to be an *attractive* quality." Her eyes had widened, but Tony just leaned in, unable to resist a final, disgusted snipe, "If you're that keen to have someone take you home tonight, pick someone a little closer to your league, darling."

The insult finally made her rear back, her lips curling in disgust and her hands loosening their hold on him. Tony used the opportunity to shrug off her touch and walk away from her, relieved beyond measure when no one else stopped him from making his way to Loki.

The moment he reached the mage the engineer wrapped his arm around the taller man's waist and pressed up against him. He also pressed a delicate kiss to Loki's jaw for good measure, not giving a flying fuck about Odin sitting right beside Loki.

If the King didn't want to see Tony reaffirm his status as Loki's boyfriend then he shouldn't have tried to thrust slutty women on Tony.

"Hello, Anthony," Loki greeted with amusement and not only did Loki's hand lightly come to rest over Tony's where it rested on the mage's hip, but Tony actually *felt* the trickster's magic settle.

"I've missed you," Tony stated simply before flicking his eyes over to the scowling King. He didn't address Odin though, just turned back to Loki. "How's the conversation going, Lokes?"

He could hear the faint smile in the mage's voice and enjoyed the way Loki also leant back against him slightly. "Odin merely enquired about our partnership, relationship and my motivations for protecting the universe against the Mad Titan."

*Would have thought living in the universe would be motivation enough*, Tony thought, but didn't get a chance to say as Odin, obviously not willing to accept being ignored, remarked coldly, "Do you deny your deception these last years, Loki? Do you lie to this mortal by keeping those actions and the *truth* of your nature from him?"

"It was not *I* who lied about the truth of that for centuries," Loki accused harshly, his voice practically a growl. "It was not *I* who crafted the greatest deception of all, Odin Allfather."



“A deception you continue to maintain,” Odin fired back. “An illusion you refuse to shed.”

“A choice that is now *mine* to make,” Loki hissed. “Something that needs no further input from *you*.”

Odin stayed silent at that, seeming to either give the statement consideration or take the time to craft his response. The King looked between the mage and engineer with an eye that was sharp and narrowed. Tony didn't flinch when that shrewd gaze landed on him; simply tilting his chin and standing firm by Loki's side in both what the trickster was stating and whatever else the old man might throw at them next.

The King's appraisal only lasted a few weighted moments before he finally spoke, “Should this Midgardian know the truth of you and your actions and willingly remain at your side...” his gaze had drifted back to Tony and his voice was projecting consideration, his eye looking thoughtful - but Tony knew better; he knew it for what it was.

Odin was trying to dangle bait in front of Tony, he wanted him to bite and ask Loki either here or in private *what did he mean by that?* Odin thought the answer might fracture them, and it was obvious from the coiled tension in Loki that whether or not Odin was correct in his assumption, it was still an uncomfortable subject for the mage.

It was also obvious that Loki *hadn't* spoken to the engineer about it. Tony had an idea of what was being discussed but certainly couldn't put his finger on it. Odin seemed to suspect as much but he didn't have any proof, he could only try and encourage Tony's curiosity in the hopes it would do the damage that he wanted.

Tony had no intention of letting him succeed.

He merely raised his eyebrows at the King, unimpressed and looking bored. Odin's face soon soured and the usual scorn slipped back into his words, “But words hold little glory, truth, or use when so rehearsed and conspiratorial.” He waved a dismissive hand and turned from them. “There is little more to be gained from speaking with you this night.”

“Oh? Then perhaps Anthony and I might retire to our chambers,” Loki suggested; his tone lascivious enough to make it obvious what the mage intended for them to do there and causing Odin's eye to twitch. “It has been a rather tedious day, has it not, Anthony?”

“Absolutely,” Tony lightly ran his fingers over the mage's hip. “I would definitely enjoy being spread out in bed right about now.”

Odin shot them a deeply unimpressed look at Tony's turn of phrase, but Loki was just smirking, looking as if he was repressing a chuckle. Tony pretended innocence even as Loki shifted to better wind his arm around the smaller man's waist. “Then we shall leave.”

The mage ignored Odin entirely as he turned them and began making their way down from the royal table and back to the main floor. When they were far out of earshot of the King, Tony asked, “We actually leaving for the night?”

“I would suffer no more of this evening, yes,” Loki answered, his voice tight, and showing how frayed around the edges he truly was.

Tony felt his goblet disappear in a swirl of magic, assuming that Loki’s, wherever it had ended up, had been sent to the same place.

The brunet couldn’t help shooting Loki a look of concern as he lightly started stroking his thumb over the taller man’s hip in comfort. “Anything I can do to help?”

Loki glanced at him, offering a weary smile and squeezing Tony’s hip. “You already do all that can be done, but thank you, Anthony.”

Tony didn’t feel particularly content with that, but he was willing to stay quiet until they were back in Loki’s chambers and could talk more openly about what had happened with Odin. Thankfully, they didn’t have any trouble leaving; no one tried to talk to or stop them and while there were a few glares and snide remarks as they walked passed, it seemed most people were too busy drinking or socialising to pay much attention to their departure.

The moment they had entered the empty corridor and were out of sight, Loki let out a faint sigh of relief. His freehand came up to lightly rub against his forehead. “I detest these types of evenings.”

“I can understand why,” Tony agreed. “Enough nights like that and I’d be searching for the first ship out of town. I applaud you for managing to last for *centuries*.”

Loki gave him another half-hearted smile, but with a hint of genuine humour sparking to life in his eyes. “There was good reason as to why I became known for *mischievousness*, Anthony.”

“Makes total sense to me; I’d have been known for the same thing.”

Loki chuckled softly and Tony felt a feather-light kiss get brushed on his temple in gratitude. Loki just seemed tired as if Tony was the strength that was not only holding him up but keeping him going. Tony just tightened his hold on Loki a little more, shifting just enough that he could take some of Loki’s weight if he needed to.

“How did you fair this evening?” Loki enquired.

“Oh, great,” Tony answered sarcastically. “I got told by Volstagg that I was whoring myself out for Earth and that you’ll stab me in the back one day. Some harpy of a woman tried to get me to sleep with her, probably on Odin’s orders, and a bunch of courtiers tried and failed to manipulate me.” He paused. “Actually, completely verbally destroying them was one of the best parts of the night; wish you could have been there to see it.”

“As am I,” Loki agreed, sounding a little wistful before his voice took on a different, more unreadable tone. “But, in regards to the woman-”

“Who I shot down,” Tony made sure to interrupt, stating that point nice and clear.

“I had little doubt you would not,” Loki answered, flicking his gaze to Tony. “Odin, of course, believed you far more susceptible to her wiles, something he made sure to point out

to me when he noticed you together.”

Tony remembered the blank way Loki had looked at him; giving nothing away before turning back to Odin as if nothing was amiss. Tony really wanted to say a number of things to Loki in that moment but most of them needed the privacy of the mage’s chambers and spells that allowed them to speak freely to do it.

He settled on the most simple of assurances and hoped Loki could read everything else that rested between the lines.

“You didn’t need to have any doubt.” The words made Loki glance at him. “I’m with you, no one else. There isn’t a person in the *universe* that could tempt me into cheating on you.” He tugged Loki closer until they were plastered side by side. “Morals aside, babe, there’s just no one around that’s ever going to measure up to what I’ve already got.”

Loki didn’t seem to know what to say to that, his face rushing through too many emotions to catch before eventually settling on a gentle smile and a laugh. He shook his head lightly, his eyes averted from Tony. “Sentimental fool.”

“*Your* sentimental fool,” Tony quickly interjected before dramatically leaning his cheek against Loki’s shoulder; every inch the besotted lover. “And I’m not going anywhere.”

He half expected Loki wouldn’t reply or that the mage might shake him off, but he kept Tony exactly where he was, murmuring only a soft ‘*good*’ that made Tony grin, feeling oddly... satisfied - content even. It made him stay exactly where he was as they walked the rest of the way through the halls and corridors to Loki’s chambers.

There were a few guards that they saw during the journey, but the Aesir didn’t speak to them and Tony ignored the dour expressions they wore at seeing the mage and engineer’s intimate embrace. All Tony really cared about was getting back to the privacy of Loki’s rooms where they would be able to *relax* for the first time in hours.

It felt like an age until they finally got there, but the moment they were able to close the doors behind them it was like a physical weight lifted off their shoulders; Loki’s in particular. He slumped a little; unwinding from Tony only so he could take a heavy seat in the nearest chair.

“Loki?” Tony asked.

The mage waved his hand absently. “A long day, Anthony; I’m tired and not relishing the thought of repeating it tomorrow.”

“But the ambassadors will arrive,” Tony said, walking closer to the other man. “That’ll help make it a bit more bearable, yeah? And Odin’s face will be something to treasure.”

Loki’s mouth quirked in a small, tired smile. “They will be a useful barrier. They will also allow us time away from the palace and Odin’s eye - but our days will be no less draining, of that I assure you.”

The mere thought of it made Tony's already depleting energy levels take a significant hit. "Yeah, okay, fair point." The shorter man rubbed a hand over his face before suggesting, "Maybe we should head to bed then? Rest as much as we can before taking on whatever the hell tomorrow brings."

Loki sighed and nodded before wearily pushing out of his chair.

It showed how exhausted Loki must have been for the mage to take until he reached the bedroom to remember the sleeping situation. He stilled, the abrupt motion making Tony glance at where he was staring at the bed with a mixture of discomfort and trepidation. The brunet just had to bite down on an amused smile.

"Right or left side, Lokes?"

The trickster glanced at him, but seeing nothing but ease he started to relax a little. He didn't verbally reply but he did make his way to the right. Tony took that as his cue and started pulling off his Asgardian clothes and laying them on the ornate footstool on the left-hand side of the room.

He could hear Loki disrobing as well, but didn't look over his shoulder; he didn't want to give Loki the impression he was uncomfortable or suspicious. There was a moment where he realised he didn't have anything to change *into* though and the engineer would forever cherish asking Loki to conjure him boxers and seeing the mage freeze and flush slightly as he realised Tony was standing naked only a few feet from him.

The trickster did do as Tony requested, but he didn't even *once* try to sneak a peek. It caused Tony's ego to take a rather significant hit for which he was tempted to say something, but in the end, he refrained, knowing that the mage was likely still nursing the worry that Tony would find Loki's attraction to him discomfoting.

That theory was only further proved when they both climbed into bed. Loki was shirtless and wearing some kind of Asgardian sleep pants. He was also as stiff as a board and staring at the ceiling; barely moving, barely *breathing*.

Tony decided that really needed to be fixed.

The engineer didn't even bother to warn Loki before he was rolling over and throwing an arm and a leg over Loki in a full-body, skin-to-skin, unabashed cuddle.

"Anthony!" Loki practically yelped, sounding aghast and hurriedly moving to try and shove him away.

Considering Tony didn't end up halfway across the room due to the other man's vastly superior strength, he figured it was less of an adamant protest and more of a panicked reaction. It meant Tony could just continue to wiggle himself closer and into a comfortable position.

He did respond to the other's shocked exclamation though, keeping his voice light and unconcerned, "What? I told you; I cuddle. I'm a cuddler. It's going to happen eventually, why

not get it started now? Embrace the inevitable, Loki. Also, you're comfy."

Loki didn't look in any way prepared for what was happening as he stared down at Tony. "And what if I dream?"

"I told you, just don't stab me and-"

"No, what if I *dream*."

The implication was obvious and the genuine concern and embarrassment on Loki's face impossible to miss. Tony just gave him a lop-sided smile. "Then you dream. It could happen to me too, you know. And I've woken up to far worse things than a hard on pressed against my thigh."

The casual acceptance finally seemed to be enough to break through Loki's worry. He gave a huff of a laugh and finally started to relax, he even brought a cautious hand to rest on Tony's back. The engineer just relaxed back against Loki, his head lying against the other man's chest.

It was only a few moments later that the lights began to dim, likely working on Loki's magical command. Tony just closed his eyes and got used to the feeling of Loki's chest rising and falling in soft breaths beneath him. It was meditative, *calming* and he hadn't been lying when he'd told the mage that he was comfortable.

It was as the engineer's breathing was starting to sync with the mage's and his mind was drifting to what would happen tomorrow and how they would handle it - that he heard Loki quietly whisper, "*Thank you, Anthony.*"

The words were heart-felt and almost raw with the amount of emotion in them, and Tony knew it wasn't just the bed-sharing that the mage was talking about. It was everything Tony had done since arriving on Asgard; it was the unwavering support and friendship that Tony offered him freely and constantly.

It was Loki being painfully relieved and grateful that he wasn't doing all of this alone. That for once, the trickster had someone by his side that he could trust to have his back.

Smiling gently, the engineer tightened his hold on Loki briefly; a single gesture of recognition and acceptance of the words, before letting his grip relax once more. Not long after, Loki began stroking his fingers over Tony's back in absent, soothing gestures.

They didn't speak after that, just lying close and comfortable in each other's embrace. Tony couldn't have said how long they both lay there, unable to sleep and thinking of what the next few days would bring and how their partnership would be tested.

But despite any lingering concerns that Tony might have felt, it was still easier than the engineer expected to fall asleep on a hostile planet, far away from home; he supposed it helped to be curled in the arms of someone he not only trusted but whom he cared about as well.

## Chapter End Notes

Hehe. I hope you liked the chapter; some more Fandral, lots of support friendship ~~and flirting~~ between the boys and also *bed sharing cuddles*. Always a nice thing to end a chapter on, huh? XD

Buuuut, okay, my other update: It's to let all the people who also read my "A Deal with the Prince" story know that my other beta who edits that story has been terribly unwell this last week and hasn't had a chance to finish editing it :( This will likely mean a delay on the update of that story. We're both terribly sorry, but I hope you can all understand and send good, positive, healing vibes rightsidethru's way! I'll have that chapter up as soon as I can! ♥

Thanks again for reading! :)

# Chapter 32

## Chapter Notes

What's this? Less than a month since the last update?? Could it be that having more freetime means *more frequent updates on this story??* Who'd have thought! XD

Now, I just straight up I want to say **this chapter was written before I saw Thor 3 (and the story plotted long beforehand). SO THIS IS NOT THOR 3 COMPLIANT.** Just putting it out there for you all. There are no spoilers inside :)

I also want to mention an anon ask I got on tumblr a while ago, I forgot to mention it last chapter. They gave a beautiful, sweet message about this story and I just wanted to say thank you! My tumblr is more for original work than FI so I didn't post it. But I just wanted to thank them for their message. It made my day to read!

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

When he woke up in the morning to faint sunlight across his face, Tony was momentarily confused.

His room in his penthouse blocked out all sunlight. His *bed* in the tower was comfortable and spacious but had very few layers and a much firmer mattress. This bed was unfamiliar and also included another person who was wrapped around him, something which hadn't happened to Tony in quite a long time. But it only took him a couple of blinks and a glance at pale skin, dark hair and fur pelts for it all to come flooding back.

The moment it did and Tony was able to properly catalogue the situation, he had to smother a laugh as he looked down at Loki's peaceful sleeping form that was *completely* wrapped around him.

Tony was a cuddler, he could admit as much - but he tended to drift away in the middle of the night. Loki, it seemed, hadn't intended to let him go far. They were mostly in the middle of the bed, but still a little on Tony's side. It made the engineer believe that he'd rolled away from the taller man during the night but that Loki had quickly followed after him.

Loki's arms were wrapped around Tony's waist, drawing him as close as possible. Tony was on his back, the entire left side of his body pressed against Loki. The trickster had his head on Tony's chest and their legs were tangled as Loki breathed heavily and serenely.

He looked peaceful, relaxed. He also *wasn't* sporting the erection that the mage had feared last night.

*Well, that's one less embarrassment for him to wake up to.*

Unable to completely contain his amused smirk, nor his mischievous side, Tony slowly brought his arms up to languidly rest them behind his head. He then cleared his throat and began calling the other man's name.

It only took three soft attempts before he felt the trickster start to stir. The moment Loki became aware of the situation was easy to pinpoint; his entire body went stiff.

"Comfortable?" Tony asked, the moment he knew Loki was awake, amusement plain in the engineer's voice.

Loki lifted his head slowly, blinking up at him with wide eyes before his gaze narrowed with intensity; taking in Tony's arrogant posture and teasing smile with a calculated glance before suddenly relaxing. He even went as far as to drop his chin back down on Tony's chest, looking up at the brunet while telling him simply, "Yes."

Seeing Loki free of mortification or discomfort actually sent more relief through Tony than he expected and his smile became softer to reflect it. "Good. Sleep well?"

"Surprisingly, yes," Loki agreed. "I expected more turbulent dreams, considering the surroundings."

Tony scowled, his good mood falling slightly, but he hurried to keep it from dropping further by focusing on the positives. "I'm glad it was better than expected."

A grin pulled at Loki's mouth. "Mm," he hummed. "And how did you sleep?"

And that was actually an interesting thing to consider now that he wasn't focusing on the mage.

"Ridiculously well, actually," Tony answered with a small frown. "Probably the longest sleep I've had in weeks." He smirked a little. "Guess it's easier to sleep knowing you've got a powerful demi-god in your bed ready to protect you."

Loki chuckled lowly. "That is all I am to you now; a guard?"

"Nah," Tony disagreed. "Thought we already established you work wonders as a pillow too."

The mage shook his head at the shorter man before unwinding himself from Tony. It almost made the engineer pout, but he ignored the disappointment to sit up as well. They were still sitting close, their legs still more tangled than separated as Loki ran a hand through his somewhat frizzy, wavy hair and Tony stifled a yawn.

"Are you hungry, Anthony?"

Tony nodded. "I could eat."

"I will call the servants and have them bring us breakfast." He gestured towards one of the archways in the room. "There are bathing quarters through there if you'd like to freshen up, but we shall need to leave soon if we wish to be present when the first of the ambassadors arrive."



Glancing around and finding nothing resembling a clock, Tony asked, "What time is it?"

"An hour past sunrise," Loki announced promptly, making Tony raise his eyebrows. Loki just shrugged. "This was my home for many centuries. Very little changes without influence; even the rise of the sun or the weather does not alter without another's hand at work."

Tony couldn't stop the disgusted noise he made, causing the mage to raise his eyebrows curiously. "It's Groundhog Day and I can actually feel my skin crawling. *Ugh.*"

"Some would call the world idyllic. That it's constant, unchanging pace makes it the perfect world," Loki remarked, almost sounding as if there was some kind of test in the words. Tony didn't know how the mage could possibly doubt him.

"I'm not one of them," Tony told him firmly. "Give me something a bit more interesting, a bit more chaotic. Hell, I haven't even been here twenty-four hours and I want to ruin something just to see if things can become a little less boring."

When Loki's eyes caught Tony's they almost *burned* they were so bright. "You want to cause *chaos* do you, Anthony?"

The brunet grinned and leaned a little closer to the mage. "Oh, please tell me that we can."

Loki actually tipped his head back and *laughed* in reply. The sound reverberated around the chambers and sounded purely joyful. It was so contagious that Tony found himself chuckling softly in response, unable to stop himself when Loki looked as if he hadn't been so amused in *years*.

"Oh, Anthony," Loki said when he finally looked back at the engineer with a wide smile and gleeful eyes. "You truly are a prize."

"Right back at you, Lokes," Tony told him truthfully.

Shaking his head fondly, Loki just climbed the rest of the way out of the bed, offering a hand to Tony; it seemed simple, *natural* even to do it and Tony took it without hesitation. When he was standing, Loki let him go and made another motion towards the baths. "Go. I will see to it that food arrives by the time you are finished."

"Yeah?" Tony asked. "I could end up being only thirty seconds."

"Oh, that I do not think will be the case," Loki told him; the words only making Tony narrow his eyes suspiciously.

The trickster didn't say anything further though as he turned and made his way out of the room and into the living quarters of his former chambers.

Curious, Tony just moved directly to the bathing area. The moment he stepped inside sconce lights on the wall glowed, allowing Tony to see everything properly and quickly helping him to realise why Loki had thought he would need at least a few minutes.

The room was almost as big as the bedroom and was more like a Turkish bath than the kind of en-suites Tony was used to. It didn't mean he was going to turn around and ask Loki for help though. No, he could absolutely figure this out. The fact that the first basin he walked up to didn't have taps wasn't exactly comforting, but if there was one thing Tony was good at it was figuring out how things worked.

He was Tony Stark; this would be a piece of cake.

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Well, okay. Maybe it was a bit more complicated than that.

Tony managed to get certain aspects of the bathroom working, like the cold water. The hot water? Apparently that was a bit more difficult. He did manage to make a giant pile of foam by pressing a small indent in the basin though. He wasn't exactly relishing showing that one to Loki.

He'd eventually just decided to go out and ask for some help. Tony had paused near the bed when he'd heard Loki talking to someone - a servant - and Tony quickly flicked his eyes around the room before changing direction. He grabbed the shirt Loki had worn the previous night and slipped it over his head. It actually fell low enough that you could barely see his boxers and Tony hoped that would be distraction enough that no one would notice the complete *lack* of any of the illusionary lovebites Loki liked them to flaunt.

Tony did ruffle his hair a little bit more to give himself a more recently ravaged look before stepping out of the bedroom and making a direct line towards Loki. The mage had his back to the engineer and Tony barely had to think before he was wrapping his arms around Loki in an affectionate hug, his chin coming to rest on the mage's shoulder.

Loki didn't even startle over Tony's presence, he merely paused what he was saying to look over his shoulder at the brunet. He played the part perfectly; his smile soft and his eyes amused. "Good morning, Anthony."

Tony just brushed his mouth in a soft kiss against the taller man's shoulder. "Loki," he said, adopting a more sleep-roughened voice. "Come bathe with me."

The servant gave a soft little gasp but Tony ignored them, just waiting patiently for Loki to make some final remarks about the food before quickly dismissing the Aesir. Loki waited until the door was firmly shut behind the servant before asking, nothing but laughter in his voice, "You can't figure out the bath, can you, Anthony?"

"I *could*," Tony insisted. "But I don't want to miss out on Odin's little surprise. Or breakfast. And you need to bathe too right? Makes more sense to have you point out where the hot tap is before I make another cloud of foam."

Loki chuckled before lightly patting Tony's hand to make the engineer release him. When he turned to make his way towards the bathroom, the trickster's eyes did linger for a moment on the shirt Tony was wearing and the way the hem of it brushed the shorter man's thighs.

It made Tony huff out a small laugh as he followed after the mage. “Your shirts are nice and soft,” he called, unable to resist, “maybe I should wear them more often?”

“Or perhaps you should wear clothing more suitable to your shorter frame.”

There was tease in Loki’s voice, there was also a dramatic pause and Tony knew what was coming next. He still tried to stop it, the smile dropping off his face as he warned, “Don’t say it.”

Loki just looked over his shoulder; his eyes twinkling as he completely ignored him. “Say what, my little vegetable?”

The engineer dropped his head back against his shoulders, staring at the ceiling and groaning loudly. The disgruntled noise wasn’t enough to drown out Loki’s amused chuckles though, leaving Tony torn between enjoying Loki’s good mood and trying to get rid of that infernal nickname.

The sound of running water did distract the engineer and he was too curious to refrain from looking inside the bathroom.

He blinked a little at finding everything had already been set up, including some lotions and soaps that were aligned beside the large sunken bath. Tony eyed the room sceptically before looking at the mage, “You used magic, didn’t you?”

“I did,” Loki agreed, his expression becoming a little tighter even as his eyes travelled over the room. “And when time is not of the essence, I will teach you how to use everything in here.”

The reminder of the dignitaries had Tony agreeing, “Yeah, alright.”

Tony could see furrows etching themselves into Loki's brow. He knew his friend's tension had a lot to do with what the morning and day would bring, and he wanted to forestall that, to have Loki concentrating on the here and now again.

He started by pulling off Loki’s shirt before calling the mage, “Hey, Loki!”

The moment the other man looked at him, Tony was throwing the balled up item at the trickster’s face. Loki caught it on instinct, looking adorably confused as he glanced between the shirt and Tony with pure puzzlement.

Tony just grinned; trying to keep Loki at least momentarily distracted. “I hope you enjoyed the special sight of Tony Stark stripping for you.” He winked and placed his hands on his hips. “But now I have a bath to take. Do you have something for me to change into?”

Loki blinked, still looking off-balance and his eyes had dipped to focus on Tony’s hips, however briefly. “Ah, yes. Hertha prepared many outfits.” He glanced towards the bedroom, the shirt still clutched in his hand. “I’ll have one on the bed by the time you are finished.” He looked over the room again, his eyes a bit less distant as if he was checking for faults as opposed to imagining potential ambassadorial failures. “Enjoy your bath.”

Loki didn't wait for Tony to respond; he just turned on his heel and left the room. The engineer watched the spot he'd disappeared from for a long moment, his mouth quickly becoming a worried, unhappy line. Tony could understand why Loki was distracted; he could understand why the mage was tense and uncertain. The fate of worlds and the success of their plans were riding on the response that their invitations received, and how Odin handled the appearance of the ambassadors.

There was a lot of ways it could go wrong and only a few where it could go right.

Frustrated at the very thought, Tony ran a hand through his hair and looked down at the bath Loki had prepared for him. A part of the engineer wanted to skip it entirely, to just go after Loki and keep the trickster company, to stop him from getting tripped up in worries and potential disasters.

Tony could understand where Loki was coming from as he shared most of the mage's worries, but they also needed to look their best if they were going to impress the dignitaries. It meant that they both needed to have a wash.

Letting out a rough, aggravated breath, Tony stripped from the last of his clothes and made his way towards the bath. He gave it a cursory check of temperature before slipping into it.

It was... it was god damn *blissful*.

It was like slipping into a hot spring after a long day and Tony couldn't stop the small, pleased groan he let out as he relaxed into the feeling. The water felt different, like there was some kind of scented oil mixed into it, the Asgardian equivalent of lavender, maybe?

All Tony knew was that for a good few minutes he just lay there, soaking up the warmth and forgetting everything but the immediate pleasure of the best bath he'd had in years - possibly *ever*.

It was only the absent, floating thought as he stretched out his muscles - *I hope Loki feels half as relaxed when he gets his bath*- that made him remember not only where he was, but that Loki was waiting for him in the other room and that the dignitaries could arrive at any minute.

He blinked his eyes open, grimacing a little at being swept away by the bath. He was going to be stuck in Asgard for days; surely he could enjoy it at a *less* crucial time? Shaking his head and sitting up a bit more, Tony made sure to keep his motions brisk and to the point; washing his hair and body with the crisp apple body wash that Loki had given him.

Pulling himself out of his little slice of bathing heaven was a bit of a task, but his stomach was rumbling and his concern for Loki was swiftly returning.

He dried himself off with the unbelievably absorbent and fluffy towels, wrapping one around his waist before heading into the bedroom. His clothes were laid out on the bed, as Loki had promised, and was the standard Asgardian attire and much the same as the night before. There was the linen shirt, leather-like pants, the same boots as well as a new and more casual

leather jacket. Tony could only smirk a little at finding his new shirt was in Loki's favourite shade of green.

Pulling on everything but the jacket - which he folded over his arm - Tony made his way out to find Loki. The mage was sitting on one of the settees, scowling into midair. There was a collection of food in front of him but it looked like Loki had barely touched; in fact, he was holding a piece of cheese in his hand, but seemed oblivious to the fact it was there.

Instantly concerned, Tony walked quickly towards him, dropping his jacket on the back of the couch, but not gaining any acknowledgement.

Keeping his voice soft, Tony came to sit beside the trickster, trying not to let too much of his worry show, "Hey, you alright?"

Loki jerked a little before glancing over at him. The mage gave him a tight smile, before answering, "Well enough. Did you enjoy your bath?"

"Yeah, you're not escaping that easily," Tony told him. "What's wrong?"

Loki briefly looked like he might try to evade it, but in the end, his shoulders dropped a little and he gave in, "Today will be difficult, Anthony, even should it all go to plan we will need to forge friendships and alliances quickly if we are to keep the tide turning in our favour." His smile was rueful. "And I am not the most trusted of allies. When I was speaking on behalf of Asgard, I could be trusted to work within existing agreements. When on my own, well..."

"You were known for tricking them into deals more heavily in your favour and now they're sour and suspicious about it?" Tony guessed.

The engineer's suggestion made Loki's smile became a little more amused and a little more proud.

"*Perhaps*," he allowed, but his humour also faded far too quickly. "I was careful to keep those of greater influence out of my schemes, but many stories have been whispered about me in recent years. I cannot gauge how many will dislike and refuse me for what they have learned."

"Loki, this is the fate of the worlds. You might have a bad reputation, but if you prove you're on the right side, people shouldn't refuse you out of spite."

"Asgard would," Loki stated simply.

"Yeah, well Asgard are *idiots*," Tony told the mage, his voice almost a growl. "And we both know your plan isn't going to let Odin get away with that level of stupidity."

Loki still looked a little unimpressed, a little disbelieving and Tony reached out and wrapped his hand around Loki's wrist, squeezing it gently and hoping he could somehow *make* Loki believe him.

"Seriously, Loki, go with me on this," Tony told him, his voice earnest, "I trust few people anymore - but I trust *you*. Asgard might be stupid enough to waste every opportunity you

throw at them, but the rest of the realms won't, if you thought that was the case, you wouldn't have bothered to have us stay up here."

"Such unshakeable faith in me," Loki murmured, his expression trying to stay blank but failing miserably. "But even you cannot sway everyone to my side."

It reminded Tony, abruptly and suddenly of the conversation he'd had with Rhodey and Bruce, about all the people waiting for them on Earth who just wanted to tear Loki down and refuse to accept him. It made fury and determination burn hot and bright inside Tony; a need to defend, protect and *support*.

"Watch me," Tony told Loki fiercely, the sheer stubbornness in his voice making Loki blink at him with surprise. The engineer just held Loki's gaze and dared the mage to try and deny him as he repeated, "Just watch me."

Loki stared at him for a long moment before shaking his head and lightly patting the hand still curled around the trickster's wrist. "We shall see what we manage, Anthony. But do not raise your hopes too high; bringing the dignitaries here was a way to force the realms into unity. Asgard protects Midgard, so either way, an alliance with the Aesir is an alliance that benefits your planet. The greatest strength for myself is knowing which ears to whisper in and which alliances will require further tending."

It suddenly made perfect sense and Tony didn't know how he'd never realised it before.

"You didn't do this to create allies for yourself, you did this to make sure everyone else was working together." His eyes widened. "You're doing what you did with the Avengers; forcing everyone to unite against a common enemy, only this time, the enemy isn't you!"

Loki looked momentarily surprised before he abruptly smiled, looking incredibly fond of the engineer in that moment. "You sometimes surprise me with how incredibly perceptive you are, Anthony."

"That's why you said it would be easy once the ambassador's arrived," Tony continued to say, understanding coming sudden and sharp. "Once they were here all you had to do was watch, listen, nudge a few people maybe, but they'd do the rest of the work themselves." Tony still couldn't stop looking at him with shock and a heavy mix of awe. "You're getting exactly what you want without having to make a bargain or a deal with anybody."

"I will not reject an alliance if it is offered," Loki told him simply, "and I *will* endeavour to gain Midgard and yourself greater connections with the other realms, but I know when I am wanted and when I am not." He shrugged. "I also prefer to work alone," his mouth twitched upwards, "you are a delightful exception."

*Can I marry your brain?* Tony thought, barely keeping himself from blurting it out loud.

"But if you don't care about alliances," Tony murmured, "why are you worried?"

Loki tapped his long fingers against his leg in an almost stalling gesture. Eventually though, he admitted, "The Aesir may be foolish but most of these ambassadors are not."

“Okay...?”

“They will not take long to realise the invitations were of my doing.”

Tony narrowed his eyes. “And you think they’ll say something?”

“No,” Loki smiled tightly. “I think they might leave.”

The engineer couldn’t keep the incredulity of his face. “What? *Why?*”

“Wounded pride influences the decisions of many warriors, Anthony,” Loki explained. “It would not be the first time an important, political alliance was destroyed because someone felt their honour to be besmirched.”

Tony narrowed his eyes suspiciously. “Someone like Thor, maybe?”

“Yes,” Loki agreed, “him and other Aesir. The Vanir are also inclined to such behaviour, as are those from Niðavellir, but the elves of Alfheim are more likely to show restraint.” He let out a sigh and brought his fingers to pinch the bridge of his nose. “It is a delicate situation, Anthony, and it is my hope that the terror inspired by the Mad Titan will hold even an Aesir’s furious tongue.”

“*Shit,*” Tony hissed.

“Yes, Anthony,” Loki remarked wryly, “it is why I would like to leave soon, to better observe the temper of those present.”

He finished those words by lightly encouraging Tony to let his wrist go. The engineer hesitated, but complied in the end. Loki simply stood, the cheese that had been in his hand being placed back on the table. “I will bathe and change. Eat what you wish and I will join you again shortly.”

Tony nodded, but suddenly didn’t have much of an appetite.

*So much for; ‘it’ll be easy once they arrive’,* he thought as Loki turned and walked towards the bathrooms. Tony just leant back against the settee and closed his eyes, trying to summon up calm and strength for what was to come.

He just hoped it wasn’t as bad as Loki was imagining.

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Loki didn’t spend as long as Tony had in the baths, and by the time he returned - wearing almost identical clothes and colours to the engineer - the brunet had managed to at least eat something.

The moment he saw the mage, Tony stood up and pulled on his jacket; Loki’s spine was stiff while his eyes were determined and sharp. There wasn’t a hint of uncertainty or concern; it was all locked up behind a mask of poise and confidence. Tony just came to stand by the other man’s side, gaining a brief smile before they left Loki’s chambers to head towards the palace entrance.

They didn't speak much as they walked, but Tony did shift himself close to Loki, their arms and hands brushing with every step they took. The engineer couldn't feel the almost familiar weight of Heimdall's eye and wondered if that was Loki's spell working or that the gatekeeper was distracted by the sudden guests.

He didn't know, and didn't want to bring it up when the mage beside him already looked incredibly tense. Normally, the engineer would try to say something to break the quiet and the nervous air, but there was something in Loki's motions; the powerful strides and concentrated scowl that made Tony think he *needed* this.

He needed the time to prepare himself, to run through his many plans as well as all the ways to twist the situation in his favour. So Tony didn't say a word, he settled instead for offering silent support by snagging Loki's hand and linking their fingers.

The trickster startled slightly, but Tony just smiled at him and Loki's mouth briefly twitched back at him before he was looking away. But Tony wasn't bothered by it. They had a ruse to present, after all, and Tony needed to make sure Loki knew that he wasn't in this alone.

When they came close to the palace entrance, they began to hear uncertain and confused murmuring. Tony hastily plastered on a confused expression, and he saw Loki presenting a look of intrigue.

Stepping fully out of the corridor, Tony got his first glimpse of the dignitaries that Loki had invited. It was an... interesting bunch.

There were a group of fair-skinned, very tall men and women. They were elegantly dressed, but in long gown and ceremonial robes. They were all wearing some kind of armour. Well, okay, no, that wasn't true. There was a lady in a black dress and what looked like the arm and face of a skeleton. But when Tony looked more closely, that side of her body just look really, *really* pale. She was smiling at him in a way that made him want to shiver. Her eyes were like looking into the void.

Tony hurriedly focused on some of the other guests. There was a large group of people actually *shorter* than him. Loki has said there was a dwarf realm, right? There was also a group who resembled Hogun in both looks and dress.

Honestly, Tony wasn't sure who anyone was; he was a little out of his depth and probably should have brushed up on his Norse Mythology the moment Thor dropped down on the Quinjet to steal Loki all those years ago.

Mind you, Loki had called bullshit on half of the myths, so, it might not have helped him that much.

Resisting the urge to scratch the back of his head nervously - especially when the thirty odd people began to become aware of Loki and sent him a mixture of dirty, curious and suspicious looks - Tony decided to tackle the big question first. "Is there a half-skeleton lady here or is that just me?"



“That is Hel,” Loki told him. “Ruler of Helheim, and of those who die an ignoble death. And no, Anthony,” Loki remarked wearily, making Tony look at him oddly for the unexpected tone, “unlike many of your myths claim, she is *not* my child.”

Tony blinked rapidly. “Um. Didn’t know she was meant to be?” And that suddenly begged the question. “Wait, do you *have* children?”

Loki smiled wryly and shook his head. “No, Anthony, I do not.”

“Okay,” Tony nodded. “Good to know.”

They fell quiet after that; the large doors to the entrance hall rumbling loudly as they were pulled open. It was all rather grandiose, and reminded Tony of mausoleum doors in old horror films; overly dramatic and unintentionally amusing.

He didn't seem to be the only one unimpressed by it either; most of the ambassadors just looked impatient and the moment there was a clear path the dignitaries were making their way inside without hesitation. Loki however, tugged Tony gently back by the hand when the engineer went to take a step forward.

The mage waited until they were the last people left before proceeding to step inside.

Tony had to wonder if a part of that wasn’t so that they could beat a hasty retreat if things went wrong, but he hoped that between them, that wouldn’t need to be the case.

Odin was seated on his throne with a collection of Aesir standing at the foot. He was shooting them a very dark scowl that Tony had to resist smiling brightly at.

“His royal council,” Loki murmured in the engineer’s ear. “An emergency meeting was likely called once Heimdall started allowing each of the ambassadors’ passage into Asgard.”

The mage had barely finished his whisper before he was straightening and calling, his voice carrying through the hall and making the ambassadors fall quiet and turn to look at him, “I am impressed, Odin Allfather. You have taken the warning of the Mad Titan so seriously as to involve all of Asgard's allies." He nodded respectfully at the dignitaries. "It is gratifying to see that, when it comes to the safety of the Nine Realms, you would allow open discussion as to how we should all proceed.”

Loki glanced at Tony then, his expression deliberately soft and affectionate before he looked back at the King. “I am grateful that you would also include Midgard in these talks. The world is young but filled with fine warriors; Anthony has even fought valiantly beside Prince Thor himself.”

An almost painful squeeze to Tony’s hand had the engineer quickly speaking, “It is truly an honour to be included, Odin Allfather.” Tony bowed his head in respect. “My planet has much to learn from realms far older and wiser than our own and we will do all we can to help protect against the threat of the Mad Titan.”

Odin was trying very hard not to show how much he was seething, but he was gripping his staff painfully tight and he looked like he was grinding his teeth. Loki just smiled in the face of it and Tony made his expression matched the mage.

“I am indeed pleased to see you have mended the rift between Loki and yourself, Odin Allfather,” the skeletal woman, Hel, spoke, her voice making Tony fight down a shiver. She had a small, barely perceptible smile tilting up the lips on the more human side of her face. “I will be pleased to speak with Asgard, Loki and the ambassador of Midgard about the defence of our realms.”

Tony raised his eyebrows a little and glanced at Loki. *You’ve got a friend there*, he wanted to say, but Loki’s eyes were already filled with surprised pleasure at her words. She had also ignited low chatter between the ambassadors who were glancing between Odin and Loki as if trying to decide just what and who they wanted to believe. Some of them were even sending Tony curious glances, like they were trying to puzzle him out. Loki just kept staring at the king, simply waiting to see what he’d do.

It wasn’t as if Odin had much of a choice.

“Asgard thanks you for receiving our summons and responding to the threat that faces us all,” he answered smoothly, any anger at their duplicity carefully hidden. He did give a particular nod to Hel after her earlier words. “Today shall be spent in reflection and discussion until we will meet in these halls tomorrow at midday. The fate of the realms will be decided in the alliances we form and actions we take.” He struck his staff to the ground. “Asgard welcomes you throughout your time on our realm.”

He nodded his head in respect to the ambassadors and they did the same and gave him soft applause in response to his speech. The moment he rose to walk down from his throne, Loki was all but yanking Tony into the crowd and snagging the first Alfheim dignitary he could reach by pulling them into a conversation that involved quickly introducing Anthony.

It was a seamless way to get them out of Odin’s warpath while furthering Loki’s goals to keep all of the ambassadors on the planet and to forge as many alliances and friendships as he possible could for.... everybody but himself.

But standing by the mage’s side and smiling his best CEO smile, Tony had every intention of working just hard at winning *Loki* as many connections as he could.

Because one way or another when the bifrost dropped him and Loki back down in New York in a few days, Tony intended to have as many people as possible on *their* side, ready to protect Earth and ready to accept Loki as a badass ally in his own right.

After all, Tony wasn’t going to be around forever, and Loki needed to have more than just Tony standing by the trickster’s side.

So. As I mentioned above, *not* Thor 3 compliant, lol. Hel(a) is different in this universe. Probably more like the myths. And more like a powerful ruler and friend to few, but fond of those that she does like. I *loved* movieverse Hela, but that really isn't going to work in this universe, heh.

But yes, anyway! I hope you enjoyed the new chapter. We'll see when I manage to update with chapter 33!

# Chapter 33

## Chapter Notes

Sooo, I was meant to have this up a while ago but the festive season has meant I have had like *no time for anything, holy crap*. It's only likely to get even busier when around my family. So, um, heads up and warnings? But I hope you like this chapter. Much kudos and adoration to my beta **Amara1783** who put up with my frazzled by festivities self when she emailed me back the edited chapter. ^^;

And, for everyone who has been hoping for it, we have a new Loki POV chapter! :D

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

Loki, despite his many centuries on Asgard and travelling the other realms, had never truly had a companion that he could feel proud of, not until Anthony Stark.

Watching the mortal charm the ambassadors with ease was everything that Loki could have wanted. They complemented each other brilliantly; working separately but never once ceasing to work *together*. They traded affectionate gestures like a game, brushing their fingers over each other's arms, pressing their lips to the other's temple or cheek when they had to part, watching as the dignitaries took it in stride, watching as the dignitaries seemed to warm to Loki *more* because of it.

And *that* had been something Loki never would have expected. Oh, he knew Anthony was trying to make a point of winning the ambassadors to the trickster's side, but it wasn't only that, Hel had remarked on it quietly to him, saying - when Anthony was otherwise engaged - that the mortal looked good beside him, that Anthony softened his otherwise sharp edges.

Loki had laughingly brushed it aside at the time, but the thought had lingered.

When they had eventually retired for the afternoon, retreating back to the mage's chambers for a quick meal, Loki had been unable to turn his mind from the unexpected boon Anthony's presence provided him. He hadn't been able to stop himself from praising the other for it as well, and while Anthony had been smug and preening, he was also noticeably relieved that things had gone well.

They spent the rest of their meal discussing the various people they'd spoken to and what tactics they would employ tomorrow. Loki had been in the process of explaining the diplomatic history of the realms when a servant had interrupted them.

The servant had passed on a letter from Fandral that requested their presence at one of the larger stables on Asgard. Loki had debated going, not wanting his good mood to plummet when faced with the swordsman's presence, but Anthony had been keen to watch Fandral try and fail to tame the rhino.

In the end, Anthony's cajoling had been enough to make the mage agree.

They walked the fifteen minutes from Loki's chambers to the stables, using the opportunity to be seen out and about and to gauge the populace's attitude towards them. Loki took the time to point out the different alcoves he'd concealed himself in during his youth when he'd needed to hide from the consequences of a prank or miscast spell. Anthony's laughter and smiles during the stories had been a joy. It was all too easy to ignore the glares and murmurs of the passing Aesir's.

When they reached the stables, the smell of hay, leather, horse and saddle soap made Loki slow to a stop, just breathing it in and letting a thousand memories assail him. He felt a brief sharp pang as he remembered his own stallion, Halvor, and wondered what had happened to him. There had been little need for Loki to visit the royal stables during his time masquerading as Odin as the Allfather had rarely ridden in the last few decades. Odin had been known to visit Sleipnir, but wary of the eyes of others, Loki had only ever groomed and given attention to the King's horse.

Loki didn't even know if Halvor still resided there or if he had he been sold off or given away.

Loki didn't expect the lack of knowledge of his steed to pain him as much as it did, nor did he anticipate the guilt of never having checked on his horse before his ruse had been discovered.

Perhaps he could try and see Halvor before he left Asgard this time...

"Loki?" Anthony asked, dragging the mage from his thoughts.

He looked over at the other man to find Anthony eyeing him with concern. Loki smiled but didn't explain his sudden, pensive silence; he just pressed his hand to Anthony's back and guided him into the stables.

They found Fandral quickly enough as he was crouching down beside an open stall. He was smiling with a soft expression at the rhino that was sleeping inside, his hand lightly petting the beast.

The swordsman heard their approach and he glanced over before standing with an excited grin. He came over and clasped Anthony's arm in greeting before turning to the mage. Loki had instantly tensed and it made Fandral hesitate, his arm hovering in the air before eventually dropping back to his side.

The swordsman continued to smile, even if it was slightly tighter than before. "Loki, Anthony, I am grateful for your assistance."

Loki just gave a small nod, accepting the words before he was moving over to the sleeping mammal, his magic rushing over it to be certain it was still in good health. It was, thankfully, and that allowed Loki to observe the creature's surroundings. Fandral had brought the rhino to stables where the swordsman's own horse resided, well aware of the impracticality of keeping the rhino at the royal stables where he would need permission to visit and train the beast.

The stall the rhino was in was of good size but hardly strong enough to contain him. That would need to be fixed first.

“He will destroy this stall in moments,” Loki told the Aesir. “Another home will need to be sought for him.” He glanced at Fandral. “Or do you plan to restrain him until he can be trained?”

“I have requested that leather be made for him,” Fandral answered, coming to stand beside Loki. “But I had hoped to seek your council on the best method to tame him before the items are fitted.”

Loki smirked slightly before making a gesture with his hand so that he could hover the rhino in the air. “The stockade should hold him for a time,” he glanced over at the swordsman, “and he will need to be introduced to you.”

Fandral grimaced slightly even as Loki started walking out of the stall with the rhino floating close behind. “The stockade, Loki?”

“Many a great beast has been trained there,” Loki replied, barely containing his wry amusement at the swordsman’s unease.

Fandral’s discomfort only seemed to deepen at the mage’s response. “Many an Aesir has been *broken* there,” he muttered under his breath and Loki saw him eyeing the rhino’s horn with worry.

Anthony was watching the proceedings with uncertain eyes. “When you say stockade, do you mean a corral?”

"It is a pen for livestock," Loki clarified, not familiar with the word.

"Yeah, that's what I thought," Anthony said, glancing between the Fandral and the rhino, likely remembering his own, brief encounter with the creature. "You know how to take a hit, right?"

Fandral gave an almost weary smile as they stepped out of the building. “One does not train with Thor without becoming accustomed to the occasional injury.”

Anthony just hummed absently, the expression on his face looking more than a little dubious. Taking some pity on the swordsman, Loki offered a glimmer of advice, “The creature is not known for its keen sight; I would use that to my advantage, Fandral.”

“Thank you, Loki,” Fandral replied humbly.

Loki didn’t bother to respond, not when they were almost at the stockade. The pens were built close to the stables as captured war beasts or recent, unruly purchases often needed to be trialed and broken in before they could be moved to more hospitable locations. It had been made with strong Asgardian timber with wide enough gaps for an Aesir to dart in and out of the stockade with ease, should they need to avoid or calm an angry beast. Loki also planned

to weave an additional spell for further protection so that he and Anthony could watch the events without fear of the rhino breaking through the wall.

The gate was already open, allowing Loki to guide the rhino inside and place it on the ground. He looked around the area before conjuring a small trough filled with water as well as some of the stores from the stables that he thought the rhino might be more inclined to eat. When he was finished, he stepped back out and closed the gate after him.

He looked at the swordsman as he questioned, "Are you ready for me to wake it?"

"Garðr," Fandral corrected firmly. "His name, he will be Garðr."

Loki raised his eyebrows with faint disbelief. "You would name the Allfather's prize?"

"I have petitioned to train and wield the Rhinocerotidae in battle." Fandral grinned proudly. "The Allfather has granted my request and allowed me possession of him."

"Re-gifting our gift?" Anthony clicked his tongue unhappily. "*Rude.*"

Loki just chuckled at the other's remark. "Be grateful, Anthony; at least with Fandral he will be well looked after and highly prized. The Allfather would likely forget he existed." Anthony made another unimpressed noise but Loki pretended not to hear it. He focused instead on the blond swordsman, making a sweeping gesture towards the stockade with his arm. "Shall we, Fandral?"

Fandral nodded and moved to grab some of the rope and gear hanging up beside the stockade. Loki took the time to flick his fingers and end the spell that had placed the creature in slumber. It didn't take long for the rhino to begin to stir but during that time Anthony came to stand beside him.

"Not that I mind either way," Anthony murmured, the slight tension in his voice belying his flippant words, "but Fandral's not going to get himself killed, is he?"

"I shouldn't think so," Loki answered while watching as the rhino shifted and pulled itself to its feet. He looked at the other man from the corner of his eye, sending Anthony a small smirk. "I will be sure to send the creature to sleep before too much blood is shed."

The rhino, however, for all that it was confused and exploring the area did not have the same hostility that it had displayed during the battle. Loki had to wonder if the disconnection from the woman who had enhanced it might have weakened any additional behavioural tampering. The fact that the rhino had only seemed to have enhancement to its hide also made it far less likely to notice and grow panicked by the changes to its physiology.

The animal made its way over to the water first, drinking happily enough before moving to sniff and examine the offering of food. It nibbled at the grass and Loki felt his mouth curve into a small, relieved smile at seeing the rhino beginning to replenish what was lost in the battle and subsequent sleep.

“I thought you said it had bad eyesight?” Anthony questioned. “It walked directly over to the food and water like it knew it was there.” He looked over at Loki thoughtfully. “Think that was enhanced too?”

“Possibly,” Loki murmured, thinking furiously. “If that is the case, it will be difficult to tell exactly what they are able to do without waking them and testing the range of their abilities.”

“I’m guessing Brucie scanned their brains and did a rough comparison to see the basics, but how the hell could we really tell if she messed with anything else?” Anthony ran hands across his face suddenly, groaning under his breath. “Shit.”

Reaching out, Loki placed a calming hand on Anthony’s shoulder. “They will be out of our hands soon and they will be well taken care of where they are going.”

“Yeah, but what about the next ones she unleashes?” Anthony demanded, glaring at him with frustration. “What about the next animal that she manipulates and fucks up without giving a damn about the consequences?”

Loki moved his hand before he could think, sliding it up to rest at that back of Anthony’s neck. He squeezed lightly, massaging tense muscle and trying to comfort and sooth. “We will find and stop her, Anthony. We will make sure the creatures she attacks are protected and looked after in the aftermath.”

Anthony still didn’t seem happy, letting out a frustrated breath, but he did lean back into Loki’s touch. The mage continued the motions of his hand, watching as Anthony’s eyes fluttered slightly closed at the feeling. Watching him like that, Loki felt his smile become softer, he found himself wishing to do anything to sooth the aggravation and worry from the other man’s brow.

He found himself moving, wanting to minimise even the short distance between them - but he stopped, his hand freezing at the sound of Fandral clearing his throat. Loki kept his hand where it was even as he looked over at the swordsman.

The blond looked as if he was fighting between the discomfort of witnessing their intimate touch and the amusement of catching Loki off guard. In the end, he seemed to turn towards the latter, as he told them, “I hope you will not be so distracted while I am in the pen with Garðr, Loki.”

Loki smiled sharply. “Do you not *trust* me, Fandral?”

Shaking his head, Fandral answered with a sigh and ironic smile. “Despite the many experiences warning me against it, somehow, I always do.”

The response surprised Loki and he couldn’t quite keep it from his face. He’d known Fandral for centuries and knew how terribly a liar he was despite Loki’s numerous attempts to help him. Fandral’s face simply gave him away; he was too artless and open. It made those words... difficult to hear and accept.



The swordsman didn't look at him after speaking; however, he just bent and stepped between the wooden rails of the fencing. The swordsman then started making his way slow and careful around the edge of the stockade, hoping to let the rhino see him before he approached.

"You alright, Loki?" Anthony asked him quietly, no doubt having seen his reaction.

"Fine," Loki told him instantly. Seeing the smaller man raises his eyebrows doubtfully, Loki licked his lips and amended, "Fandral continues to behave in ways I do not expect."

"Like a friend?" Anthony suggested, making Loki shoot him a sharp, warning look, not wanting to rehash the same conversation from the previous night. Anthony just gave a light-hearted smile and shrugged in the face of the mage's glare. He also looked away and changed the subject. "We're missing the show."

The production in question, when Loki glanced towards the swordsman, showed the rhino shifting uncomfortably and watching him. It was done from a distance that shouldn't be possible from its breed, only furthering the theory that more than just its hide had been enhanced. Fandral was being slow, taking care and was offering a hand holding grass towards the creature. The rhino seemed remarkably calm, making it unlikely it would be attacking Fandral anytime soon. It was almost disappointing.

"So, if we finish this in the next hour or so," Anthony suddenly remarked, flicking Loki a smile. "Does that mean we have the rest of the afternoon off?"

Loki raised his eyebrows. "Did you have something in mind?"

Anthony's eyes were bright with glee. "You mentioned a royal library, right?"

The mage couldn't help the way he laughed and without thinking, he let his thumb lightly stroke over Anthony's neck. "We will see, Anthony. A mortal in the royal library would be quite a scandal, after all."

Anthony though, the bright, brilliant man, instantly caught on, his eyes flaring with mischief. "Only *if* they discover me."

A smirk curled at Loki's mouth, "Well, yes."

"Then we better not be discovered." Anthony shifted, their sides almost pressing together as he continued, "Good thing I know the guy who can sneak around this planet with his eyes closed, huh?"

He winked at Loki and the trickster could only laugh softly, thrilled beyond measure to have the engineer by his side. He knew it was reckless to be pushing so soon against Odin's temper; but Loki had been sneaking in and out of the library since he was a child. It would be simple to get them in and out without anyone the wiser. And how could he refuse Anthony something as desired as information? How could he refuse when Anthony was *asking* him to show his skill at mischief?

"You are a terrible influence," Loki told him.

Anthony just grinned bright and *proud*. "Bad influence on the God of Mischief? Damn, I'm going to need to get that framed."

Loki laughed again, he couldn't help it, he also tugged Anthony even closer, pressing their sides together as his hand moved and he draped his arm over the shorter man's shoulders. It was easy, comfortable and Loki enjoyed the softness of the moment; the *camaraderie* that he'd never truly experienced before.

It had him holding the other man tight as they both watched Fandral take slow steps towards the rhino. Loki also took the time to plan an afternoon that would involve sneaking Anthony into the royal library and finding all the engineering texts that he'd promised the brunet earlier.

It would be a nice, brief break from the stress and diplomacy that would come both at dinner when they met with the ambassadors once more, and tomorrow, when the true negotiations begun. Loki had a feeling they would need that light-hearted enjoyment.

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They stayed with Fandral for only an hour or so but found him more than capable of charming the rather docile animal. Loki had made sure to give Fandral all the information he had on the creature before they left and Fandral had thanked him profusely. The swordsman planned to spend most of the next few days with Garðr, getting to know the beast.

With nothing else to keep them, Loki had quickly enacted his plan, and sneaking Anthony into the library turned out to be every bit as easy and entertaining as Loki had anticipated. The library was large and rarely used. It was full of vaulted ceilings and elegant stone pillars of black and gold that marked the hallways that led one further into the maze of floor to ceiling shelves that made up the library. The shelves held hundreds of thousands of books and scrolls that were crammed together and held information on any possible subject.

The room also had strong wooden tables and various trophies from conquests littering the few spaces of open floor. They were elegant items of gold and beauty, giving the room a further sparkle and show of wealth. Anthony ran his hands over a large planet crafted from metal and sitting in a stand in the middle of the room. The planet no longer existed as the world had been pilfered by Asgard long before Loki had been born. The item had been taken when the planet's own library had been ransacked. Seeing the joy on Anthony's face, Loki decided not to tell him of that story.

He explained instead that with his simple cloaking of their features and a long-familiar diversion of Heimdall's eye no one was the wiser about their presence and, assured of their secrecy, Anthony had rushed over to the nearest shelf and skimmed the titles, quickly dragging Loki over to ask him questions.

Anthony was so excited, so enthusiastic about everything with wide-eyes, a bright smile as he almost bounced around the room pulling text and text out of the shelves and thrusting them into Loki's arms so that the mage could help him carry everything over to a table.

The engineer was talking a mile a minute; almost tripping over his words he was so eager. He mourned being unable to sit here for days to just read everything and had instead

compromised by taking out his phone, using the camera to scan the text of the books.

It made Loki fight down his own smile, simply watching as Anthony looked ready to hug the books to his chest and then hug Loki for good measure. He was bubbling with happiness and speaking almost constantly, his pleasure impossible to contain.

It made Loki think of himself as a child, feeling so happy and just as excited in the library, but never allowing himself to act so openly about his delight. It made Loki want to bring Anthony here again. It made Loki be willing to return to Asgard after everything with Thanos was complete, if only so that he could let Anthony spend a few days walking around the halls with wide-eyed wonder.

And while it was probably treasonous to be giving a mortal access to such dangerous and powerful information, it didn't stop Loki. Instead, he helped carry the books for Anthony; he searched out others that he thought the mortal might enjoy. He watched as the engineer exclaimed excitedly over them and shook his head a little when Anthony soon created a pile for Loki to use his own phone camera to make copies of.

The process was slow going, unfortunately, but by the time dinner was approaching, they had more than enough data to keep Anthony occupied until they could next spend time on Asgard. Anthony still eyed the library with longing as he was pulled away by the mage. Loki did hope that they would have a few more afternoons for Anthony to explore the rooms and steal more information - but for now, they had to get ready to meet and charm the ambassadors once more.

When they were back in Loki's chambers and changing into more formal wear, Anthony suddenly cursed, making Loki look over at him.

They had been changing on opposite sides of the bed, their backs to one another. When he glanced over he found Anthony was almost completely dressed and was grimacing at his phone.

"Hey, how long do we have before we have to leave?" he questioned, glancing over at Loki.

"Perhaps a half hour," Loki answered. "Why?"

Anthony sighed but pressed a few buttons on his phone before pressing it to his ear. "Rhodey hasn't heard from us all day and is afraid we've died." Loki's mouth curled into a small smirk, but before he could say anything Anthony was wincing and holding the phone a little away from his ear. "Okay, no need to shout. I said we'd be fine." A pause. "Yes, we are both fine. Loki's right here." Anthony's eyes danced as he looked at Loki. "He's just putting his clothes back on."

Loki rolled his eyes and shook his head, but still went back to dressing, keeping half an ear on the side of the conversation that he could hear.

"No, seriously, we're both fine. We've got dinner with the realms tonight so this is going to have to be quick chat." Another pause. "Loki thought it would be rude if we were the only

ones invited to the party.” A loud sigh and a long silence. “Guys, do you *really* think we’d be that dumb? Come on, Odin can’t kill us for something he has no proof we did.”

*Well...* Loki thought but didn’t bother to correct Anthony and worry his friends. After all, Odin had always chosen his battles wisely; it was why he had amassed so much power and held onto it for so long.

“Seriously, Bruce, it’s better in the long run. I’ve already met a handful of the ambassadors and things are going well. Besides,” Anthony’s eyes flicked to Loki’s, a hint of the seriousness - the *reason* that they were here - in his eyes, “we’re going to need all the help we can get when we fight Thanos.”

Anthony broke their eye-contact a moment later, frowning as he listened to what was being said. Loki was grateful for it. The last thing he wanted to remember was his time in the Mad Titan’s realm; but the memories lingered closer to his mind now more than ever and he had to push them back forcefully. It would not do well to dwell on the pain and terror that soaked every aspect of his time with Thanos. He was free from him, and Loki had every intention of remaining so; of seeing the titan *destroyed*.

“I *told* you,” Anthony’s slightly exasperated voice pulled Loki away from his thoughts; “we’re fine. We had some breakfast, watched Loki’s quasi-friend train his new rhino and I looked over some plasma gun schematics...” he trailed off before suddenly laughing. “Well, I wasn’t *planning* to mount the guns on the suit, but now I kind of like it. I’m sure I could find a way to convert it down to shoulder-pad size.” He looked over at Loki. “What do you say, Lokes? Should be easy to do right?”

“Certainly,” Loki answered with an amused smirk. “If you wish the recoil from firing the item to break you in two.”

Anthony sent him a withering look, but was kept from replying by whatever was said on the other line. “Guys, seriously, stop fretting. We’ve got this, and we’ve got Loki’s super fabulous brofriend-bracelets to get us out if we really need to. You’re still wearing yours, yeah, Rhodey?” Another pause. “See! So we’ve totally got this. Now, come on, stop wringing your hands and tell me what’s been happening Earth-side?”

Knowing that whatever was said from that point would be relayed to him, Loki concentrated on pulling on the last of his clothes and moving over to the mirror to straighten and folds or creases in the leather. There was very little imperfection to be found and when he was finished, Loki looked at himself in the mirror.

The outfit was beautifully done - but he would expect no less from Hertha - yet Loki found his eyes drifting from his reflection to look over at Anthony. He was still on the phone, his brow furrowed in concentration over what was being said. Loki wasn’t paying attention to Anthony’s replies, instead he let his eyes travel over Anthony, enjoying the sight of him in Asgardian attire. Then he noticed his companion’s bare feet and could help but grin.

*He is so effortlessly handsome.*

The thought made Loki swallow slightly and dart his eyes away. His expression was slightly pinched when he looked in the mirror, but it was more an irritation with himself.

It was... difficult being in Asgard with Anthony. He was striking on his own world, in his own clothes, but he was *incredibly* attractive in fine leathers and wearing Loki's colours. It was a miracle that Loki had not dreamt about him last night.

It made Loki uncomfortable at the idea that it was only a matter of time.

He knew Anthony wouldn't condemn him, that he would only shrug it off and make some ridiculous joke that would break the tension and flood Loki with relief. But it still frustrated Loki that he was so continually drawn to the other man.

Their ruse necessitated holding Anthony's hand, brushing a kiss against his cheek, wrapping an arm around his waist; they were all such loving gestures. Anthony also bestowed them readily and easily and it made Loki... wonder.

Loki knew that Anthony's past relationships had been with women, but maybe Anthony was more open to men than even the engineer was aware? They flowed so naturally together, perhaps Anthony had just never thought to try...

But Loki stopped those thoughts in their tracks. It was nothing but his physical attraction to the man talking; trying to discover if an overture would be welcome. It was an overture that Loki would *not* be offering. His friendship with Anthony was precious, their ease with the ruse was important and Loki would not throw either away just because Anthony was handsome.

*But he is not just handsome...* his mind whispered and Loki's magic twitched with the near-constant desire to get closer to Anthony; to wrap around the mortal and keep him protected, close, *Loki's*.

It was something that the mage was trying desperately to squash and ignore - but it was getting harder.

He was almost grateful for the distraction, when Anthony came up beside him, his phone closed and a small frown on his face. "Hey, you okay?"

"Fine," Loki answered instantly while smoothing out his expression. "How are things on Midgard?"

"Slow and steady," Anthony told him with a small shrug. "Not much to report. They were more concerned about us."

Loki smiled slightly. "And as you have advised, we are fine."

Anthony hummed absently, making his way towards the bed to sit down and put on his shoes. "You know most people say '*fine*' when they mean '*not fine*', right?"

"Are you implying we aren't?"

“I’m implying that you seem tense,” Anthony told him, sending Loki a pointed look.

Loki made a point of relaxing himself, willing the tension out of his back. He didn’t want to admit the true path his thoughts had taken, so he selected a half-truth. “Your talk of the Mad Titan brought him to mind. It is nothing to focus on, Anthony. I’d prefer not to linger in my memories, but they will always be close at hand while we discuss alliances against him.”

Anthony winced with sympathy. “Ah, gotcha. Anything I can do to help distract you before we head to dinner?”

Loki blinked, his eyes having fallen to watch Anthony bend down and pull on his boots. He glanced away, stepping back from the mirror and averting his eyes.

“Tell me of Banner and Rhodes,” Loki selected. “Tell me what they relayed to you.”

He could hear the smile in the other man’s voice as he drew out the ‘*Well*’ that started his recounting. Loki just let the words wash over him as he absently walked around the room in something that was almost a mindless pace if not for the sharpness of his movements.

Loki just needed to do something with the nervous tension that was lingering inside of him. He needed a way to unwind before they walked out of his chambers to see the ambassadors and continue a ruse that was beginning to scratch uncomfortably underneath his skin.

## Chapter End Notes

Now, *on the bright side*. I actually wrote the next chapter at the same time I wrote this one *and* it's another Loki POV :D So I just need to give that a skim read and send to my editor so *hopefully* I'll have the next chapter up sooner (family festivities permitting in the weeks to follow -\_-'). But yes, happy holidays to any and everyone and in what ever way you do (or don't) celebrate.

Take care!!

# Chapter 34

## Chapter Notes

Okay guys, are you ready for this? ;P

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

The nervous tension continued to linger under Loki's skin over the following days. The mage tried to dismiss it as worry about Odin and the ambassadors, but it became quickly apparent that things were working in their favour.

Odin was furious, of course, and he made a point of cornering Loki during dinner to express it.

When Loki and Anthony had arrived for the evening meal their once empty table was filled with visiting dignitaries eager to converse, learn about Midgard and be charmed by Anthony and Loki's partnership.

It was during the more social portion of the night that Odin conspired to get Loki alone. The mage had allowed it and while it was still a harsh, barbed conversation, there was nothing Odin could do about Loki's machinations without losing face, and in the end, Odin had known he was cornered and had grudgingly been forced to back down.

It was almost easy from there to spend their days focusing their attentions on the alliances they were building.

Hel was firmly and openly supporting them and seemed faintly amused by the whole thing. She had been involved in a conversation with Anthony as he quizzed her about her realm. His astute questions about her role in the universe had led Anthony to cautiously ask with a furrowed brow, "If you're the ruler of the dead, wouldn't you be kind of... happy about more subjects showing up?"

It had made Hel smile slightly and reveal that her interest in the protection of the realms was merely about balance; the dead needed the living. If Thanos succeeded in his goals of death and destruction, it would rip into the natural cycle of life and the universe. She had further explained this with illusions and depictions of the world tree, gaining an interested audience of not just Anthony, although Hel did keep her attention on the fascinated mortal. Loki just tried not to smile at Anthony's uncontainable enthusiasm and desire for knowledge.

Loki continued to lay his charm on the other ambassadors but they were taking time to warm to him. Anthony however, for the most part, seemed to be a focus of interest everywhere he turned. Anthony was a shrewd and skilled negotiator but he was also ridiculously charming and *likeable*. The dignitaries found him *delightful*.

It didn't mean Anthony's personality would win over everyone, but Anthony was undeterred. The engineer also made it a personal mission to charm as many people to Loki's side as Midgard's. The trickster had tried on more than one occasion in the days that followed to convince Anthony it was a battle he didn't need to join, but Loki was ignored.

Loki was glad for it in the end as working together, Loki had managed to renew some of his contacts on Alfheim and Vanaheim as well as gain new ones with some of the realms, something Loki hadn't expected.

Loki also hadn't anticipated the slow renewing of his friendship with Fandral. The mage was still hesitant to trust it, still expecting the other man to prove himself false, but somehow, he never did. It made Loki wonder how much he and Fandral had both been tainted by the actions and associations of others.

It didn't mean their time on Asgard was always easy. Heimdall's eye resting on them was a constant strain and masking them pulled on his magic, making escape to the library difficult. Sometimes, it was all Loki could do to get them in his chambers and let the stronger, century-old wards cloak them.

He would often find himself collapsing on the settee and closing his eyes. It would usually involve Anthony making his way over and flopping down dramatically on top of the mage.

They'd had many conversations lying together and soaking up the warmth and support the other provided. They spoke about everything; Anthony asked what schooling was like in Asgard. Loki enquired as to what the inventor wanted to create first when they were back at his tower. Anthony would frequently have him laughing, even when Loki thought it to be an impossible task.

Loki found himself waking up in the morning and enjoying the feel of Anthony sleeping soundly in his arms. He was going to miss it when they were back on Midgard. Loki had never been one for sharing his bed or having such intimate embraces, but somehow Anthony made it easy, *enjoyable*.

The trickster was just grateful that neither nightmares nor dreams about the other man had plagued him. He *had* woken up aroused, but only once, and thankfully before Anthony could become aware of it.

This morning, at least, he was simply warm and content; the furs were lying on top of them and he had his nose buried in Anthony's hair and his arm around the smaller man's waist. The mortal was sleeping soundly with occasional, small snuffles. Loki was just enjoying the knowledge that they did not have to rush out of bed today.

It was the first full day free of any negotiations. They had all needed the break and had unanimously declared it a day of rest. Loki was planning to live up to his promises and show Anthony some of the nicer parts of Asgard. He particularly wanted to take Anthony to the markets that had been running since the day they'd arrived.

Loki had been happy to relax where he was and luxuriate in the peace of the morning, but he soon felt Anthony begin to stir. The mage smiled a little, having grown familiar with the way



the other man woke over the last few days.

It only took the engineer a few moments to become aware enough to know that Loki was awake as well. He shifted slightly to look over his shoulder, forcing Loki to pull back a little to accommodate him. The engineer was blinking himself awake as he looked at Loki. He smothered a yawn into his hand moments before mumbling out, "Mornin'."

"Good morning, Anthony," Loki told him quietly.

Anthony continued to turn in Loki's hold until he was practically burying his face in Loki's neck. The roughness of his beard scratched against Loki's skin pleasantly and made the mage's eyes briefly flutter closed. "S-time?"

The mangling of the words made Loki's grin pull a little wider and he absently began stroking the other man's back. "After sunrise," he answered, "but time does not matter today as the day is ours to do what we wish."

"Mm," Anthony hummed against him, making Loki fight down a shiver. "I'mma spend an hour in the bath."

Loki chuckled. "You are fond of it, aren't you?"

"I'mma steal it," Anthony mumbled, his voice still half-asleep as he hovered between waking up fully and going back into a doze.

"Well, try not to spend too long in there," Loki advised him, his voice not able to mask his humour. "We only have a single day and I hoped to have us see the entirety of the market without needing to rush."

Anthony nodded absently for a few moments before stilling, pulling back and blinking at Loki, suddenly more alert. "Market?"

Loki smirked. "If you can tear yourself away from the bath-"

He had barely finished speaking before Anthony was pushing away from him and rolling out of his hold. Loki felt a small sting of disappointment but ignored it as he sat up in bed and watched Anthony rush over to the closet where Loki had made room for the engineer's clothing to hang.

Anthony threw the doors open before hastily pulling out an outfit while Loki watched with bemusement. When the brunet had everything hanging over his arms, he walked over to the bed but only long enough to drop his clothes on the edge.

"Fifteen minutes," he told Loki firmly before he was hurrying over to the bathroom to take his much shortened bath.

Loki just shook his head at the other man before stretching languidly. He heard the sound of running water and took that as his cue to climb out of bed and make his way out of the bedroom. He rang the bell for breakfast before settling down with a magic book.

He was quickly lost in spellwork and theory that he barely paid attention to when breakfast arrived. It wasn't until Anthony came and dropped down on the cushions beside him that he truly blinked back to the room.

Loki looked over at the engineer only to find him scowling and rubbing his jaw slightly. The mage frowned. "Is something the matter?"

Anthony's frown increased. "I'd kill for a razor right now." His fingers move to brush his goatee. "And some scissors to trim this." He sighed and looked at Loki's smooth jaw a little enviously. "I don't suppose, since you don't *grow* facial hair, that there's anything you can conjure for me to do the job?"

Loki's mouth twitched before he held out his palm and allowed an [elegant blade](#) to form and hover above his hand. It was done in black and mottled grey; the blade was thick and large with a solid grip and a curled handle.

Loki quirked an eyebrow when Anthony just stared at it incredulously. "Will this do?"

"Are you seriously offering me a straight razor and expecting me to do anything other than accidentally slit my throat with it?" Anthony demanded. Even so, he reached out and carefully took it. His eyes were bright with fascination as he ran his finger over the spine of the blade.

"I doubt you would do more than *minor* damage to yourself," Loki teased softly.

Anthony snorted. "You say that now, wait until I'm lying in a puddle of blood on the floor." He moved to hand it back before he paused, looking between Loki and the blade before back to the mage. "But you're good with knives," he said casually. He reversed the blade and offered it to Loki. "Think you could shave me?"

Loki's eyes flew wide with shock. He glanced between the blade and the Midgardian. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah," Anthony told him with an easy smile and a shrug, as if it was nothing, having Loki's knife at his throat. "I trust you."

Loki swallowed a little. "You would be alone in holding that sentiment. Let alone allowing me a naked blade at your throat."

"Guess, I just know you better," Anthony stated with a grin before carefully wiggling the blade in the air until Loki took it.

A moment later Anthony was standing and waiting for Loki to join him. Unable to do anything else, Loki just followed after the engineer as they made their way to the bathroom.

"Want to conjure me a chair?" Anthony enquired, once they were there.

Loki, still a little bewildered by the turn of events, did as requested without comment, placing the seat near one of the basins. Anthony didn't even hesitate to walk on over and plop down,

leaning back against the wood with ease and his ever-present smile. Loki, despite still being shirtless, suddenly felt too warm as he stepped closer to the other man.

“It has been many years since I have done this,” Loki warned him.

“Oh?” Anthony questioned, his eyebrows raised. “Shaved other people have you?”

Loki shook his head. “I do not grow facial hair, but many others do. In my youth, I used shapeshifting for decades to maintain the illusion that I was one of them.” He shrugged. “I eventually decided it was not to my taste, but,” he grinned slightly and shifted the blade, drawing Anthony’s attention to it, “this was the very blade I used to maintain it.”

“Is it alright to feel special?” Anthony asked with a small smirk. “Because I kind of do right now.”

Loki shook his head even while placing the knife on the basin and turning on the water.

“Let us be certain I do not cut you before you crow too loudly,” he advised.

“Eh,” Anthony remarked, more dismissively than was probably wise, “you can always heal me if you do, but I really doubt you will.”

Loki felt his heart flutter slightly at the utter trust in the statement, but he chose not to comment, busying himself with setting everything up; the foam and brush for Anthony’s face, a towel to warm for when they were finished and an additional cloth to wipe the blade on. When he was finished, Loki collected some of the soap on the brush and moved in front of Anthony.

Anthony was already leaning back and Loki tilted his chin a little further as he spread it over Anthony’s cheek, jaw and throat. “I assume you will want your goatee to remain?”

“You assume correctly,” Anthony told him, a smile pulling at his mouth.

The design would make it slightly difficult, but not impossible as he continued covering the lower half of Anthony’s face with the foam. When it was complete, Loki put the brush aside before picking up the blade. He moved back, standing between Anthony’s legs as he tipped up the inventor’s chin and tilted it to the side. He brought the blade up, hovering it above Anthony’s cheek for only a moment before he let the blade glide across the other man’s skin.

Anthony didn’t flinch; he actually *closed his eyes*, relaxing completely into Loki’s touch. It made something inside Loki’s chest feel tight as he drew in his next breath. The mage did his best not to focus on it, giving his complete attention to carefully shaving the other man.

The minutes passed in silence as Loki shifted his potion and moved his fingers around Anthony’s face and jaw; wiping away excess foam and shifting him where needed to shave the other man until nothing but his goatee remained. It left Loki staring down at Anthony’s relaxed face, his hand on the other man’s jaw and their faces inches apart.

*Such trust you have for me*, he thought, feeling his throat tighten with emotion until he made himself move away, rinsing his hands and magically heating the towel.

When he looked back over his shoulder, Anthony had his eyes open and was running his fingers over his smooth cheek.

“Here,” Loki said, his voice coming out a little gruff as he handed over the towel. Anthony wrapped it around his lower face, his body slumping into the chair with relaxation and happiness at the feeling.

Loki busied himself with washing and drying the blade and washing away the foam that was still in the basin and on the brush.

“Thanks, Loki,” Anthony told him coming up beside him, the towel in his hands and a bright smile on his face. “Best shave I’ve ever had.” He bumped their shoulders together. “Maybe I should try and con this out of you again when we’re back on Earth?”

Loki smiled but it didn’t sit well with him; he felt strangely off-balance. He answered neutrally, if only to hurry away the subject, “We shall see.”

He was still drying his hands but he gestured towards the bedroom. “I will have a quick bath and then join you for a meal before we leave for the markets.” He sent a small burst of magic towards the edge of the bed, before adding, “I have placed the scissors you requested on the bed for the trimming of your goatee.”

Anthony nodded. “Thanks, Lokes,” he said, sending him another quick grin and clapping his shoulder before making his way to the bedroom.

Loki watched him leave with a small frown. He only noticed he was balling the cloth in his hands when he felt the strain of tightly clenched knuckles.

Loki released his grip before tossing the cloth in the basin, feeling frustrated and not wanting to consider why. He just angrily flicked his magic at the bath, filling it up and pulling off his clothes. He closed his eyes as he slid into the warm heat and tried to let it sooth him.

Yet, all that was there when Loki closed his eyes was Anthony’s trusting face below him as his fingertips tingled with the memory of smooth skin underneath them.

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After breakfast they made their way directly to the markets where it quickly became apparent that they weren’t the only people taking the freedom of the day to explore the stalls. They met some of the ambassadors who were quick to greet them and share a few friendly words as they walked between the sellers and their wares.

Anthony seemed incapable of walking past a stand without examining each item with great curiosity. Loki found himself spending more gold than he ever had at a market in the past. Loki couldn’t say that he minded.

“Loki!” Anthony remarked, pulling Loki from his wandering thoughts as he held up a small wooden box and opened it, revealing colourful satchels. “What do you think? Alien teas for Bruce?” He dropped his eyes to the items with a suspicious frown. “They won’t poison him or anything, right?”

“No, they shouldn’t harm him,” Loki answered with a small smile, scanning his eyes over the flavours. “And it is a good selection; many of them are favourites of mine.”

Anthony brightened. “Yeah? Awesome!”

Shaking his head, Loki just pulled more coins from his pocket and paid the stall owner before dispatching the teas to join the many other purchased items now gracing Loki’s chambers. Anthony actually looked slightly sheepish, running an almost awkward hand over the back of his neck. “I’ll pay you back when we’re on Earth.”

“There is no need, Anthony,” Loki told him while directing the engineer to keep moving through the markets. He did shift closer though, murmuring his words by Anthony’s ear so no others might hear them, “You cover any expenses for me while I reside on Midgard; it is only fair I do the same for you on Asgard.”

Anthony glanced at him with a scowl; but the expression didn’t look angry, more as if the engineer was fighting pleasure and discomfort. It made Loki think that it wasn’t often that Anthony was on the receiving end of someone’s monetary generosity. It made Loki feel a small burst of happiness and it made him fight down a smile as he a point of distracting Anthony with a nudge towards a new stall.

This one was filled with animal statues, each one made from metal and charmed to mimic the sound of the creature they represented. “Does Rhodes have a particular favourite?”

Picking up a small bird, Loki held it out for Anthony, placing it in the inventor’s palm before stroking his finger down the creature’s back. The wings instantly unfurled and it tilted up its head, chirping out its most common call. Anthony’s eyes flew wide with fascination and while he kept the bird in his hand, he quickly went around and stroked each of the hundred animals on display, wanting to know what they’d all do.

Loki tried not to wince at the cacophony of noise, but at least the stall owner seemed more amused than irritated. She spoke with Anthony at length about each of the creatures and it soon ended with the inventor buying six of the animals; a bear for Rhodes, the original bird Loki had shown him, two wolves, an adolescent bilgesnipe and a bannog that Anthony had laughed loudly upon finding.

Loki was not sure what was so amusing about a rabbit like creature with large fangs, but the answer of ‘*Monty Python*’ did little to explain it. Anthony had attempted to go into more depth, but halfway through his explanations the engineer noticed a booth filled with material and dashed over to it. He picked up a bright green satin fabric with sharp black designs from the table and wrapped it around Loki’s neck, tying it in a knot and promptly calling it a fabulous addition to his wardrobe as well as a gift.

Loki had laughed, knowing he looked ridiculous, but he hadn’t protested as Anthony pinched Loki’s coin satchel and passed over the coins needed to the scowling stall owner.

The trickster had soon sent the material away to be dealt with later, but planned to have Hertha make something with it regardless.

It was truly a wonderful day and Loki felt as if he was on a constant cloud but things changed when it was late afternoon and the stalls were beginning to be packed away for the day.

They had found a jewellery stand on their way back towards the palace and an item had caught Loki's eye. He had pulled Anthony close to him so that he could select a gold dragon ear-cuff with ruby eyes from the display. He then clipped it to the engineer's ear, murmuring how the item would roar whenever Anthony was in danger.

Anthony had just smirked at him, even while Loki's fingers continued to brush his ear. "Two badass magical gifts looking out for me now? You're spoiling me, my prince."

The inventor had followed it up with a wink and a quick kiss to Loki's cheek. Loki had felt himself shiver while his magic simply *hummed* with pleasure at the words and the gesture. He'd wanted to pull the other man even closer to him so that he could kiss Anthony. He wanted nothing more in that moment than to wrap Anthony in his arms and lavish him with affection, gifts, books and-

-and suddenly, it was all too obvious.

*I'm falling for him.*

Loki's froze as realisation and dread rushed through him in equal measure. He dropped his hands from the other man, his limbs feeling heavy as he swallowed thickly and just *stared*. Loki didn't know how he could have been so blind, how he could have let himself *ignore* the depth of his interest in Anthony. Gods, what an utter *fool* he was. His magic should have been warning enough; a yearning to be close and protect the one who supported him, accepted him, *matched him*? Was it any surprise that his heart had followed his body's attraction?

Anthony was his perfect partner.

... But, no, all they shared was friendship and a ruse and surely even *Anthony* could not so easily dismiss and ignore romantic inclinations as well as physical desires?

*No. No, he cannot know*, Loki told himself firmly. *I will not wreck what we do share.*

"Hey," he felt a hand come to grasp his wrist, dragging him back from his reeling thoughts. He looked down at Anthony who was frowning with concern, his thumb lighting brushing against Loki's wrist soothingly. "You alright?"

"Perfectly," Loki answered, burying his discovery down deep.

He needed time and he needed a place without Anthony nearby if he wanted to find a way to proceed from this.

Mostly though, Loki just wanted to rest his face in his palm and ask himself how *idiotic* he could possibly have been to fall for a man who only saw him as a friend. How *stupid* he had allowed himself to be in ignoring his growing attraction when the man he wanted wasn't even attracted to Loki's gender!

*But perhaps I could...* but no, Loki squashed that thought down firmly. The last thing he was going to do was try and find a way to tempt Anthony into laying with him or to encourage Anthony into making their ruse a reality. Loki was already lucky enough to have Anthony as not only an ally but as a treasured friend as well.

Loki might be reckless in many things and he might take chances when it came to gaining what he wanted... but they were always calculated risks, always done when the odds were stacked heavily in his favour. But when it came to reciprocated feelings and having Anthony as his lover? Loki had seen little indication he had a chance and it made a sinking feeling come to life in his chest and drag down his heart.

*But perhaps if you just-*, Loki cut off the thought again, gritting his teeth and trying to ignore it. He had to think, he had to *consider*. They were perpetrating a ruse where discovery and failure meant more than just their reputation, it meant loss of allies in a war they couldn't afford to lose.

And how could Anthony even consider him? He wasn't just a man, he was from another species and he wasn't even Aesir he was a... a.... Loki clenched his fists angrily, but the thought still slipped through; *frost giant*. Loki closed his eyes briefly, trying not to let the knowledge sting. *You will deal with this later*, he told himself firmly, taking in a careful breath before letting it out slowly and opening his eyes.

Anthony was back to watching him with growing concern and he squeezed Loki's wrist again. "Hey, how about we head back for the day?"

A part of Loki wanted to refuse, to avoid more time alone with the other man, but, no. He needed time to think and he wouldn't gain it in a market with too many eyes on both of them. "Yes, I think that would be wise."

Anthony just nodded slowly, a furrow in his brow. Loki made himself turn away as he paid for the dragon cuff he'd clipped to Anthony's ear before he was leading them back towards the palace. He hoped that the walk would give him the time to regain his equilibrium. He *also* hoped that Anthony wouldn't press too hard for the reason behind Loki's reaction. He didn't want to lie again if the engineer asked him what was wrong.

*I am falling in love with you and a relationship - a **man**; they are both things you do not want.*

Oh yes, that was a conversation Loki would go to great lengths to avoid starting.

Trying to avoid the sudden ache in his chest and the way his skin felt hot where Anthony's hand still encircled his wrist. Loki tried to think of something other than the man beside him and the suddenly realised feelings that were coursing through him.

He didn't manage very well.

\*GASP\*

Could Loki have worked out his feelings? Could a confession be in the near future?

...I'm afraid we'll all have to wait and see ;)

p.s. In case you missed it in the story this is the [straight razor](#) Loki used :)



# Chapter 35

## Chapter Notes

Ah! Look at this! An early update! What can I say ~certain people inspired me to write this chapter. Sooo, enjoy! :D

I always want to thank the *amazing* NovaRain who helped so much with not only this chapter but talks on plot and upcoming chapters. She is a gem. A *gem*, I tell you. ♥♥

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

Loki was acting weird and Tony was more than a little concerned.

He'd kept a careful eye on the mage and a firm hold on Loki's wrist from the moment he'd noticed the change. Loki had been fine one moment - laughing even - before suddenly he just... panicked. There was no other word for the expression that crossed his face for that painful moment before he withdrew and just stared, blankly, into the middle distance.

Worry had slammed through Tony and he'd cautiously glanced around to see if there was a threat or if anyone else had noticed their behaviour, but nobody was any the wiser and when Tony had tried to prompt Loki for an explanation, he'd closed up and hidden everything under a wall. Tony hadn't experienced a reaction like that from Loki in months. He knew he couldn't ask about it again, at least not until they were in the safety of Loki's rooms, but it still left Tony tense and concerned as they navigated their way through the streets and buildings of Asgard.

They didn't speak much on their way back to the palace, Loki had tried to mention past mischief, but it was obvious that his heart wasn't in it. Tony just took to stroking Loki's wrist with his thumb in a soothing gesture, but far from having the effect he intended, it only seemed to make Loki's tension curl tighter.

The moment that they were safely enclosed in Loki's chambers, Tony rounded on him; stepping close and trying to catch Loki's darting eyes. "Loki, seriously, what happened? What's wrong?" Loki opened his mouth, another denial no doubt on his lips, but Tony interjected, "Please don't say 'nothing'."

Loki pressed his lips together as his gaze fell, his attention fixed on Tony's hand wrapped around his wrist. It was their sole point of contact, but it would take only a small move on Tony's part to press them together. A part of Tony *wanted* to press them together, to wrap Loki in a hug and offer comfort and safety from whatever had spooked him.

Tony tried stroking his thumb over Loki's wrist again, planning to offer that they cuddle on the couch again like they often did after a long, stressful day - but before he could try, Loki was tugging his arm out of Tony's hold.

“I... I need to leave for an hour or so,” Loki told him and Tony’s worry only skyrocketed higher.

“What? Why?” Tony reached out, grabbing Loki’s arm in an attempt to keep him from teleporting or fleeing out of the room. “Loki, what the hell is going on?”

“Nothing,” Loki dismissed hurriedly, but no doubt sensing the protest Tony was about to start, he added, “Nothing to concern you. I won’t be gone long.”

“Loki-”

“*Please, Anthony,*” he entreated, his eyes finally finding Tony’s and holding them, his expression was pleading with Tony to accept and understand. “I just... this is something I must do.”

Tony didn’t like it in the slightest, he didn’t like that everything had changed in the blink of an eye and he didn’t know what it was or why it had happened. He also didn’t like the idea of Loki walking around on Asgard by himself. He knew that nothing should happen to them and that Loki could defend himself, but he *worried*.

They had the bracelets at least, and he had his suit - but Tony still didn’t like the idea of leaving Loki alone when something was so obviously on his mind.

“You know you can trust me with anything,” Tony told him softly, and it just made something pained sweep across Loki’s face. The mage also looked away, staring at the ground and looking exceedingly torn. “You know I would *never* betray you,” Tony insisted. “Even if I wanted to, our contract wouldn’t let me.”

“Yes, yes I know,” Loki murmured and it *hurt* that Tony could hear doubt in Loki’s tone; there was a part of Loki that didn’t believe it. But before the engineer could protest, Loki was continuing, his tone just as soft, “Forgive me, but I must tend to something.”

“Loki,” Tony tried again, but the mage was pulling out of his hold and turning his back to the engineer. He grasped the door handle even as Tony tried once more time, “Loki, please, what’s wrong-”

“I’ll be back within two hours,” Loki interrupted firmly. “The items we bought are in the bedroom. Please, try to stay within the safety of these walls.”

“Loki-” but Tony didn’t get to finish his protest as Loki was opening the door and disappearing out of it.

Loki shut it behind himself with finality, leaving Tony alone in the prince’s chambers. Tony could only stare at the door with confusion about what happened, concern about why Loki was upset and more than a hint of hurt at not being trusted with what was wrong. He didn’t know what was going on and why Loki had chosen, for the first time since starting their partnership, not to tell Tony what was worrying him.

*What happened, Loki?*

The question echoed in his mind, going completely unanswered and Tony found his hand going up to touch the earcuff that Loki has placed on his ear before everything had gone wrong. What had the earring made Loki think of? What had it inspired him to remember? And why couldn't he explain it to Tony?

Tony didn't know the answers and it made him ache to think of his friend choosing to suffer whatever was weighing on him alone, rather than asking Tony to help.

*What did I do to make you think you couldn't trust me?*

Tony tried to ignore how deep the pain of that rejection cut. He made himself turn away from the door but instead of going for the bedroom and all the items Loki had bought for him, he just took a seat on one of the chairs in the living room and picked up a previously discarded book. He wanted to be nearby and ready for when Loki returned; Tony wanted to ask him again what was wrong and try to convince Loki to explain it.

They were friends, they were partners and they were pretending to be lovers: whatever the hell had happened, Tony was here and he was ready and wanting to help.

---

After an hour and a half Tony found he still couldn't concentrate on anything. He found himself picking up numerous items and books around the room only to put them down a few minutes later. He took to messaging Bruce and Rhodey and snapping some pictures of Asgard from Loki's balcony to send to them.

He tried to let the meaningless chatter of the messages calm him, but it was a losing battle; his mind kept drifting to where Loki was, what he was doing, if he was okay - oh and, *what the hell was bothering him.*

Tony had been going over his memories of their day at the market and what had happened just before Loki changed and he couldn't figure out the trigger. He had even pulled off the dragon earcuff to examine it while wracking his brain for any bad stories Loki might have told him involving dragons - but there was nothing; no indication for what had sent Loki into an alarmed and discomfited tailspin.

The longer that Loki stayed away, the more that Tony found himself getting wound up into nervous knots. He had even started to pace the length of the room, debated actually calling Bruce to ask him for advice, but knowing how much Loki valued his privacy, Tony refrained. He'd taken to fiddling with the earcuff that he'd placed back on his ear, remembering the feel of Loki's fingers and his soft smile for the few moments it had lasted.

It was as Tony was agitatedly beginning another circle of the room - half tempted to go out searching for Loki, despite the mage's request that he stay in Loki's chambers - that he heard the door open and snapped his head to watch as Loki quietly stepped inside. He noticed Tony quickly and briefly stilled before giving a soft sigh, his shoulders slumping. He shut the door gently despite knowing he was well and truly caught.

"Anthony, I did not mean to keep you waiting," he softly apologised.

Tony scoffed and his voice came out sharper than he'd intended, "Oh, sure, not like I was *worried about you* or anything." Loki winced, but the anger that had been simmering under Tony's concern was quick to find and strike at its target now that the mage was back in front of him. "I'd ask where you were, but since you didn't want to tell me to *start with*," Tony snapped "I guess you won't bother to tell me now-"

"I was at my mother's gravemarker," Loki's voice was quiet but unwavering and it cut through Tony's frustration and made Tony's heart stutter and fall. Loki's gaze was focused somewhere near Tony's shoulder as he continued to explain, "It is not a marker such as your world would use. Her body was sent over the falls as with all others that were lost to the Dark Elves, but during my time as King, I commissioned a statue for her gardens." His smile was small and gentle and still tinged with grief. "I would often go there to talk with her."

*Oh shit*; guilt abruptly slammed into Tony and he had to swallow it down along with memories of his own mother, of the violent death that had taken her from Tony's life, the same way an enemy had taken Frigga from Loki. Tony found himself walking forward before he could stop himself, coming to stand by Loki, but not yet touch him, remembering the unease the mage had felt at his touches earlier. "Loki, you could have just told me."

*I would have come with you*, Tony thought but didn't say, not wanting to intrude on something so incredibly personal if Loki didn't want him there.

Loki smiled tightly at Tony's words. "Perhaps, I should have."

It was as close to an apology and acknowledgement as Tony knew he was going to get, but it didn't bother him, not when Tony was walking across the heavily scarred and still raw wounds that made up Loki's relationship with his family.

Tony knew enough about Odin and Thor to make him want to punch them both in the face, but Frigga had always been conspicuously absent from most of Loki's more negative stories. The fact that Loki cared enough to visit her grave... it meant something, it had to.

The engineer was still tentative as he asked, "What was she like?"

Loki blinked before he gave another small, sad smile. "She was an excellent Queen and a formidable warrior. She taught me some of my first spells and was someone I could always turn to. She was..." he trailed off, swallowing thickly and letting his eyes fall closed for a brief moment. "She will *always* be my mother."

It made Tony want to hug Loki in comfort. It also made him want to learn more about the woman who, despite everything, Loki seemed to genuinely love.

Yet, Tony didn't get a chance to do either as when Loki looked back at Tony, his eyes were determined but his jaw was tight. It let Tony know there was more to come and that, whatever it was, Loki was still trying to build himself up to it. Loki carefully reached out and touched Tony's shoulder, leading him towards one of the settees. Tony followed, keeping a careful eye on Loki; though the mage was endeavouring to mask his expressions, he still looked uncomfortable and jittery as hell.

It was only when Tony was seated and watching the still standing mage, that Loki continued, “But, as you are aware, Frigga, like Odin and Thor, was not my relative by blood.”

Loki paused, as if waiting for Tony to confirm he'd heard, so he gave a small nod, still watching Loki warily.

The engineer knew this was a subject that Loki had always shied from in the past and Tony had never pressed. Loki had been devastated by the news of his heritage, suicidal even. Right now he was almost painfully stiff; his eyes flicking from Tony to the furniture around him as if he didn't know where to look.

“Frost Giants, Jotnar,” he swallowed. “They are the Aesir's hated enemy, they are the monsters of every children's story, they are...” Loki trailed off, his gaze dropping to focus on his hand which he'd raised slightly. He was staring at it in lingering horror and bitter resignation. He clenched his fist and seemed to force his gaze to Tony's. “This form is a glamour, but I did not know that until a Jotnar touched me. It is how I discovered my heritage, Anthony; their touch turned my skin back to its natural shade.” Tony's eyes had grown wide with shock, but Loki just tilted his chin and watched the brunet with a carefully blank expression. “My skin is blue and my eyes red. The Jotnar - *I* - am a creature of snow and ice and I could burn you with a touch of my true skin. And you... you deserve to *know* this, Anthony, if you are to continue with this ruse of desiring me.”

Tony had to admit, it took him a few moments to comprehend what was being said to him, mostly because he couldn't fully imagine how utterly *fucked up* someone had to be to hide a secret like that from someone you were meant to *love*.

Blue skin, red eyes; God, even Loki's *appearance* was a lie.

*No wonder he fucking shattered*, Tony's mind hissed and the eyes that had fallen to stare at his hands jerked back up to Loki.

He looked ready to fracture again.

Loki was wound so tightly Tony was sure that one wrong word would break the pieces Loki had managed to pull and glue back together. It made Tony stand on instinct, his arms coming up to wrap around Loki as he stepped in close and hugged him.

Loki froze for a long moment before he eventually slumped, wrapping Tony in his long arms and a warm embrace.

“I don't care what the colour or temperature of your skin is, Loki,” Tony told him gently. “You're not going to be any less ‘Loki’ to me, no matter where you were born.”

“Even if I am born a creature of winter and horror?” Loki whispered, his voice terribly vulnerable even as he only held onto Tony tighter as if afraid to have the engineer disappear.

Tony shook his head against Loki's chest, it ended up with him doing something close to nuzzling and it made the mage shiver, but Tony ignored it to tell him, “You're not a creature

or a monster or a horror, Loki. You're brilliant and you're a genius and that isn't going to change whether you show up like this or blue."

"You do not know my appearance when I-

"I don't need to," Tony told him simply. "I only need to know *you*." He tilted his head so he could look up at the trickster. His green eyes were overflowing with raw terror. "Loki, there isn't a damn thing you could say about the Jotnar that's going to make me change my mind about you."

"You don't know that," Loki denied, his voice barely louder than a whisper. His fingers tightened their grip on Tony's shirt, nails digging slightly in to the engineer's back. "You don't know the things I could say about them, about..." he swallowed, "*us*."

But Tony just shook his head again. "Whatever they may have done, you're not them. You've got a connection, but that's it. The Aesir were assholes to a *tremendous* degree and that's their issue, it's not a reflection on you. The same thing goes for the Jotnar."

"Anthony, they have slaughtered-

"Loki, *you* have slaughtered people." Tony's words made Loki flinch, but Tony just ran a soothing hand down the mage's back. "So has Thor, so has Odin. Kind of comes with the warrior culture territory." He smiled gently. "You've told me about your past, about everything that happened, and I'm still here. A person's actions are always going to speak louder to me than stories exaggerated to scare children ever could."

"They were not exaggerated-

"I am ready to bet money that they were," Tony argued even while continuing to soothingly stroke the mage's back. "No children's story is worth its salt unless someone can't sleep at night."

"That does not mean it isn't *true*," Loki answered, a hint of a bite in his words.

Tony still wouldn't believe it, but he could see attempting to fight it would be an uphill battle, so he switched tactics. "Okay, so where are the texts on Jotnar culture, history and society? You've been able to show me books for every other culture in the realms, so where are theirs?"

"I-" Loki seemed momentarily thrown off guard. "They have none." He actually looked more than a little discomforted by that. "Or perhaps... what the Aesir had of them has been destroyed during the war."

*There's my sharp-minded, questioning mage,* Tony thought triumphantly as Loki's frown only deepened.

"History is written by the winners, Loki," Tony told him gently. "I'm not saying the Jotnar are all roses and butterflies, but I think there's more to be said about them than what you've been shown."

“We cannot be sure of that,” Loki murmured, but despite the protest, Tony was only feeling encouraged; Loki had said *we* not *you*. It meant he was considering it.

“Well, then we’ll set out to prove it,” Tony told him firmly. “One way or another, we’ll find out what they’re like and what your real history is - and either way Loki,” Tony promised him, holding Loki’s nervous, darting eyes unflinchingly, “it’s not going to change what I think of you.”

Loki stared at him for the longest time, too many emotions going across his face for Tony to pick or name, but he stood firm in the face of them regardless; if Loki was finally trusting Tony with what had rattled him at the markets, than Tony was only going to prove that the mage had nothing to worry about.

When Loki finally spoke almost a minute later, his mouth had tipped up into a smile that was slightly wry, “Even with this, you still remain loyal to me.”

“Of course I do,” Tony told him. “This doesn’t change who you are.”

“Your friend,” Loki murmured, a new, if smaller frown forming.

Tony just wanted to wipe it away, so he quickly tried to inject some humour into the discussion. He gave a lopsided smile and told Loki, “Absolutely, and I cling like a leech. You’re stuck with me, Lokes.” He even offered--hoping that it would inspire Loki to smile more honestly or even let out a laugh, “Your little damn vegetable.” But instead of the chuckle Tony had been aiming for, Loki’s pensive frown just grew even deeper and it made Tony sober to ask seriously, “Hey, what’s wrong?”

Loki didn’t answer; he just slowly began unwinding his arms from Tony. He also gently pushed Tony backwards, forcing the engineer to unwrap his arms from around Loki's sides as well. Loki’s hands did remain resting on Tony’s shoulders as the mage seemed to study him, trailing his gaze over Tony’s body but lingering on where they still touched.

“You would continue to care for me despite knowing this,” Loki murmured, “you would continue our ruse knowing what lies under my skin.”

Loki seemed to be talking to himself more than Tony, weighing things in his mind and fighting with something Tony couldn't pinpoint; the disbelief that Tony would care for him regardless of his heritage? That Tony would be willing to help him learn about the Jotnar and to prove that Loki was less of a monster than Odin-the-ass had made him believe? That trusting Tony had actually worked out in his favour? Or all of the above?

And hell, Tony knew better than anybody how hard it could be to offer someone your heart when you were terrified that they would crush it.

“Nothing is going to make me uncomfortable around you, Loki,” Tony promised. “I’m grateful that you trusted me with this. I'm grateful you shared with me where you went.” He brought up a hand to lightly rest over Loki’s where it was still clutching at the engineer’s shoulder. “And if you want to go visit your mother’s grave again before we leave - if you want my company, I’d be honoured to visit her with you.”

Loki swallowed thickly. “You would visit her gravemarker with me?”

“Sometimes it helps to have someone with you,” Tony said gently. “You could tell me some more stories about her too, if you want.” It ached a little, but Tony still offered, “I could tell you about my mother as well.”

Loki’s eyes jerked to Tony’s and they stared at each other for a long moment; united in shared grief.

“I would like to learn of your mother,” Loki eventually told him before licking his lips, “and to tell you of my own.”

Tony found himself smiling, feeling oddly... okay about talking about Maria. It would hurt, the way it always did, but somehow, Tony thought it might hurt less when it was shared quietly with Loki; when they would have a mutual understanding and the silent comfort of similar pain. It made the moment feel soft and delicate; a soothing end to a harrowing conversation.

Tony was torn over whether to step back into a hug with Loki or to pull away entirely and change the subject. Maybe he could lead Loki to the bedroom so they could go through all the things they’d bought at the market? Maybe they could examine them and joke until Loki was laughing and unwinding beside him and they were back to their usual ease?

But before he could try, Loki’s eyes dropped from Tony’s face and his expression changed into something sharply painful and achingly resigned. He gave a very sad smile that Tony didn’t like in the slightest and he lightly stroked Tony’s shoulders with his thumbs before he was removing his hands completely.

“Loki?” Tony asked, feeling concern wash over him once more.

“I suppose there is something else that should be said,” Loki said quietly, “if the truth of my skin can be told to you, well, perhaps...” He suddenly let out a huff of a laugh that was bitter and short-lived. He even ran a hand over his face, looking remarkably tired. “How much I trust you,” he remarked, “yet, how little I know it will help.”

“Okay, Loki,” Tony told him when the mage had fallen into a tense silence following his words, “you’re talking in riddles and I don’t know what you-”

“You were right,” Loki interrupted abruptly. “Something occurred while we were at the markets.” Loki’s eyes flicked to Tony’s ear and the dragon cuff he still wore. “Or rather, something came to my attention.”

*It wasn’t the Jotun thing?*

Tony raised his eyebrows and carefully prompted when the silence stretched, “Okay?”

“I know you will not let what I share with you come between us and the alliances we seek, I trust you implicitly in this, not only as you wish to protect your planet, but because we have come too far to let things falter now.”



Loki paused if only to swallow thickly, yet his voice didn't waver as he continued, "The ruse that we perpetrate is important and so is our comfort with one another. You accept my heritage, you accept my sexuality, you accept... everything." Loki closed his eyes and let out a slow breath. "Your acceptance means more to me than I can admit, Anthony, and your care and trust deserve something other than avoidance, discomfort and lies. You deserve the *truth*."

Loki opened his eyes again and there was an intensity to them that made Tony's mouth go dry. There was also a faint grimace on Loki's face as if he was already regretting the words he was saying, but he pushed on regardless, "You have been treating me as you would a lover and I have started to..." Loki gritted his teeth and looked away, "*want* that from you."

Tony's eyes widened as he suddenly realised what had happened at the markets and why Loki had panicked. Why he now looked so distraught and like he wanted to crawl out of his skin or bolt for the door.

Loki had started to develop feelings for him.

*Well, shit.*

## Chapter End Notes

\*innocent smile\*

Now, now, don't look at me like that! I told you I was inspired! And there's no better inspiration than the lovely and wonderful [DLS](#) challenging me to a cliffhanger war. And, while it took a bit of altering of my plans to end the chapter like this, I wasn't about to ignore the gauntlet that was thrown at me. Soooo, you can all thank her for the chapter ending on this note (Loki was always going to confess, but now you get CLIFFHANGERS on Tony's reaction!).

See you in a few weeks! ;P

# Chapter 36

## Chapter Notes

Hey everyone! I'm terribly sorry that this took longer than I intended to update but my amazing beta has had a cyclone/hurricane go through where she lives and while she is thankfully fine, she has been out of power and is only just getting it back. She is such an amazing trooper though and got this sent back to me the moment she could.

Your patience is super appreciated though! I hope the content makes up for it :)

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

Loki's confession rested heavy in the air between them and Tony knew he needed to say something, but nothing came to mind; every word felt wrong and slippery on his tongue. What the hell did he even *say* to something like that?

He'd never let himself think about Loki as a prospective romantic partner; they were friends, they were working together, they had a *fake relationship* which was part of their kind of important plan to save the world. Worlds, multiple, even.

Tony tended to turn a blind eye to his feelings on a good day and that was backfiring on him now, because Tony had absolutely no idea what to say about Loki wanting him.

"You are not interested in men," Loki spoke into the suddenly oppressive silence. "I don't intend to sway your attentions I just..." he sighed. "You deserved to know rather than continue our ruse, unaware of what I feel."

That at least, gave Tony somewhere to start. "I never said I wasn't interested in men."

Loki blinked, surprise momentarily taking over his expression. "What?"

"I mean, before we came out as a couple, it was ignored by some branches of the media and the general public because it didn't fit who they wanted me to be, but they've known that I've never cared about gender," Tony explained.

"You've had male lovers?" Loki asked, sounding completely dumbfounded.

"Yeah," Tony agreed, frowning. "I thought you knew that?" Loki shook his head slowly, still looking completely mystified. "Wow," Tony breathed. "I'm sorry I never specified."

"You did not know I was unaware," Loki murmured. "You did not know I had misinterpreted your words."

Tony just gave a tight nod and found himself rubbing the back of his neck, feeling incredibly awkward.

“But an interest in men does not mean an interest in me,” Loki continued.

And there it was, in all its brutal honesty. And yeah, okay, Tony may have thought about Loki once or twice, but it was never something he had let himself linger on; there were too many more important things to give his attention to. There was always the fact that their relationship was *fake* and that Tony had always planned to keep it that way. Loki had been hurt too many times in the past and Tony was terribly skilled at destroying anything good that ever came into his life.

But that wasn't what Loki wanted to hear, he wanted to know what Tony thought about him, about having a *relationship* with him, and damn, but Loki deserved that much.

“It doesn't mean there can't *be* an interest in you,” Tony admitted, chewing on his bottom lip. “You're handsome as hell, Loki, and you have all the checkboxes that would normally have me climbing into your bed.”

“But?” Loki questioned, rejection already heavy in his voice and eyes.

“*But*, that would be the action I'd take if I only wanted a one-night stand.” Running a hand through his hair, Tony explained, “I'm not going to do that to you. I don't want to hurt you and I don't want to string you along.”

There was a long pause before Loki asked quietly, “What of a consecutive series of nights?” Tony blinked and looked up at Loki uncomprehendingly. “You mentioned a single night would not be something we would undertake. What of a series of nights? We are already known to be lovers; surely making it a reality would hurt no one?”

“Are you...” Tony couldn't believe he was saying this, “are you asking that we become friends with benefits?” Loki gave a shrug, aiming for dismissive, but his eyes were locked on Tony's, searching for any interest in the suggestion. “But... wouldn't that be painful for you?”

“I don't see how getting what I want would be painful,” Loki answered with a raised eyebrow.

It left Tony struggling to explain. “Friends with benefits is no strings attached. Romantic feelings aren't a prerequisite, they're actually not... encouraged in that sort of situation.”

“Ah,” Loki murmured, a brief shadow crossing over his expression. “You believe my... fondness for you would cause problems.”

“It's... more that I can't guarantee I would develop feelings for you,” Tony explained. “I don't know how interested you are in me, and I just... I don't even know what I feel for you and-”

“Anthony,” Loki interrupted, holding up his hand in a gesture for Tony to stop and the engineer found himself falling quiet. “I like you as a friend and as a partner, but I would also enjoy having you as a lover.” He smiled a little tightly. “Truthfully, I believe I would find it

harder to continue our ruse and know that it will never be welcomed privately. But I had accepted that outcome before I told you. Whatever you decide I will adhere to it, whether that means we remain as we are or we enter into a physical relationship; it is your choice.” His smile grew wider and his voice softened, “I had honestly not thought even that would be an option we could share, so I am already faring better than I expected.”

“And if sex was all we ever shared, you’d be fine with that?” Tony questioned.

Loki nodded, but Tony wasn’t sure if he bought it. Loki’s face was very carefully blank of all emotions except for those he permitted himself to show. It left Tony unsure how to proceed... but Loki had advocated that truth was important for their partnership, and he wasn’t wrong. The air couldn’t afford to be clouded, not about something like this.

“What exactly do you feel for me?” Tony asked, keeping his voice as soft and gentle as possible. “What do you *want* from me, Loki? You said you want more than just the ruse; how much more?”

Loki swallowed and his eyes darted away from Tony to stare at another point in the room. His voice was quiet when he asked, “Is not telling you I want more from you enough?”

“Not if I’m going to be considering the idea,” Tony told him firmly. “The last thing I want to do is hurt you, Loki.”

Loki’s smile was slightly wry. “I appreciate the sentiment, Anthony, but I would prefer not to sway you either to my side or from it.”

Tony narrowed his eyes, picking apart and quickly finding the meaning of the other man’s words; “You want me to make my own decision, based on what I think of you, not on what I know you want from me.”

“Yes,” Loki agreed quietly. “You know I desire something more between us. You know I would enjoy becoming your lover.” He gave a faint shrug, his emotions tightly locked up behind his perfect, unshakeable mask. “But, as I have stated, that decision will be yours.”

Tony just nodded slowly, letting the whole situation sink in and taking time to come to terms with it.

Loki liked him. Loki wanted more from him than a platonic partnership and friendship.

What the hell did he think about that?

Tony might have enjoyed kissing Loki and, thinking back on it, he might even have considered deepening those touches and seeing where they led more than once. But it had never happened; someone had always interrupted, one of them had always broken away and remembered it was just a ruse.

*So, what would it be like to kiss Loki for real? What would it be like to sleep with him?*

The question might have had a part of Tony’s mind torn, but another part of him was already fluttering with interest, curiosity and attraction. It was a start, but Tony was still nowhere near

a decision.

And that was only his side of things - what about Loki?

The mage had only just worked out his deepening interest in Tony, and the engineer could already guess where a lot of that was coming from.

Tony was the first person to ever treat Loki well, to be open and proud about being his friend and lover. It only made sense that Loki had grown attached to him and that aspect of their ruse. That wasn't to say Loki's feelings weren't genuine; he had always found Tony attractive, he'd made that known early in their partnership; but maybe it was only here, in Asgard, that Loki was starting to crave something truthful.

And who was to say friends with benefits had to be clinical and free of emotion? They were friends who had the benefit of sex. It was a bit more long-term and complicated than Tony was used to... but maybe it was exactly what he wanted? It wasn't a romantic relationship-- which he had proven he was absolutely terrible at--but it wasn't a one-night-stand either. It was something in the middle.

Tony was still debating the idea when Loki started to speak.

"You do not have to decide now, Anthony," he assured gently. "And if you do not want to deepen our relationship, you need not hesitate to inform me. I told you because you deserved to know, not because I expected your reciprocation."

Tony sighed, feeling guilty for making the other man wait, but, well.

"It is something I need to think about, Loki. I don't want to make a hasty decision and regret it later; you deserve more than that."

"Would you like me to leave you?" Loki asked, watching Tony carefully. "I sought solitude to come to my own conclusions. I can give you the same."

But Tony shook his head. "No. I know you feel better when we're both safe in your chambers."

Loki gave a small nod and they quickly fell into an uncomfortable silence. Loki was standing watching him, his arms clasped behind his back and his eyes puzzling out Tony; trying to gauge Tony's reaction to the confession as well as what the likely conclusion would be.

It wasn't intended to make Tony feel pressured, but it was impossible to ignore just how crucial the situation was; whatever he decided would affect their whole partnership. Loki said he trusted Tony not to put their alliance and plans in jeopardy and Tony trusted the mage just as implicitly. Whatever happened, they would still be ready for Thanos. Tony just didn't want to lose the ease, the fun and the *friendship* he had formed with the other man.

*The universe sure does like to make my life fucking complicated*, Tony silently grumbled. He felt bad for it a moment later, especially when he remembered that his part of the situation

wasn't half as complicated or painful as Loki's. Tony wasn't the one waiting for an acceptance or rejection of his feelings.

Tony's eyes had fallen to the floor, but he looked up at Loki, catching and holding that uncertain green gaze, but any worry that Tony might have briefly glimpsed was wiped away as Loki smiled politely and told him, "You deserve some time to yourself. I will bathe and leave you to your thoughts."

"Thanks, Loki," Tony said, still feeling wretched about the whole thing and making Loki more or less retreat from him.

An apology was also on Tony's lips, but he was struggling about whether to say it. Loki--like him if he was in the same position--wouldn't want to hear anything that could be misconstrued as pity.

Loki seemed to notice his struggle, but he seemed to think it was for a different reason.

"The dinner with the ambassadors is tonight," Loki told him quietly. "I will understand and make an excuse for you if you would like some additional time before resuming our ruse."

"No, Loki," Tony instantly denied, shaking his head. He also gave the mage a small smile. "You said you trusted this not to come between us. It won't. I'll be there."

Loki gave a small, but genuine smile as well as a soft nod. Loki began heading towards the bedchambers shortly after, although he did call over his shoulder, "If you have need of me, Anthony, you know where I will be."

When he could no longer hear Loki's retreating footfalls, Tony brought his hands up to rub over his face before just resting his head in his palms.

At least they'd managed to quickly sort out that concern, because no matter what, they would make their alliance work.

But Tony still had a hell of a decision to make, and while feelings weren't Tony's forte, he was still going to have to dive head first into trying to figure his own out. Loki had offered him the truth and the only thing Tony could do was try and offer the same back.

Tony just hoped he could come to some kind of conclusion before they had to walk out into another political dinner and act as if everything between them was as smooth, happy and perfect as normal.

*Piece of fucking cake.*

Tony just smothered his pained groan in his hands. God, he needed a drink.

---

Tony spent a good hour thinking about everything; Loki, their ruse, their partnership and something more developing between them. He had as many pros as he did cons and as much worry about Loki as he did curiosity about where a physical relationship would lead them.

He eventually just decided to put it the hell aside and focus on what always spoke louder to him: *actions*.

Basically, Tony went to look for Loki.

The only problem was that the mage hadn't yet left the bathroom. Tony had floundered for a moment before his attention was caught on the items from the market.

His fingers twitched and before Tony knew what he was doing; Tony was sitting down beside the pile of items and starting to examine them. It was oddly therapeutic. It gave him the chance to think about Loki and their time at the markets. He shied away from the moment Loki had realised his feelings and instead focused on the day they'd shared, how much *fun* it had been.

Before he realised what he was doing, Tony was smiling and chuckling as he picked up the fabric he'd wrapped around Loki. He ran his fingers over the animals, making them let out their animal cries.

Tony was sure he wouldn't have heard Loki enter the room and step closer if the mage wasn't deliberately trying to give Tony a warning.

Glancing over at him, Loki looked uncertain, obviously unsure if Tony still sought solitude instead of Loki's company. But Tony just smiled and gestured him over, "You said there was a story about how this tea first came to Asgard?" He gestured with it. "Something about a mixed-up plant shipment?"

Loki smiled slightly and nodded before taking a seat beside Tony. He looked dainty and elegant even as he folded his crossed legs underneath him. "Yes. There was an old man who refused to believe he was going deaf." Loki gave a soft huff of laughter. "There were many mistakes ordered that day. The teas were one of the benefits, but some of the others? Well, that is how a great Asgardian joke was formed..."

As Loki continued to explain, it was - almost - as if nothing had changed between them, as if their prior relationship had formed back around them from one blink to the next. Only this time, Tony had the benefit of looking at it with fresh eyes.

It didn't make him come to any sudden epiphanies, but it did let him think about what it would be like to lean in close to Loki, to draw him into a kiss and make use of the bed behind them. It was a way to test how he felt about Loki in a casual setting, as well as a way to test how they would be able to work together with this new dynamic between them.

They didn't spend the entire afternoon discussing the items from the market; they also talked strategy about the dinner as well as their last days on Asgard. Loki also planned to get a report from Heimdall and Odin regarding the Animal Whisperer tomorrow.

Everything was smooth and flawless; they were like perfectly oiled clockwork with no signs of the underlying issue. Even when they made it to the dinner, nothing was out of place; Loki's prediction regarding their performance was as accurate as any of his other deductions.

It made Tony feel deeply, genuinely relieved. Tony had seen and been a part of a lot of relationships that crashed and burned at the first hurdle.

It meant that by the time they got back to the privacy of their rooms, Tony had his answer.

When they stepped into Loki's chambers and shut the door, the mage was the first to move away and put distance between, but Tony didn't let him go far. He stopped him with a gentle touch to Loki's arm.

"Hey," he said quietly, "can we sit down for a bit?"

Loki's eyes widened slightly and his nervous swallow was noticeable before he gave a very small nod and let Tony lead him to the settee.

They took their seats side by side but where Tony felt jittery and was barely controlling the way he wanted to bounce his leg or drum his fingers on his thigh, Loki was completely still and tense. His posture was rigid and his eyes were focusing on a point far away from Tony.

They both knew what they were about to talk about.

But while Tony was trying to figure out how to best start the conversation, Loki broke the silence.

"You've made your decision then," Loki said quietly, his tone indicating he didn't believe the answer would be in his favour. His fingers twitched against his thigh, as if he was barely refraining from clenching his hand into a fist. His smile was bitter. "I suppose it was to be expected."

The frustration and resignation hurt something deep in Tony's chest and he brought his hand to rest over the other man's wrist and kept his tone light, almost teasing, "You going to keep putting words in my mouth, or do I get a chance to tell you my decision?"

Loki didn't smile, but he gave an absent shrug. "I thought I would save you the discomfort of explicitly rejecting me, but you may continue, if you wish."

His words would have made Tony roll his eyes if he didn't know it came from a lifetime of expecting and receiving rejection from everyone Loki ever cared about. It *hurt*, and it also put Tony in a very difficult position. He just hoped he wouldn't fuck everything up. *Fingers crossed.*

"I thought about this a lot, Loki," Tony told him. "I thought about my track record with anything resembling a relationship. I thought about your history. I thought about what it would be like to climb into bed with you and I thought about what my answer would mean for our relationship either way."

Loki nodded, acknowledging all the points he'd raised, but didn't say a word. His eyes remained focused on where Tony was touching him, his expression carefully void of emotion.

"I also spent a lot of time thinking about continuing how we are only with sex on the side," that at least, made Loki tilt his head and glance at Tony curiously. "I figured with how



publically we're dating each other, even if we wanted to, we couldn't exactly find someone else to sleep with."

Loki blinked before his eyes narrowed, anger and unhappiness flashing through his eyes. "I don't want to be a *last resort*."

"And you wouldn't be," Tony squeezed Loki's wrist comfortingly. "I would *never* do that to you, not knowing how you feel about me, alright?" The furious tension bled out of Loki as he accepted Tony's words, so Tony continued, "But it made me think that if we did start something together, we both deserve a way to back out, no questions asked, if it doesn't work." Loki nodded absently, but that wasn't enough for Tony as he pressed, "Do you agree to that?"

Loki raised his eyes to Tony, still looking dejected, but he answered regardless, "Yes, that would make sense."

Feeling relief flood through him, Tony let himself smile. "Okay then."

It took Loki a moment for the words to sink in, but even when they did, he just frowned in confusion before tilting his head at Tony quizzically. "That... I do not understand?"

"You agreed to tell me if it wasn't working," Tony clarified. "But until it doesn't," he squeezed Loki's wrist again before lightly rubbing his thumb against Loki's skin in a soothing, intimate touch, "I'm willing to see what can happen between us."

Loki looked completely stunned and disbelieving for a long moment, his lips parted in surprise, but he eventually managed to blink a few times and closed his mouth. He then very hesitantly raised his free hand to cup Tony's cheek. When he felt no resistance, he tentatively moved in and pressed his mouth against Tony's in a soft kiss.

Closing his eyes, Tony didn't hesitate to respond. He felt Loki's hand spasm under his in reply, but Tony's lips barely quirked into a smile before he was distracted by Loki kissing him with more intent.

Tony felt a small surprised sound catch in his throat, but he ignored it to kiss back, especially when Loki carefully started shifting to better face Tony. It was a matter of moments before Tony's hands were cupping Loki's neck while one of Loki's hands came to press against Tony's side. Loki's tongue was soon licking at his mouth, asking for entrance and Tony shivered as he let him inside. It was easy to get lost in the kiss from there as Loki's tongue lived up to its legend and made Tony let out a soft groan as he brought his hands down to Loki's jacket and tried to pull him closer.

They ended up breaking apart to pant, their cheeks flushed and Loki half bending over Tony who had ended up pressed back against the arm of the settee. Tony let out a soft laugh and smiled up at the mage. "I'm hoping that was working as well for you as it was for me."

Loki chuckled softly before bending down to brush his mouth over Tony's jaw, making Tony's eyelids flutter.

“Oh, yes,” Loki whispered, his mouth travelling down to brush over Tony’s neck, causing the engineer to tilt his head to give him better access. “I do hope you would like to continue.”

Tony could sense the mage’s hesitancy in the way Loki's hands hadn’t drifted anywhere else on his body, nor had his mouth pressed any harder against Tony’s neck. He was waiting for confirmation; the ball was very squarely in Tony’s court.

But Tony had made his decision an hour ago.

“Yeah, Loki,” Tony answered, encouraging Loki to raise his head so Tony could hold his gaze with a soft grin as he pulled Loki even closer to him. “I want to continue.”

Because if Tony was doing nothing else tonight, it was seeing how far he and Loki were comfortable going, and whether that would be necking on the couch... or moving things to the bed, well, Tony was eager to find out.

## Chapter End Notes

LOOK AT THAT! TONY SAID ~YES... OKAY HE SAID YES TO FRIENDS WITH BENEFITS, BUT IT'S SOMETHING, RIGHT? And who knows what the future will bring ;P

Which, okay, okay! So yes this is *kind of* another cliffy, mostly because, big question: **how do people feel about this rating being boosted up to M/E: i.e. sex/intimate scenes becoming a thing?**

Now, I am happy to use asterisks (as I have in the past) to make it easier for people who don't like to read smut scenes to skip them, but I'm also happy to keep the sexing~ to a minimum/not have it at all if that is the majority vote. I can go either way, but I thought I'd give you all a warning before suddenly being startled by nakedness XD

Please let me know your thoughts (and yes, while I know it's my story and my decision, I am honestly curious to see what the vote would be) :)

Thanks for reading!!

**EDIT:** The majority of people have requested the rating get updated to M/E so I believe I will be doing that since I do have some intimate scenes in mind. I'm still debating exactly how I will section the story whether it be **a)** asterisks/a notation in the text, **b)** separate chapters for intimate scenes **c)** a separate story just for the intimate scenes, but I will make sure the information is clear and plan in the beginning a/n of the next chapter.

But please note this story was always meant to focus on the romance/relationship between Loki and Tony and not specifically on the intimate side of things. If sex scenes occur they will be few and far between and when best suited to the story. "Fade-to-black" will likely be highly common and "important plot points" will not be discussed

during intimate scenes to avoid difficulties for those who don't wish to read it. If you have questions/thoughts, please don't hesitate to comment about it. This is still a very flexible and fluid thing at the moment as I work out what will happen. But thank you for your support for me and this story! I hope this can continue to be a work that everyone will enjoy :D ♥

# Chapter 37 - Clean Version

## Chapter Notes

Okay everyone! Please be advised that due to the overwhelming vote, the rating will indeed be boosted up! I'll stick it as 'M' for the time being, but that might be subject to change.

**However, as a number of people did not want smut, I will be posted a 'clean' chapter as well as a 'smut' chapter. This way you can pick which one you would like to read. You will just need to check if you've selected 'Chapter 37 - Clean Version' or 'Chapter 37 - Full Version'. The only thing you'll miss if you choose the clean version is the smut, everything else you'll gain :)**

**Chapters that don't have smut in them will update as normal with just a single chapter.**

Please let me know if you have any questions!

But in regards to this chapter being the "clean" version, I have included some of the making out on the couch because it involves discussions relating to what the two of them like in bed/some of Loki's sexual hangups, which I think is relevant. I also have implied what is done between them. I tried to include as much as possible while keeping it to a 'T' rating, please let me know what you think for ~future chapters :)

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

They stayed on the settee for a long time, just getting used to one another as they kissed.

Loki's hands soon began to slowly explore Tony's upper body, trailing his palms over Tony's clothed chest and Tony did same to Loki in return.

It was one of the few times where Tony had taken the time to enjoy kissing and learning a new lover without it being an impatient race to the bedroom. This was about slow, exploratory kisses. This was about feeling Loki's grin get pressed against his skin when the mage travelled his mouth down to Tony's neck and jaw. It was about feeling those long fingers and talented hands map Tony's chest and lightly brush over Tony's nipples making the engineer's chest arch a little into the touch.

It was about responding in kind, lightly nipping at Loki's neck and making the mage shudder. It was about running his hands over Loki's back and feeling each groove of Loki's spine as well as each strong, defined muscle.

The longer they stayed there, the more heated the kisses became as hands slowly slipped under rumpled shirts to touch warm, smooth skin. Loki's hands were cupping his side; hot

against his already overheated flesh, while Tony's were against Loki's lower back; the mage's shirt having risen to bunch behind Tony's wrists.

When they broke apart this time they lingered close, their breaths coming heavy as they looked at each other. Their eyes were dark, their cheeks flushed and lips swollen from kissing. Loki was the first to break the silence, his tongue darting out to lick his lower lip almost nervously while his fingers stroked Tony's side. "Would you like to continue?"

Tony could feel Loki's arousal where their hips were pressed together and Tony knew he wasn't much better, but Tony knew that Loki would be willing to halt their activities if Tony wanted him to. It just made Tony smile and stroke his thumbs against Loki's skin, asking, "Mm? What did you have in mind?"

Loki's eyes dropped tellingly to glance between their bodies even as he murmured, his voice slightly rough, "Many things."

It made Tony chuckle and caused Loki to flick uncertain green eyes up to catch the engineer's. Tony just smiled. "Well, pick one, and we'll work our way down the list."

His response made Loki grin softly before bending down and kissing Tony again, slow and almost sweet before he pulled back and murmured, his lips still faintly brushing Tony's, "What do you like, Anthony?"

"Hmm?" Tony hummed, still slightly distracted by the kiss.

"When your lovers are male; what do you like?" He pressed his mouth to Tony's jaw. "You are dominant when you bed a woman, are you dominant when you bed a man?"

There was something in the phrasing, something in the deliberate smoothness of Loki's motions... it caught at Tony and made him move his hands up to Loki's face, stilling his nibbling on Tony's neck and directing the mage up so that Tony could better look at him.

"What do you mean by 'dominant'?" Tony asked him carefully.

Loki hesitated for a moment before answering almost too casually, "The penetrative partner."

Tony just narrowed his eyes; he could sense something else lurking underneath; probably some stupidly Asgardian backwards bullshit. "Loki... what aren't you telling me?"

The trickster's fingers twitched against Tony's side and Loki's gaze darted away so that he wasn't holding Tony's gaze. "On Asgard it is seen as a further shame to be the receptive partner. As unmanly. It is a weakness and disgrace."

Oh, the *fury* Tony felt at hearing that.

"Well, that's fucking bullshit," Tony snapped. "Obviously no one here has ever worked out how to put their prostate to good use."

His remark startled a laugh from Loki, and the sound forced Tony to put aside his anger; add it onto the pile of why he hated and wanted to punch most Aesir.

Loki, after all, was his priority.

Smoothing out his face while also brushing his thumbs soothingly against Loki's neck, Tony told him, "I'm happy either way, Loki; I've done both, but if you'd prefer to be on top, that's completely fine with me."

"I..." Loki trailed off. "I know the Aesir are... wrong in their assumptions." He grimaced. "But I have always been seen as womanly for my seidr. The people of Alfheim... they are more open, more accepting of one's pleasures and interests. I have tried both," and Loki's mouth twitched on the word; all that remained of what Tony was sure was an ingrained flinch and discomfort at admitting it, "but I prefer to be... the 'top' as you say."

"Alright," Tony told him easily, continuing to soothingly stroke Loki's skin, "works for me."

It made Loki relax and he smiled at Tony with gratitude. He still offered, "I am not averse, Anthony, should you wish to—"

"Hey," Tony interrupted gently, "some people like it one way, others like it another. I like it *all* ways. You don't need to change your preferences for me." Tony grinned teasingly. "Especially when this way, you're doing all the work."

He threw in a wink for good measure, making Loki laugh again; his green eyes were bright with amusement, affection and lingering appreciation. Tony just made sure to tug Loki down into another kiss, encouraging the mood back into what it had been before Aesir stupidity crept in.

Loki kissed him back greedily, their tongues curling around one another as their hands went back to caressing each other's chests. When they broke apart this time, they were panting and their hips were lightly rocking against each other.

Loki's face was slightly pinched and his eyes were still closed; it was an expression that made Tony wonder, and before he could stop himself, he asked gently, "Been a while?"

The mage's eyes snapped open and his cheeks darkened a little, embarrassment obvious even while his expression quickly turned to a rueful grimace. "My reputation these last few years... it has not awarded me many who would seek my bed."

*Time we changed that*, Tony firmly decided, and without giving himself time to second-guess, Tony kept his eyes on Loki's while his hand slid between their chests. "How about we start here then," he suggested, "leave the rest until later?"

Loki's eyes had widened and he didn't look like he had the capacity of thought to disagree, rather, he did the opposite, happily encouraging Tony.

It was all too easy from there to give in to something they had both been wanting from the moment that they'd first started kissing.

And it was good, incredibly good. Tony knew how to use his hands and Loki knew how to use his mouth. It meant that when they had both brought each other to a very pleasurable

completion, there was nothing either of them could have wanted more. Tony was relaxing back against the furnishings feeling perfectly languid and satisfied. He gave Loki a lazy smirk and couldn't help asking him, "Is this the part where I compliment your silver tongue?"

Loki snorted; he also uncurled himself to move back over Tony. He didn't kiss him, but he did nuzzle at Tony's neck. "Many have done so," he murmured, "few have survived."

Tony's lips twitched in amusement even as he angled his head to better catch Loki's eyes and gauge the honesty of the statement. "Even when I'm being entirely truthful when calling that the *best* blowjob I've ever had?"

Loki looked like he was trying not to smile at the compliment. "Perhaps I can make an exception for you."

His grin widening, Tony moved forward and chastely pecked Loki's lips. "Glad to hear it."

Loki's smile finally appeared after receiving the kiss and he trailed after Tony to kiss him again, a little bit deeper but still remarkably chaste. It was an easy affection that he'd never managed, even with Pepper; he had always been tense and fearful of doing something wrong, worried that he'd push or ask for too much from her - but with Loki, it didn't feel like that.

Maybe it was because the pressure of being *perfect* for someone wasn't present. After all, neither of them were perfect, but they were remarkably good at aligning with each other. They also both craved affection, so they offered and took it easily; especially after many of their personal boundaries had been removed after starting the ruse.

"We have an early morning tomorrow," Loki remarked when the kiss eventually finished. "We should retire."

Tony grimaced, but well, the sooner they got tomorrow over and done with, the sooner they would be heading home; with any luck they'd be heading back to Earth in two days time.

"Yeah, okay," Tony agreed, regretfully watching Loki pull away from him so that they could both fix their clothing and climb off the settee.

They made their way to the bedroom with minimal touches or discussion, both of them focusing on preparing for bed, having a quick wash and pulling off their clothes and pulling on their sleepwear.

It was just like every other night as Loki magically turned off the lights once they were both in bed and under the covers, their bodies pressed together in a way that was both familiar and comforting. Tony was on his back and Loki's arm was around his waist, Loki's head resting on his chest. Tony was staring up at the ceiling, thinking about everything that had happened, not only in the last twenty-four hours but the entire time they'd been on Asgard. He was thinking about how much things might change again, once they arrived back on Earth.

"Anthony?" Loki asked quietly, making Tony blink from his thoughts and give a questioning hum. Loki's hold briefly tightened on Tony's waist before he asked just as softly, "You do not regret your decision?"

“No,” Tony answered instantly while bringing a hand to link with Loki’s against his chest. “This is definitely the right one.”

He could hear the smile and contentment in Loki’s voice as he relaxed completely against Tony; holding the engineer tight and snug against him. “Good.”

---

The next morning found Tony waking up wrapped around Loki. It wasn’t an unfamiliar position, but this time it made Tony think about all the things they *could* do; all the places their hands and mouths could now explore.

It was a damn shame that today, like most days on Asgard, didn’t give them a lot of time to laze around in bed. The sun was already starting to rise and bathe the room in a golden glow and that meant that breakfast would be arriving soon. Not long after that, they’d need to head to the council rooms to hammer out the last of the agreement.

Truthfully, the debates and decisions were practically finished, but Odin was the one dragging his feet. He offered enough legitimate reasons that no one could call him on it, but it was blatantly obvious he was still trying to manoeuvre Loki and Tony out of the ambassador’s good graces. Odin wanted them to fail, and he was getting increasingly irritated that it wasn’t working.

Tony was dreading whatever new ploy Odin had spent yesterday devising; there was no way he called a day off without it somehow benefiting him.

And on top of that, Loki had to meet Heimdall for a report on the Animal Whisperer, something Tony was planning to attend with him; not that he expected the Gatekeeper to be any help at all.

Sighing, Tony had to admit, as much as Asgard’s library and technology were fascinating (and their baths, *amazing*) Tony was really looking forward to getting back home. SHIELD and the Avengers might be assholes and a pain in his ass, but at least there he was on his home ground.

Here, it was a whole different ball game and Tony was tired of playing it. He was sure Loki must be too. Tony was sure they would *both* be glad to return to Stark Tower.

It was as he was thinking about their arrival back on Earth, that he felt Loki start to stir.

Looking down at the mage, Tony watched him slowly blink himself to awareness. “Anthony,” he greeted, stifling a yawn. “How long have you been awake?”

“Not long,” Tony answered. “Sleep well?”

“Yes,” Loki agreed, nodding absently, the motion causing Loki’s cheek to rub against Tony’s chest in an action reminiscent of a cat. Tony had to do his best to repress his smile at the sight, not wanting Loki to misinterpret it. “And you?”



“Yeah,” Tony agreed. “Although, I’ll sleep better in a few days when I know I don’t have to get up at sunrise.”

Loki chuckled softly. “Indeed.”

However, a moment after he said the word, he stilled, his humour disappearing and making Tony frown and look down at him. Loki looked pensive and almost... disappointed. “Hey? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he murmured, but when that resulted in Tony harshly poking him in the side and narrowing his eyes at the mage. Loki corrected, “I merely recalled that you will no longer be required to share a bed with me.” He gave an awkward shrug from where he lay over Tony. “I almost began to tolerate your snores.”

Tony knew the words were meant to be flippant, a way to hide the fact that, for a moment, Loki had been relaxed enough to let the truth slip onto his face; he was going to mess sharing a bed with Tony.

And, when he thought about it, Tony was going to miss it too. It was why it didn’t take him long to come to a decision.

“Damn,” he said, in the same light-hearted tone as the mage, “you’re right. And here I was getting used to cuddling up next to you for warmth. But hey,” he nudged the mage; making Loki’s carefully blank eyes catch his own. “Who says we can’t share a bed in the tower? I mean, kind of comes with our new agreement, doesn’t it?”

Loki looked surprised, but it was swiftly replaced by something extremely pleased. “Yes, I suppose you’re right.”

“Great!” Tony said cheerfully, happy to neatly handle that problem and move on to the next; specifically, “So, let’s try to get the hell out of here and be back at the tower by tomorrow. Sound like a plan?”

“Yes,” Loki agreed with a grin. “It sounds wonderful.”

With that decided, they unfortunately did have to climb out of bed, but the morning was spent pleasantly enough as they discussed their plans for the day; Loki was hoping to see Heimdall before their first meeting with the ambassadors and, once they finalised the alliances, Loki hoped to take Tony to the library once more as well as to Frigga’s gravemarker.

The amount of things they wished to do before leaving Asgard, only made them more inclined to gain the alliances they sought. It was why they were leaving Loki’s chambers less than an hour after waking. There were already a few ambassadors up and about, talking and chatting near the council chambers, but their focus was on Heimdall who was waiting for them.

The council chambers were housed in a part of the palace that opened onto a cloister filled with elaborate formal gardens, with benches and a large fountain in the centre. It was

attractive and well-situated to allow for pleasant conversation--and additional political wrangling--in between meetings.

Heimdall was standing by the fountain, looking stern and ominous.

Making their way over to the Gatekeeper, walking side by side, they stopped before him while Loki gave him a sharp smile. "Heimdall, how kind of you to finally grace us with your presence."

Heimdall barely reacted to the remark, "You believe yourself deserving of things you do not yet earn."

"The protection of *Midgard* is something that should not be *earned*, but given whenever possible," Loki answered, a bite in his tone. "Or does the heroism of the Aesir escape your sight and grasp, Gatekeeper?"

"I would not think it myself who has trouble distinguishing these traits," Heimdall answered, his voice level and free from the agitation that was already brimming in Loki.

Tony just placed a gentle hand against his friend's wrist, even as he interjected, "Whatever way you want to measure it, the way I see it, we're owed information as part of our deal. You kept watch over Earth while I couldn't."

Heimdall's sharp, unnerving gaze moved from Loki to examine Tony. The engineer just gave him a smile to match Loki's for sharpness and held the gaze without flinching or looking away.

It took a long moment, but eventually, Heimdall gave a small incline of his head. "I have watched the woman you seek." Tony felt something excited and full of adrenaline rush through him. Heimdall had seen her and that meant he had a *location*. "But there are other things that must be spoken of."

"What other things?" Loki instantly demanded, his eyes narrowed.

"A test." The words made both Loki and Tony stiffen as they looked over their shoulder to find Odin approaching, his staff in his hand as he stared at them both. "A final examination before Asgard's army is allied to you."

"What test?" Loki asked, the words coming out through gritted teeth.

"Heimdall seeks to search your words for lies," Odin told Loki before his attention shifted to look directly at Tony, pinning him like a bug. "While I seek to search Anthony Stark for deception." His gaze suddenly swung back to Loki whose fists were clenched and teeth were gritted. "Or do you have something to fear? A reason we should not have this final trial before offering you Asgard's might?"

*Fuck*, Tony thought. They were stuck, and they both knew it. Odin had done to them exactly what they had to him. They couldn't say no, not without looking like they had something to hide. They both had to be quizzed if they wanted to get the alliances they'd sought.

*Fuck, fuck, fuck*, Tony chanted internally, even while smiling his best media grin and stepping towards Odin. “What’s one more trial, hey, Loki? Especially when Odin’s agreeing to sign the alliance once we pass.”

*Because I’m going to make it impossible for you to back out after we do this*, Tony thought, and some of that determination must have shown in his eyes as Odin’s gaze narrowed slightly as he watched Tony. But, it also didn’t make him back down. Which meant Tony had to be careful; whatever Odin had up his sleeve, he was obviously betting on it winning.

“Come,” he gestured at Tony while starting to turn away. “We will walk the garden. Loki shall remain with Heimdall at the fountain.”

*Great, separating us too. Fucking asshole.*

“Fine by me,” Tony answered before glancing back at Loki who was looking at Tony with worry and fury both. Tony just stepped towards him and brushed his mouth across Loki’s lips, chaste and uncaring of who saw.

He held Loki’s eyes as he pulled back; confident, determined and not about to lose. When he turned back to Odin, his smile had lost all of its affection and kindness; in its place was nothing but the hard lines and calculation of the man who had created Iron Man.

Odin was unconcerned by his expression as he began leading Tony on a walk around the spacious garden. He waited until they were far enough away Loki couldn’t hear them before Odin started to speak, “Heimdall has observed you and looked into your past.” Odin gave him a slow, assessing look. “You are not one to publicise such... *associations*.”

He didn’t quite say the word with derision, but it was still obvious what and who he was talking about, namely; Tony’s affairs with men.

“I do it for the right people,” Tony told him, smiling viciously. “Sometimes you have to look deeper than the surface to find someone *worthy*.”

If Odin noticed the dig at Thor, and you know, *Asgard in general*, he ignored it. “Sometimes, no matter how deeply one looks into another, only darkness is observed.”

“Was that a warning?” Tony asked sharply.

“An observation,” Odin answered. “You have spent months in Loki’s company, I have spent centuries.”

*And that sure as hell didn’t make you an expert on him*. “Some people take a lifetime to learn something that takes another person minutes.”

Tony got a sharp glare for that snipe, and it made him feel all warm and proud inside.

“And to what extent do you *know* him, Anthony Stark?” Odin demanded. “Do you know the stories of his youth; the ones that resulted in the injury, destruction and punishment of those around him? Do you know of the treasonous acts he committed in adulthood; actions that could never once be pinned on him through the use of his trickery? Do you know of his *birth*

on a planet of ice and snow, to a race that once invaded and slaughtered hundreds on your world?”

Tony couldn't stop the furious tension that coiled in his shoulders at each one of Odin's spitted words. Odin had even stopped walking, staring hard at Tony as he threw each question at the engineer; hoping to see him flinch, hoping to see him look *surprised*.

Tony was just *angry*.

“Do I know that you stole him from another planet and never told him who or what he was?” Tony growled. “That you raised him to believe himself a monster? Yeah, I know about *that*, Odin Allfather.” He had the pleasure of seeing *Odin* look taken aback. “And his past isn't what matters to me; I care about who he is now and what he does with his future. I'm here to *support* him; that's what *partners* do.”

Odin was silent for a long moment, scrutinising him as Tony glared back, unwilling to back away or stand down.

It was *incredibly* disconcerting when his actions made Odin's face slip into something almost pitying, yet there was something unnervingly victorious lurking around the edges. It made Tony feel like he'd miscalculated somewhere and something was about to go very wrong.

“Midgardian,” he mused, “kept from awareness of events throughout the Nine Realms.” He made a gesture with his hands. “Even some here do not know the truth of events we did not wish to speak of when Loki was thought lost.”

Tony narrowed his eyes but he didn't bite the poison apple presented in the old man's hand.

Odin didn't seem concerned, in fact, he continued as if he hadn't taken a moment to pause, waiting for Tony to ask what he meant.

“On the day of Thor's coronation,” Odin elaborated, “Loki assisted the Jotnar onto Asgard; an act of high treason. He proceeded to incite Thor into a rage, sending him to Jotunheim and almost causing war. Had I not followed them and stopped this foolish venture, the Mad Titan may not have been the greatest threat to these realms.”

“Upon the revelation of his heritage on that planet,” Odin continued to recount, moving to circle Tony's tense form like a vulture surveying a wounded animal. “He returned here and sought confirmation of his true birth. He became King and proceeded to attack Midgard and attempt to kill Thor. When this failed, he turned the bifrost upon Jotunheim.”

Stopping back in front of Tony, Odin held his gaze and spoke with clear words and a stare full of vindication and spite, “Had Thor not arrived and fought him; his attempted destruction of that planet and its people would have been complete, and none but he would remain as a member of his race.”

Tony was stiff, attempting to keep his face blank and his breathing even so that Odin wouldn't see the truth or the depth of his reaction – but Tony's mind felt like white-noise and his heart felt frozen inside his chest.

He didn't know what to think, he didn't know what to *say*. Tony didn't even realise his eyes had dropped from Odin's until the Allfather spoke, making him dart his eyes back to the old man's face.

“As I have said,” Odin told him, his own attention on the courtyard behind them, “sometimes there is naught but darkness to be found, when one looks into another man's heart.”

Tony couldn't even look around, not when he knew he would see Loki, not when he didn't know how he would react to seeing the mage right now.

Odin just patted Tony on the shoulder, an act of false sympathy and compassion as Tony stood stiff and unwelcoming under the Allfather's touch, trying not to cringe away.

“Loki's rage and revenge against the Mad Titan we may trust,” Odin advised him, looking back at Tony once more, “but his affection for another, his ability to become more than a bringer of destruction and chaos? I doubt such a change. This is my warning, Anthony Stark of Midgard.”

After that, Odin left him, walking away from Tony after dropping his bombshell.

Because while Odin might have given up on stopping the Realms from allying with them against Thanos, he still hadn't given up on ripping Tony and Loki apart; and this time, he'd made sure to pull out his biggest trump card.

## Chapter End Notes

:O

Will this throw their relationship into turmoil? Will Tony be able to handle what Loki did? What will *Loki* say?

...Did *I* really just fuck up their relationship before they've even managed to have five seconds enjoying themselves and leave you on a cliffhanger again? Yes, yes I did.

Hopefully you'll like what the next chapter has in store ;P

# Chapter 37 - Full Version

## Chapter Notes

Okay everyone! Please be advised that due to the overwhelming vote, the rating will indeed be boosted up! I'll stick it as 'M' for the time being, but that might be subject to change.

**However, as a number of people did not want smut, I will be posted a 'clean' chapter as well as a 'smut' chapter. This way you can pick which one you would like to read. You will just need to check if you've selected 'Chapter 37 - Clean Version' or 'Chapter 37 - Full Version'. The only thing you'll miss if you choose the clean version is the smut, everything else you'll gain :)**

**Chapters that don't have smut in them will update as normal with just a single chapter.**

Please let me know if you have any questions!

But... that aside, as this is the 'full version' *omg guys, can you believe we're finally here?!?! It only took them like 37 chapters, haha. XD Hopefully it's worth the wait!*

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

They stayed on the settee for a long time, just getting used to one another as they kissed.

Loki's hands soon began to slowly explore Tony's upper body, trailing his palms over Tony's clothed chest and Tony did same to Loki in return.

It was one of the few times where Tony had taken the time to enjoy kissing and learning a new lover without it being an impatient race to the bedroom. This was about slow, exploratory kisses. This was about feeling Loki's grin get pressed against his skin when the mage travelled his mouth down to Tony's neck and jaw. It was about feeling those long fingers and talented hands map Tony's chest and lightly brush over Tony's nipples making the engineer's chest arch a little into the touch.

It was about responding in kind, lightly nipping at Loki's neck and making the mage shudder. It was about running his hands over Loki's back and feeling each groove of Loki's spine as well as each strong, defined muscle.

The longer they stayed there, the more heated the kisses became as hands slowly slipped under rumpled shirts to touch warm, smooth skin. Loki's hands were cupping his side; hot against his already overheated flesh, while Tony's were against Loki's lower back; the mage's shirt having risen to bunch behind Tony's wrists.

When they broke apart this time they lingered close, their breaths coming heavy as they looked at each other. Their eyes were dark, their cheeks flushed and lips swollen from kissing. Loki was the first to break the silence, his tongue darting out to lick his lower lip almost nervously while his fingers stroked Tony's side. "Would you like to continue?"

Tony could feel Loki's arousal where their hips were pressed together and Tony knew he wasn't much better, but Tony knew that Loki would be willing to halt their activities if Tony wanted him to. It just made Tony smile and stroke his thumbs against Loki's skin, asking, "Mm? What did you have in mind?"

Loki's eyes dropped tellingly to glance between their bodies even as he murmured, his voice slightly rough, "Many things."

It made Tony chuckle and caused Loki to flick uncertain green eyes up to catch the engineer's. Tony just smiled. "Well, pick one, and we'll work our way down the list."

His response made Loki grin softly before bending down and kissing Tony again, slow and almost sweet before he pulled back and murmured, his lips still faintly brushing Tony's, "What do you like, Anthony?"

"Hmm?" Tony hummed, still slightly distracted by the kiss.

"When your lovers are male; what do you like?" He pressed his mouth to Tony's jaw. "You are dominant when you bed a woman, are you dominant when you bed a man?"

There was something in the phrasing, something in the deliberate smoothness of Loki's motions... it caught at Tony and made him move his hands up to Loki's face, stilling his nibbling on Tony's neck and directing the mage up so that Tony could better look at him.

"What do you mean by 'dominant'?" Tony asked him carefully.

Loki hesitated for a moment before answering almost too casually, "The penetrative partner."

Tony just narrowed his eyes; he could sense something else lurking underneath; probably some stupidly Asgardian backwards bullshit. "Loki... what aren't you telling me?"

The trickster's fingers twitched against Tony's side and Loki's gaze darted away so that he wasn't holding Tony's gaze. "On Asgard it is seen as a further shame to be the receptive partner. As unmanly. It is a weakness and disgrace."

Oh, the *fury* Tony felt at hearing that.

"Well, that's fucking bullshit," Tony snapped. "Obviously no one here has ever worked out how to put their prostate to good use."

His remark startled a laugh from Loki, and the sound forced Tony to put aside his anger; add it onto the pile of why he hated and wanted to punch most Aesir.

Loki, after all, was his priority.

Smoothing out his face while also brushing his thumbs soothingly against Loki's neck, Tony told him, "I'm happy either way, Loki; I've done both, but if you'd prefer to be on top, that's completely fine with me."

"I..." Loki trailed off. "I know the Aesir are... wrong in their assumptions." He grimaced. "But I have always been seen as womanly for my seidr. The people of Alfheim... they are more open, more accepting of one's pleasures and interests. I have tried both," and Loki's mouth twitched on the word; all that remained of what Tony was sure was an ingrained flinch and discomfort at admitting it, "but I prefer to be... the 'top' as you say."

"Alright," Tony told him easily, continuing to soothingly stroke Loki's skin, "works for me."

It made Loki relax and he smiled at Tony with gratitude. He still offered, "I am not averse, Anthony, should you wish to-"

"Hey," Tony interrupted gently, "some people like it one way, others like it another. I like it *all* ways. You don't need to change your preferences for me." Tony grinned teasingly. "Especially when this way, you're doing all the work."

He threw in a wink for good measure, making Loki laugh again; his green eyes were bright with amusement, affection and lingering appreciation. Tony just made sure to tug Loki down into another kiss, encouraging the mood back into what it had been before Aesir stupidity crept in.

Loki kissed him back greedily, their tongues curling around one another as their hands went back to caressing each other's chests. When they broke apart this time, they were panting and their hips were lightly rocking against each other.

Loki's face was slightly pinched and his eyes were still closed; it was an expression that made Tony wonder, and before he could stop himself, he asked gently, "Been a while?"

The mage's eyes snapped open and his cheeks darkened a little, embarrassment obvious even while his expression quickly turned to a rueful grimace. "My reputation these last few years... it has not awarded me many who would seek my bed."

*Time we changed that*, Tony firmly decided, and without giving himself time to second-guess, Tony kept his eyes on Loki's while his hand slid between their chests and all the way down to Loki's pants. The trickster's eyes widened - then fluttered shut, his breath catching when Tony lightly cupped him through the leather.

"How about we start here then, leave the rest until later?" Tony asked, stroking with his fingers and making Loki twitch his hips.

Loki didn't look like he had the capacity of thought to disagree; he merely shifted to give Tony better access as the engineer brought down his other hand to help with undoing the laces and buckles. Tony was grateful that he'd had practice with his own Asgardian clothes over the past few days as getting Loki's pants open was the matter of moments and when he drew Loki's hard cock out of his pants, Loki just gave a soft groan and pressed his face into the curve of Tony's neck.



Tony just let his fingers dance over the other man's erection, feeling it harden further. He was about to bring up his hand, aiming to lick it for some kind of lubrication when he saw something green sparkle to life out of the corner of his eye followed by what felt like oil suddenly coating his hand.

He startled slightly and glanced down at Loki; the mage had shifted slightly, looking at him somewhat uncertainly, as if gauging the reaction to his magic's inclusion in the activities. Tony, however, was one-hundred percent for it, and he grinned, wide and pleased before very firmly taking Loki's cock in hand and stroking it with purpose.

Tony was rewarded by Loki giving a sound between a moan and a curse as his hips jerked to follow the feeling. His forehead also pressed back against Tony's shoulder, but Tony didn't mind, not when he was able to give all his attention towards making this the best handjob Loki had ever received.

After all, Loki might have a reputation for his tongue, but Tony had one for what he could do with his hands.

Tony made sure to live up to that by using every trick in the book to stroke, squeeze, rub and tease every part of Loki's cock; quickly working out what made Loki swear, moan, whine and shudder.

It took almost no time at all for Loki to go from enjoying the touch of a lover to desperately seeking his release; his groans of Tony's name became both a warning and a plea. Tony just sped up his strokes and rubbed his thumb under the head, wanting Loki to come; wanting him to take pleasure in something that had been out of his reach for years. Tony turned his face as well, murmuring encouragement in Loki's ear and lightly biting and tugging at his earlobe.

It was after only one such whisper of '*come on, Loki*' and a firm squeeze of Loki's cock that the mage was stiffening and coming with a muffled shout of Tony's name as his body shook and spasmed with the force of his release.

Tony, grinning in triumph, just continued to stroke him through it until Loki finally stilled and his cock was flaccid and oversensitive. Letting him go, Tony brought his clean hand to Loki's side, running his palm up and down it in gentle, soothing touches designed to help anchor and support the mage as he came back to himself.

When he did, Loki's first action was to make a gesture with his hands that cleaned up his release from between their bodies and Tony's hand. The next was to raise his head and kiss Tony fiercely. The engineer could only moan at the sudden and passionate kiss before responding, leaning into the touch and the fervour with which Loki kissed him. But it ended suddenly, leaving Tony blinking in confusion and trying to follow after the mage when he broke away - but Loki barely glanced at Tony before he was sliding down the engineer's body.

It made Tony startle and sit up on his elbows as he watched the mage kneel down at the foot of the settee. Tony's heart was racing and his body was alive with desire as Loki's hands came to the front of Tony's pants and deftly unlaced them. When Loki's hands cupped his cock and gently pulled it out, Tony let out a shuddering breath, his eyes falling briefly closed.

Loki just seemed to take a moment to look at him, and Tony knew he must make a rather glorious sight; tailored Asgardian clothing ruffled as his pants lay open, his cock hard and curving. Tony was lying sprawled and aroused beneath Loki in the man's chambers.

Loki was looking at him with dark, hungry eyes and he seemed to debate something in the way his eyes dragged over Tony's form, lingering on his cock. He didn't look uncomfortable, rather, there was something in his gaze that made Tony think he was deciding on the best way to pleasure Tony, and that made Tony shiver.

A small smirk pulled at his mouth in the end, his decision made, before Loki was gripping the base of Tony's cock and a moment later, Loki bent down and the warm heat of a mouth was enveloping him. Tony cursed, trying to jerk his hips into the touch, but Loki had one hand holding him down as his mouth swallowed around Tony's cock.

"*Oh fuck,*" Tony cursed again as he looked down his body where Loki's head was between his thighs, his cock entirely in Loki's mouth as the mage began sliding his lips up and down.

Tony could only whimper as he brought one hand to Loki's shoulder, gripping tightly while the other moved to lightly lace through Loki's hair; neither forcing nor guiding, but enjoying the way it felt to feel Loki's head rise and fall as he mouthed, licked, swallowed and hummed around Tony's erection.

Tony could only tilt back his head and pant, moan and curse Loki's name as the literal *silvertongue* used his own legendary reputation on Tony and fuck did Loki *deserve* it. Loki's tongue was almost serpentine as it lovingly curled around Tony's cock and swirled around the tip. His mouth was also hot and wet and knew all the right ways to hum and swallow to make Tony keen.

It was quite possible, the best blowjob Tony had *ever had*.

And when Loki just made a point of taking him in deep enough that the head of his cock hit the back of Loki's throat, Tony barely stopped himself from using his hold on Loki's hair to push him down further, wanting, *needing*, more - but Loki seemed to know what he wanted and was he happy to comply. He took Tony *further* than Tony would have thought was possible, even cupping the back of Tony's hips to encourage the engineer's thrusts. Loki's throat was clenching and with his hips free to jerk, Tony could swear and groan and grip Loki's hair tightly in both hands as the pleasure built to a crescendo.

It was no surprise at all that with a low whine of Loki's name; Tony was coming harder than he ever had before in the entire history of lovers going down on him.

Tony didn't know how long he laid there panting and trying to recover, but he came back to reality to find Loki sitting between Tony's legs and watching him; his smirk was one of incredible smugness, and Tony couldn't even blame him for it. If Tony gave head like that, he'd be smug as hell too.

Relaxing back against the furnishings, Tony gave Loki a lazy smirk, "Is this the part where I compliment your silver tongue?"

Loki snorted; he also uncurled himself to move back over Tony. He didn't kiss him, but he did nuzzle at Tony's neck. "Many have done so," he murmured, "few have survived."

Tony's lips twitched in amusement even as he angled his head to better catch Loki's eyes and gauge the honesty of the statement. "Even when I'm being entirely truthful when calling that the *best* blowjob I've ever had?"

Loki looked like he was trying not to smile at the compliment. "Perhaps I can make an exception for you."

His grin widening, Tony moved forward and chastely pecked Loki's lips. "Glad to hear it."

Loki's smile finally appeared after receiving the kiss and he trailed after Tony to kiss him again, a little bit deeper but still remarkably chaste. It was an easy affection that he'd never managed, even with Pepper; he had always been tense and fearful of doing something wrong, worried that he'd push or ask for too much from her - but with Loki, it didn't feel like that.

Maybe it was because the pressure of being *perfect* for someone wasn't present. After all, neither of them were perfect, but they were remarkably good at aligning with each other. They also both craved affection, so they offered and took it easily; especially after many of their personal boundaries had been removed after starting the ruse.

"We have an early morning tomorrow," Loki remarked when the kiss eventually finished. "We should retire."

Tony grimaced, but well, the sooner they got tomorrow over and done with, the sooner they would be heading home; with any luck they'd be heading back to Earth in two days time.

"Yeah, okay," Tony agreed, regretfully watching Loki pull away from him so that they could both fix their pants and climb off the settee.

They made their way to the bedroom with minimal touches or discussion, both of them focusing on preparing for bed, having a quick wash and pulling off their clothes and pulling on their sleepwear.

It was just like every other night as Loki magically turned off the lights once they were both in bed and under the covers, their bodies pressed together in a way that was both familiar and comforting. Tony was on his back and Loki's arm was around his waist, Loki's head resting on his chest. Tony was staring up at the ceiling, thinking about everything that had happened, not only in the last twenty-four hours but the entire time they'd been on Asgard. He was thinking about how much things might change again, once they arrived back on Earth.

"Anthony?" Loki asked quietly, making Tony blink from his thoughts and give a questioning hum. Loki's hold briefly tightened on Tony's waist before he asked just as softly, "You do not regret your decision?"

"No," Tony answered instantly while bringing a hand to link with Loki's against his chest. "This is definitely the right one."

He could hear the smile and contentment in Loki's voice as he relaxed completely against Tony; holding the engineer tight and snug against him. "Good."

---

The next morning found Tony waking up wrapped around Loki. It wasn't an unfamiliar position, but this time it made Tony think about all the things they *could* do; all the places their hands and mouths could now explore.

It was a damn shame that today, like most days on Asgard, didn't give them a lot of time to laze around in bed. The sun was already starting to rise and bathe the room in a golden glow and that meant that breakfast would be arriving soon. Not long after that, they'd need to head to the council rooms to hammer out the last of the agreement.

Truthfully, the debates and decisions were practically finished, but Odin was the one dragging his feet. He offered enough legitimate reasons that no one could call him on it, but it was blatantly obvious he was still trying to manoeuvre Loki and Tony out of the ambassador's good graces. Odin wanted them to fail, and he was getting increasingly irritated that it wasn't working.

Tony was dreading whatever new ploy Odin had spent yesterday devising; there was no way he called a day off without it somehow benefiting him.

And on top of that, Loki had to meet Heimdall for a report on the Animal Whisperer, something Tony was planning to attend with him; not that he expected the Gatekeeper to be any help at all.

Sighing, Tony had to admit, as much as Asgard's library and technology were fascinating (and their baths, *amazing*) Tony was really looking forward to getting back home. SHIELD and the Avengers might be assholes and a pain in his ass, but at least there he was on his home ground.

Here, it was a whole different ball game and Tony was tired of playing it. He was sure Loki must be too. Tony was sure they would *both* be glad to return to Stark Tower.

It was as he was thinking about their arrival back on Earth, that he felt Loki start to stir.

Looking down at the mage, Tony watched him slowly blink himself to awareness. "Anthony," he greeted, stifling a yawn. "How long have you been awake?"

"Not long," Tony answered. "Sleep well?"

"Yes," Loki agreed, nodding absently, the motion causing Loki's cheek to rub against Tony's chest in an action reminiscent of a cat. Tony had to do his best to repress his smile at the sight, not wanting Loki to misinterpret it. "And you?"

"Yeah," Tony agreed. "Although, I'll sleep better in a few days when I know I don't have to get up at sunrise."

Loki chuckled softly. "Indeed."

However, a moment after he said the word, he stilled, his humour disappearing and making Tony frown and look down at him. Loki looked pensive and almost... disappointed. "Hey? What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he murmured, but when that resulted in Tony harshly poking him in the side and narrowing his eyes at the mage. Loki corrected, "I merely recalled that you will no longer be required to share a bed with me." He gave an awkward shrug from where he lay over Tony. "I almost began to tolerate your snores."

Tony knew the words were meant to be flippant, a way to hide the fact that, for a moment, Loki had been relaxed enough to let the truth slip onto his face; he was going to miss sharing a bed with Tony.

And, when he thought about it, Tony was going to miss it too. It was why it didn't take him long to come to a decision.

"Damn," he said, in the same light-hearted tone as the mage, "you're right. And here I was getting used to cuddling up next to you for warmth. But hey," he nudged the mage; making Loki's carefully blank eyes catch his own. "Who says we can't share a bed in the tower? I mean, kind of comes with our new agreement, doesn't it?"

Loki looked surprised, but it was swiftly replaced by something extremely pleased. "Yes, I suppose you're right."

"Great!" Tony said cheerfully, happy to neatly handle that problem and move on to the next; specifically, "So, let's try to get the hell out of here and be back at the tower by tomorrow. Sound like a plan?"

"Yes," Loki agreed with a grin. "It sounds wonderful."

With that decided, they unfortunately did have to climb out of bed, but the morning was spent pleasantly enough as they discussed their plans for the day; Loki was hoping to see Heimdall before their first meeting with the ambassadors and, once they finalised the alliances, Loki hoped to take Tony to the library once more as well as to Frigga's gravemarker.

The amount of things they wished to do before leaving Asgard, only made them more inclined to gain the alliances they sought. It was why they were leaving Loki's chambers less than an hour after waking. There were already a few ambassadors up and about, talking and chatting near the council chambers, but their focus was on Heimdall who was waiting for them.

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It took a long moment, but eventually, Heimdall gave a small incline of his head. “I have watched the woman you seek.” Tony felt something excited and full of adrenaline rush through him. Heimdall had seen her and that meant he had a *location*. “But there are other things that must be spoken of.”

“What other things?” Loki instantly demanded, his eyes narrowed.

“A test.” The words made both Loki and Tony stiffen as they looked over their shoulder to find Odin approaching, his staff in his hand as he stared at them both. “A final examination before Asgard’s army is allied to you.”

“What test?” Loki asked, the words coming out through gritted teeth.

“Heimdall seeks to search your words for lies,” Odin told Loki before his attention shifted to look directly at Tony, pinning him like a bug. “While I seek to search Anthony Stark for deception.” His gaze suddenly swung back to Loki whose fists were clenched and teeth were gritted. “Or do you have something to fear? A reason we should not have this final trial before offering you Asgard’s might?”

*Fuck*, Tony thought. They were stuck, and they both knew it. Odin had done to them exactly what they had to him. They couldn’t say no, not without looking like they had something to hide. They both had to be quizzed if they wanted to get the alliances they’d sought.

*Fuck, fuck, fuck*, Tony chanted internally, even while smiling his best media grin and stepping towards Odin. “What’s one more trial, hey, Loki? Especially when Odin’s agreeing to sign the alliance once we pass.”

*Because I'm going to make it impossible for you to back out after we do this,* Tony thought, and some of that determination must have shown in his eyes as Odin's gaze narrowed slightly as he watched Tony. But, it also didn't make him back down. Which meant Tony had to be careful; whatever Odin had up his sleeve, he was obviously betting on it winning.

"Come," he gestured at Tony while starting to turn away. "We will walk the garden. Loki shall remain with Heimdall at the fountain."

*Great, separating us too. Fucking asshole.*

"Fine by me," Tony answered before glancing back at Loki who was looking at Tony with worry and fury both. Tony just stepped towards him and brushed his mouth across Loki's lips, chaste and uncaring of who saw.

He held Loki's eyes as he pulled back; confident, determined and not about to lose. When he turned back to Odin, his smile had lost all of its affection and kindness; in its place was nothing but the hard lines and calculation of the man who had created Iron Man.

Odin was unconcerned by his expression as he began leading Tony on a walk around the spacious garden. He waited until they were far enough away Loki couldn't hear them before Odin started to speak, "Heimdall has observed you and looked into your past." Odin gave him a slow, assessing look. "You are not one to publicise such... *associations*."

He didn't quite say the word with derision, but it was still obvious what and who he was talking about, namely; Tony's affairs with men.

"I do it for the right people," Tony told him, smiling viciously. "Sometimes you have to look deeper than the surface to find someone *worthy*."

If Odin noticed the dig at Thor, and you know, *Asgard in general*, he ignored it. "Sometimes, no matter how deeply one looks into another, only darkness is observed."

"Was that a warning?" Tony asked sharply.

"An observation," Odin answered. "You have spent months in Loki's company, I have spent centuries."

*And that sure as hell didn't make you an expert on him.* "Some people take a lifetime to learn something that takes another person minutes."

Tony got a sharp glare for that snipe, and it made him feel all warm and proud inside.

"And to what extent do you *know* him, Anthony Stark?" Odin demanded. "Do you know the stories of his youth; the ones that resulted in the injury, destruction and punishment of those around him? Do you know of the treasonous acts he committed in adulthood; actions that could never once be pinned on him through the use of his trickery? Do you know of his *birth* on a planet of ice and snow, to a race that once invaded and slaughtered hundreds on your world?"

Tony couldn't stop the furious tension that coiled in his shoulders at each one of Odin's spitted words. Odin had even stopped walking, staring hard at Tony as he threw each question at the engineer; hoping to see him flinch, hoping to see him look *surprised*.

Tony was just *angry*.

"Do I know that you stole him from another planet and never told him who or what he was?" Tony growled. "That you raised him to believe himself a monster? Yeah, I know about *that*, Odin Allfather." He had the pleasure of seeing *Odin* look taken aback. "And his past isn't what matters to me; I care about who he is now and what he does with his future. I'm here to *support* him; that's what *partners* do."

Odin was silent for a long moment, scrutinising him as Tony glared back, unwilling to back away or stand down.

It was *incredibly* disconcerting when his actions made Odin's face slip into something almost pitying, yet there was something unnervingly victorious lurking around the edges. It made Tony feel like he'd miscalculated somewhere and something was about to go very wrong.

"Midgardian," he mused, "kept from awareness of events throughout the Nine Realms." He made a gesture with his hands. "Even some here do not know the truth of events we did not wish to speak of when Loki was thought lost."

Tony narrowed his eyes but he didn't bite the poison apple presented in the old man's hand.

Odin didn't seem concerned, in fact, he continued as if he hadn't taken a moment to pause, waiting for Tony to ask what he meant.

"On the day of Thor's coronation," Odin elaborated, "Loki assisted the Jotnar onto Asgard; an act of high treason. He proceeded to incite Thor into a rage, sending him to Jotunheim and almost causing war. Had I not followed them and stopped this foolish venture, the Mad Titan may not have been the greatest threat to these realms."

"Upon the revelation of his heritage on that planet," Odin continued to recount, moving to circle Tony's tense form like a vulture surveying a wounded animal. "He returned here and sought confirmation of his true birth. He became King and proceeded to attack Midgard and attempt to kill Thor. When this failed, he turned the bifrost upon Jotunheim."

Stopping back in front of Tony, Odin held his gaze and spoke with clear words and a stare full of vindication and spite, "Had Thor not arrived and fought him; his attempted destruction of that planet and its people would have been complete, and none but he would remain as a member of his race."

Tony was stiff, attempting to keep his face blank and his breathing even so that Odin wouldn't see the truth or the depth of his reaction – but Tony's mind felt like white-noise and his heart felt frozen inside his chest.

He didn't know what to think, he didn't know what to *say*. Tony didn't even realise his eyes had dropped from Odin's until the Allfather spoke, making him dart his eyes back to the old



man's face.

“As I have said,” Odin told him, his own attention on the courtyard behind them, “sometimes there is naught but darkness to be found, when one looks into another man's heart.”

Tony couldn't even look around, not when he knew he would see Loki, not when he didn't know how he would react to seeing the mage right now.

Odin just patted Tony on the shoulder, an act of false sympathy and compassion as Tony stood stiff and unwelcoming under the Allfather's touch, trying not to cringe away.

“Loki's rage and revenge against the Mad Titan we may trust,” Odin advised him, looking back at Tony once more, “but his affection for another, his ability to become more than a bringer of destruction and chaos? I doubt such a change. This is my warning, Anthony Stark of Midgard.”

After that, Odin left him, walking away from Tony after dropping his bombshell.

Because while Odin might have given up on stopping the Realms from allying with them against Thanos, he still hadn't given up on ripping Tony and Loki apart; and this time, he'd made sure to pull out his biggest trump card.

## Chapter End Notes

:O

Will this throw their relationship into turmoil? Will Tony be able to handle what Loki did? What will *Loki* say?

...Did *I* really just fuck up their relationship before they've even managed to have five seconds enjoying themselves and leave you on a cliffhanger again? Yes, yes I did.

Hopefully you'll like what the next chapter has in store ;P

# Chapter 39

## Chapter Notes

So much love to my awesome beta **Amara1783** for her editing fabulousness! She helped me kick this chapter into shape and trim some excess prose until we got this post worthy! She is a wonderful gem! So send her all the love :D

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

Later, Tony would regret that too many seconds had passed without a reaction from him.

It didn't mean that Tony wasn't aware of the position they were in and the response he *needed* to give to Odin's declaration, his depiction of Loki's past and Loki's character. Tony's own feelings, his own flailing confusion and horror; they couldn't factor into this, not yet, not *now*.

"Odin," Tony called, turning on his heel to look at the man who was only a few steps away. The King turned to eye him with smugness and perceived victory still showing in his eyes. He paused, acting like the benevolent king he pretended to be while Tony walked towards him.

Tony stared the older man down as he closed the distance; refusing to let Odin's power intimidate him, refusing to let Odin's humble appearance and poisonous words sway him.

Stopping in front of him, Tony questioned, "If this is the part where you tell me about the blood on Loki's hands, are you going to mention the blood on Thor's too?" Odin blinked, looking taken aback, probably at the implication that something was less than perfect about his 'prodigal son'. Yeah, Tony knew the type *really* well.

"And what about you?" Tony continued. "A Warrior King like yourself, I bet you've got as many stories and as much of a death count as I do." Tony smiled sharply. "More even, considering how much long you've been alive." Odin's eye narrowed in a deadly glare, but Tony didn't give Odin the chance to condemn him for the slight. He softened his tone, neatly flipping to cajoling and sympathetic, "But these mistakes are in the past, that's why we're all here working together, seeking to find a better future. We're here to stop Thanos; not to tear each other down." The next words were difficult to say without sarcasm, but he managed it; he also hardened his eyes and darkened his smile. "So while I *appreciate* the warning about Loki, I think I'll trust my own judgement when it comes to him."

Because when it came to saying '*fuck off and fuck you*' with a smile, Tony had long turned it into an art form.

Odin could read between the lines and he seemed to fight between agitation and disgust, his lip curling into a sneer as his eye narrowed at Tony. Yet despite his obvious indignation that

his ploy had failed, his features eventually settled into something sombre, his brimming frustration carefully masked. “So be it, Anthony Stark.” He tilted his head, looking down at Tony even more blatantly than normal as he remarked ominously, “But you will regret the day that you did not heed my words.”

*Yeah, I fucking doubt that. You lying, manipulative son of a bitch,* Tony thought.

Odin just turned and walked away without another word. He made his way further into the gardens and towards the Alfheim ambassadors who were trying to look as if they weren't attempting to eavesdrop on the conversation. Tony finally let a hint of a sneer cross his lips as he watched the King depart. Yet, despite his anger at Odin and the man's attempts to tear him and Loki apart... Tony still had to acknowledge that even if he had kept Odin from knowing it, Odin *had* aimed his strike right.

And *fuck*, just how much of the old man's words were true? Had Loki really tried to destroy an *entire fucking planet*? Why the hell hadn't Loki told him? What *possible* reason could Loki have for having hidden it? But the second the question crossed his mind, the answer swiftly followed: *because he fears you rejecting him for it.*

Tony knew Loki well, and he knew that fear of losing the people he cared about was top of Loki's list of things to panic over.

When they'd first entered into their partnership, he wouldn't have told Tony because it would have made Tony balk. Tony couldn't have said whether he would have agreed to the alliance if he'd known about it, because it was one thing to participate in an invasion under duress, it was an entirely different thing to consciously choose to commit *genocide*.

Back then, he hadn't known Loki, he wouldn't have been able to trust that the mage wouldn't attack another planet.

Yet, Tony *did* know Loki now; he knew Loki's history and he liked him, he *trusted* him... and that meant Loki should have told him, especially to avoid the exact thing that Odin had just done. It could have gone *horribly* wrong and completely fucked up their alliances with the realms.

He knew that they had a friendship, a partnership and the start of a sexual relationship; all things that Loki would be desperate not to lose, but fuck it all, *concealing* that from him was plain fucking stupid. And what was *Tony* supposed to do with what he'd just been told anyway? How much of it was he supposed to believe?

*Fuck*, Tony swore internally, barely refraining from rubbing his hands over his face. *I need to talk to Loki.*

It was just a fucking shame that he wouldn't have any chance to do it for a good few hours. *Shit, shit, god damn hell*, Tony cursed to himself, gritting his teeth and resisting the urge to clench his hand in a fist. He had a role to play after all, and standing around looking worried and stressed wasn't going to help their cause or make Odin believe that Tony wasn't rattled. He needed to find Loki; he needed to pretend that everything was absolutely fine and that he hadn't just been given a whole new horrific can of worms for them to deal with.

Hissing out a breath surreptitiously, Tony made his way into the gardens, doing his best to side step any ambassadors who might try to talk to him in order to make a direct line for where he'd last seen Loki, but it seemed that Loki had also escaped his own conversation with Heimdall. They almost ran into each other, Loki reaching out to steady Tony with hands to his shoulders.

"Anthony," Loki greeted him, relief in his expression and voice even as his eyes darted over Tony as if searching for injury. "How did you fare? Did you pass his," Loki sneered slightly, "*test?*"

Tony smiled tightly. "I wouldn't call it a test." He also didn't want to give further explanations in the middle of an open courtyard, so Tony hurriedly changed the subject. "What did you find out about the Animal Whisperer?"

Loki unfortunately, wasn't buying his quick deflection.

"Her location has been discovered," he answered easily enough but his attention was fixed on Tony's face. He could no doubt see the tension and discomfort; adept at reading him already even after so short an acquaintance. He quickly made a point of pulling Tony further into the gardens, searching for somewhere secure. "What happened, Anthony? What did Odin discuss with you?"

And god, Loki didn't even look worried. He looked suspicious and concerned; he was prepared to be angry and insulted on Tony's behalf. He was prepared to roll his eyes and mock Odin's gimmicks and attempts to separate them.

And did that mean that Odin's words were complete fabrications or that Loki had simply never expected Odin to bring up the attack on Jotunheim? He wanted to believe it was the first, he really did, but he couldn't. He had gained enough snippets of information from Thor and Loki over the years to know that Odin's words had the ring of truth. Odin also wasn't stupid enough to give Tony a story he could easily disprove.

Tony didn't know how much of the story *was* true, but there was enough to make a real fucking mess - not only when it came to their relationship, but when it came to fostering Earth's good opinion of Loki as well.

And while Loki might have pulled them to an out of the way corner of the gardens, they still couldn't talk about it. There were people everywhere, with more arriving every minute in order to sign on the dotted line that would make a united front against Thanos. They couldn't afford to give anyone cause for doubt.

"Anthony," Loki still tried, leaning in close to murmur by his ear. "What did-"

"I need to talk to you," Tony interrupted. "But we can't do it here or now."

Loki's eyes narrowed further and his voice became sharper in demand, "What did Odin *say?*"

*Oh, nothing huge,* Tony thought sarcastically, *just that you tried to **slaughter** an entire race.*

“Something,” Tony paused waiting for someone to walk past--giving them a curious look but otherwise continuing through the gardens. Tony just lowered his voice, “That we can’t talk about here.”

Loki did not look pleased by the answer, but he gave a grudging nod of acknowledgment.

It was only a few moments later that a sound, not unlike a gong, echoed around the cloister, symbolising that the meeting was about to start. It meant that Tony had to put on a smile, stand beside Loki and wrangle out the last of their alliance contracts as if nothing was wrong.

It meant forcing his emotions, his tension and his need to get straight answers from Loki to the side in order to focus on Earth, the universe and the war that they all needed to prepare for.

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When all was said and done--and with Odin no longer dragging his feet--it only took two hours for everything to be drawn up, agreed upon and signed. It almost felt surreal signing a contract on behalf of *Earth*.

Tony was sure a few people and er... *countries* were going to be unhappy about him being the sole negotiator for the contracts, but, that was a problem for another day. After all, it was either Tony doing it now or Earth being left out; once they realised that, he was sure they’d start begging for introductions to the other realms. Tony was already planning to work with the United Nations and the World Security Council in order to facilitate those conversations; this had to be a world-wide effort or it wasn’t going to work. It would mean a lot of negotiating and far more politics than Tony enjoyed, but there were few other options.

And with Loki rolling up and teleported away their contracts--Loki’s personal contract with the realms, the one that related to their partnership, and the one that related specifically to Earth--they were free to leave and do what they wanted for the day.

Tony had wanted to get them out of the room and to Loki’s chambers as soon as possible, but Hel intercepted them on the way.

Her fascination with their partnership had meant the three of them had shared many discussions during their time on Asgard. Her affection for Loki and her growing fondness for Tony had also been an asset throughout their time here, but right now, Tony really didn’t want to get caught in a conversation with her.

She was perceptive enough to notice it and with a glance between the two of them, she remarked, “I had intended a private meal with you both before I depart, but I shall visit you on Midgard in the coming days instead.” She gave a small smile. “I have an interest in your other allies as well, Anthony Stark.”

Her words were surprising, and after gaining a firsthand experience of the respect that everyone gave her, Anthony didn’t hesitate to accept, “It would be an honour to host you at my home.”

Hel's smile spread wider and she nodded in farewell before turning to Loki and doing the same. It was the only form of parting she gave before turning on her heel and walking away. Loki's hand came to rest at the small of Tony's back a moment later as the mage leant in close and whispered in Tony's ear, "That is a high compliment. She does not leave her realm often, and her visitation will be seen as fondness. Many will think twice before attacking one who is so favoured by Hel."

"Are you speaking from experience there?" Tony questioned, raising his eyebrows at the mage.

Loki just gave him a rueful expression. "I tended to displease those who were not worried by such a warning, or did not believe her favour of me." He gave a faint shrug. "And as her wrath is rarely felt by those still living, some are willing to take a gamble with the fate of their afterlife."

The words made Tony shift uncomfortably, not wanting to imagine what his own 'afterlife' might end up like, let alone what might happen to Loki. Not even sure if he *bought* afterlives in the first place, but finding it hard to cling to atheism and science in the face of otherworldly beings.

He didn't say as much though, not when tension was already resting across their shoulder blades as they made their way from the gardens and into the palace. The knowledge of what they needed to discuss was a heavy weight on the air around them; leaving Tony with a mixture of emotions and not sure where he wanted to start.

They settled on inane, absent chatter about their plans for the rest of the day and what time tomorrow morning they would leave for Earth; the kind of conversation they didn't have to give too much attention to. It meant that the moment that they crossed the threshold to Loki's chambers and shut the door, blocking out Odin and Heimdall, Loki rounded on him.

Loki's eyes were filled with intensity and concern. "What did he say to make you so uncomfortable?"

And what was the point of delaying this any further?

"What exactly did you do to Jotunheim?" Tony asked him, and if his voice sounded weary, it was only because it *was*, just like the rest of him.

After ambassadors and contracts and Odin and *masks*, Tony just wanted to know where he stood and what Loki had hidden from him. And the way that Loki's eyes widened and he grew suddenly paler, Tony knew that the answer wasn't going to be something he would like.

Loki swallowed thickly. "What did he tell you?"

"That you turned the bifrost on Jotunheim," Tony answered, watching Loki closely. "That you tried to destroy the planet and everyone on it." He barely paused even when he spotted a quickly quelled tremble in Loki's hand. "How much of what he said was true?"

Loki was deathly still, and for a moment, it looked as if he wouldn't say a thing. His eyes dropping from Tony's, he stared at the ground, and when he spoke, his whispered words were full of pain and regret. "All of it."

The answer pressed down on Tony like a physical weight; his mind flooding with images of what it might have looked like, what it might have *felt* like to watch a beam of destruction hit a planet like the Asgardian version of a Death Star.

"Why did you do it?" Tony asked, keeping his voice carefully free of emotion. "And why didn't *you* tell me rather than making me hear it from *Odin*?"

Because he might understand why Loki kept it from him, but he never should have, not with something that monumental. *And how many people did you even kill?* But that wasn't a question Tony wanted to ask yet. And did it matter if he only killed ten Jotnar when he'd been planning to kill them all? Did the outcome outweigh the intent? And did it make it any worse than Tony going out and killing the Ten Rings? If the Jotnar were the monsters of Loki's nightmares who he'd been raised to slay only to be told he was one of them; did that make it more understandable that he'd tried to take out the cause of all his pain?

The questions ran through Tony's mind almost too fast to catch, but they all stopped, when Loki finally answered him.

"I was... lost," Loki began, making Tony focus on the mage.

Loki was still staring at the floor, his face as white as a sheet and his shoulders hunched towards his ears. He looked as if he was trying to make himself smaller; as if he believed himself a target about to be struck. It was a sight Tony had never expected to ever see from Loki, especially when it was *him* that Loki was facing.

"I had just learned that everything was a lie," Loki continued, "My life, my skin; there was nothing and no one I could trust." He swallowed thickly. "I had ascended the throne legitimately, but no one save Frigga considered me worthy of it. I did not see *myself* as worthy; a frost giant on the throne of Asgard? I should have been slain by Odin as an infant; no matter my age." He closed his eyes. "I felt as if everything was slipping from my grasp. I... I knew that Thor was lauded for his acts in battle, for the many he laid waste to; I wanted him kept from Asgard. I wanted to *protect* Asgard far more effectively than Thor and his hammer ever could. So I sought to destroy our enemy pre-emptively, removing the threat before they could ever harm us. I sought to prove my *loyalty* to the world I had been raised in." Loki still wouldn't look at him, but Tony did notice Loki's eyes open and flick to stare at his hand before he clenched it. "But instead of proving myself a hero and an honourable Aesir, I proved myself a monster and a disgrace, and when I saw the depths of my folly and the destruction I had wrought... I saw no reason to remain, and I let the void consume me."

It fit with everything Tony had imagined and assumed about the other man. It filled in gaps Loki had carefully left out in his past explanations. It aligned with Odin's words, even if the king had never explained the circumstances affecting Loki's mind.

Around a dry mouth and throat, Tony swallowed before asking, "Do you regret it?" His question made Loki glance up at him; desolate, haunted green eyes locking on his own. "Do

you regret attacking Jotunheim?”

Loki gave a tight, sharp nod and it made Tony let out a breath he didn't realise he was holding.

“Then why the hell didn't you just tell me? Everything on Asgard was a mess, *you* were a mess. Why didn't you tell me when you explained everything else? For fucks sake, you *know* how I am with secrets.”

“I know,” Loki whispered, “But I doubted you could forgive me,” Loki answered, his voice little more than a whisper. “A hero, I am not, Anthony, but a hero *you are*.” His eyes darted away to look at the ground. “It is something I should have told you,” he admitted, “but to hide the truth allowed me to keep you; to reveal it, meant I would lose you.” He let out a rough breath. “I do not like to think of those days, and you know it, you *let* me avoid speaking of it and so it remained unknown. I did not think Odin would admit to acts that he found so disgraceful and unbecoming, even of an adopted and estranged son.” He let out a harsh, choked laugh. “It was a selfish act to hide it from you.” A bitter smile crossed his mouth. “But I am a selfish being, and I wished to keep your friendship; I didn't dare to test it with the truth of my actions, and learn not even you could stomach everything I have done.”

When Loki finished, Tony just stared at him, absorbing everything he had learned.

What Loki had attempted was... horrific, Tony wasn't going to deny that, and the lying by omission irked him, but not as much as it could, not as much as it *should* - but it didn't, because of how well Tony knew and understood Loki.

And with Tony's own murky past, Loki's history and mental health at the time and Loki's genuine fear of losing Tony and his honesty when the engineer had asked... well. It all combined to make Tony let out a soft, tired sigh.

Looking back up at the trickster, Tony found Loki standing stiffly, looking as if he was waiting for a painful blow, a bitter rejection, and one more person telling him '*you're not good enough*'.

“Look, I'm not going to deny that what you did was terrible,” Tony told him, simple and to the point and making himself ignore Loki's flinch. “But I'm *also* not going to stop being your friend because of it.” *That* made Loki look at him with unmasked surprise and a near painful hope. “You made a mistake, Loki,” Tony explained. “A fucking huge one, granted, but there were severely messed up and mitigating circumstances preceding it. It's not a *good* thing, but you're not the person you were back then. You've changed for the better, and I also believe that you wouldn't ever do it again.” Tony offered him a smile that was still slightly strained, but *genuine* underneath. “I also understand why you didn't tell me. But, I'm asking that you don't keep things like that from me in the future, okay? I need to trust you, and you need to trust me. If things like that can be used against us by people like Odin and I can't recover in time, we're massively screwed, Loki.”

“There is nothing else,” Loki was quick to assure. He even moved to take a step closer to Tony but aborted the motion at the last moment, his hands twitching in mid-air but never getting close enough to touch Tony. “I promise you, there is nothing else. I can also assure



you that the damage to Jotunheim was minimal. Thor destroyed the bifrost in time to minimise loss of life while Frigga made certain to repair much of the damage done to the planet, and,” Loki’s eyes fell back to the floor, “to hide my crimes from the knowledge of others.”

That was comforting at least, both to know that Loki *hadn't* killed many Jotnar and to know that very few others could use that story from Loki’s past as any kind of leverage. It still meant Tony had to figure out a way to handle the problem if it every came out to the people of Earth. It would only take one careless remark from Thor and everything would turn to utter shit. Hopefully though, if he’d never brought it up so far, he might buy into that whole ‘*too disgraceful to talk about*’ thing that Loki had thought Odin would stick to. God, Tony could hope.

It was as he was running through action plans and damage control--trying to prepare for a fallout that he hoped would never happen--that Loki spoke, his words were quiet, unexpected, entirely out of context, and incredibly despondent. “Do you wish to have your out?”

Dropping his hand from where he had pressed his fingers into the corners of his eyes while trying to think. Tony could only frown at Loki in confusion. “Huh?”

Loki looked resigned and miserable; his feeble attempts at hiding it under a layer of acceptance fooling no one. “The deepening of our relationship; our ‘benefits’,” Loki answered, his eyes holding Tony’s dejectedly. “Do you wish to cease them?”

The expression on his face pulled at Tony’s heart; Loki always expected and *gained* rejection, Tony had seen it throughout their friendship. It was the whole reason he’d avoided telling Tony the truth to begin with, it was the whole reason Loki couldn’t hide his surprise when Tony consistently accepted Loki’s every broken piece without flinching or pulling away.

This, it seemed, was just one more item on a long list of things to assure Loki of.

Stepping closer, Tony placed his hand on Loki’s upper arm and lightly squeezed it. “I’m not opting out, Loki,” he told him firmly. “It’s just a bit to take in, so just give me some time on working it out, yeah?” Loki nodded, his shoulders dropping with noticeable relief that Tony hadn’t refused him all together. Letting Loki’s arm go, Tony made a point of changing the subject. “What did Heimdall have to say?”

Loki grasped the change of subject with both hands. “Precious little on our female foe,” he answered, “but before we leave Asgard he will provide me with a location and I will cast a tracking spell on her. We should then be able to capture her on our return to Midgard with ease.”

“And what about your ‘test’?”

Loki scoffed. “A game of words; something Heimdall is not yet versed enough in to attempt battling with me. No,” he shook his head. “It was merely a means of distraction to separate us and allow Odin his chance to... speak with you.”

Loki had hesitated noticeably, his voice shifting to something uncertain as he frowned; unsure, even now, of exactly how much Odin had succeeded in his goal of damaging them.

And that worry wasn't going to work, not while they were still on Asgard and under the king's sharp, bitter eye.

"Odin hasn't broken us yet," Tony told Loki firmly, holding his unsure, green gaze. "He's not going to do it now."

Loki's lips hinted at a smile, but it was short-lived and lacked its usual humour. "And as we only have dinner and some of tomorrow morning to contend with, it is unlikely he will manage it at all."

Flicking his gaze around the room, he seemed to be searching for a new topic and when his eyes caught on the pile of books Tony was still attempting to read through, he quickly suggested, "Shall we return to the library and make copies on further tomes?"

As much as Tony liked the option, he knew they couldn't do it yet, not when they had other things to talk about.

"Maybe in a bit," he admitted. "I think first, I'd like to hear the story as you would have told it. I've heard it from Odin in an attempt to drive us apart, now I would like to hear it from you."

"Ah." Loki breathed out, then Loki gave a very small nod. "Very well." He gestured towards the settee. "Shall we?"

Tony went where he was directed, with Loki following behind him until they could sit down together, a darker mirror of their conversation the night before.

But they needed to clear the air; this revelation had thrown them off balance and they needed to recover.

They also needed to remember that they *could* trust each other with the gruesome details - that when the smoke cleared, the other man would still be standing there beside them, unflinching.

As Loki started telling him about Thor's failed coronation Tony got the feeling that apart from Frigga, he was the only other person who had ever got to hear Loki's side of the story. The words came haltingly, and Loki veered between not meeting his eyes and anxiously glancing at him to reassure himself Tony was still listening.

Tony did his best to *just* listen, trying not to let his emotions show least Loki misconstrue the fury at the Aesir and more specifically, Thor's friends, as something directed at the mage. When Loki started speaking about his fall from the bifrost, his gaze was firmly fixed on the ground. He spoke about his battle with Thor, but it wasn't until his rejection by Odin that his voice got rough and his eyes blinked rapidly. He had been a man on the literal edge and the person who could have saved him with kind words, hell, with *lying* words even, had chosen blunt honesty at the worst possible time.

Tony had been trying to let Loki speak without interruption, but at hearing those words, at seeing his own past reflected in some small way by a lousy father who didn't curb his disappointment, Tony had reached out and laid a hand over one of Loki's, shifting closer to brush their shoulders together. Loki had startled initially, looking at Tony with wide, vulnerable eyes and a gaze incredibly raw. When Tony didn't flinch or pull away, Loki's mouth trembled towards a smile but never quite made it.

He swallowed thickly, and eventually looked away before continuing, talking a little about his fall through the void--where time lost all meaning, where his remaining sanity twisted and hung by a thread, only further contorting when he fell into Thanos' hands. He glossed over the specifics of the treatment he received in that realm and the threats of what would befall him if he didn't obey, but he explained enough that Tony knew *torture* was the theme of Loki's stay. He spoke more about using his invasion as a means of getting back to Asgard to heal. He was desperate for the comfort found in the familiar even after all the pain it had given him in the past.

He didn't expect the prison sentence upon his return, not when no laws had been broken as he reigned as rightful king and when his invasion of Midgard was done under coercion - but Odin had no time for his explanations or, indeed, for Loki in general.

Odin had been playing on Tony's morals when he'd delivered his bombshell, rather than any actual grief or anger over Loki's attack on Jotunheim. Loki's actions were an embarrassment while the loss of the bifrost was a blow to his power over the realms.

It left Tony further disgusted by Odin and deeply dismayed over everything that had happened to leave Loki where he was now. It made Tony realise exactly how much a friendship and a place to live where he was accepted without prejudice or limitations had helped to heal Loki more than Tony had ever realised.

Tony was only just realising how *alone* the mage had been when they'd formed their partnership. Loki was a man built on lies and masks without a hint of his true self showing to anyone but his mother. But without her to turn to, there was nothing left but illusions; versions of himself that he could get lost in, forgetting the man he had once been.

But things were different now.

And that made Tony realize how alone Loki would be once more when Tony was no longer around. Tony was Loki's closest friend and companion, but he wouldn't be here forever. Loki needed more than just Tony in his life; he needed people like Fandral and Hel; long-lived beings who could stand beside Loki centuries into the future. But getting them onto Loki's side and making the mage accept them? That was going to be an uphill battle, but it didn't mean Tony wasn't going to try.

But for now, his biggest priority was getting them both back on track.

Loki had stood when his explanations had finished, excusing himself to the bathroom as while the air might have been cleared, awkward tension still lingered in the form of hesitating touches and uncertain glances. Loki also no doubt needed some time to collect himself after reliving some of the worst moments of his life. When Loki came back they set off to the

library like the mage had suggested earlier; it gave them a few hours to stay close and talk about neutral topics, yet also allowed them the privacy of their own thoughts as they took copies of the few remaining texts that Tony wanted.

When they returned to their chambers to prepare for the evening meal, they were closer to normal, making the dinner easier. Odin watched them like a hawk, the ambassadors invited Loki and Tony to visit their realms in the months to come, Fandral pulled them both aside to excitedly explain the progress with the rhino and the two of them drank from the goblets they'd always used since their first night on Asgard.

Friendship goblets, *partners*; neither of them were going anywhere.

It was almost as if they'd never fallen out of step with each other, as if nothing had disrupted their easy relationship and friendship - but returning back to Loki's chambers that night was a slightly different story.

Tony didn't notice it at first, talking instead about visiting Alfheim and how he was really hoping they could manage it within the next few months--what with everything he'd heard from Loki and the ambassadors making it sound like it would be a *hell* of a good time--when he realised Loki was being unusually silent.

When Tony became aware of it, the engineer turned to look at Loki only to understand what was wrong. Where Tony had already kicked off his shoes and was pulling out his sleepwear - Loki was eyeing the mattress with uncertainty and regret.

It made Tony's words from earlier flood back to him.

*I'm not opting out, Loki. It's just a bit to take in, so just give me some time on working it out, yeah?*

His assumption was only proven when the mage suddenly offered into the silence that had fallen, "I can sleep on the settee, Anthony. You deserve a peaceful night's rest."

He looked resolved, even going so far as to smile tightly and move to take a step away, but Tony was quick to intercept, saying quickly, "Loki, don't be stupid. There's no reason for you to sleep anywhere else."

"I would not resent it," Loki told him, his words and expression showing nothing but honesty, "if you wished for further time and distance."

But Tony was already shaking his head. "I think distance is the last thing either of us needs right now."

He smiled at Loki when he finished, trying to assure him without words that things were okay. The mage slowly returned it, but the expression looked half-hearted. He did get his own sleepwear, so Tony didn't push it and soon there was nothing but the sound of rustling clothing to break the silence.

Tony was the first to climb into bed, but Loki soon followed him, turning off the lights with a flick of his wrist and a burst of magic, but instead of coming close as he always did at night, Loki was on the very edge of the bed, his back to Tony.

It just made Tony sigh sadly before he was closing the space between them and pressing up against the trickster's back. He felt Loki stiffen even as he draped his arm around the other man's waist, tugging the mage closer. His face was pressed against Loki's hair, and he smiled at the soft strands that smelt of Loki's fruit-scented bathing products, murmuring gently, "Thought I said we didn't need distance?"

"You would be wise to seek it," Loki replied just as softly, but with the roughness and disbelief impossible to hide. "Knowing everything you do, Anthony; how could you continue to be fond of me?"

Tony just smiled sadly, knowing the other man wouldn't see it. "Because you might have made mistakes, Loki, but that doesn't change who are now and who you're trying to be. And Loki Liesmith the mischief-maker, mage and trickster? I consider him one of my best friends." He tugged Loki even tighter to him, adding actions to words as he promised him, "And I'm not letting you go that easily, Reindeer Games."

The words made Loki let out a choked off laugh before his hand found Tony's and gripped it tightly where it rested over his chest.

"Sentimental fool," Loki whispered even while squeezing Tony's hand in a gesture so full of gratitude that it made Tony grin.

"Yeah, probably," he admitted, nuzzling the back of Loki's hair. "But, I'm afraid you're still stuck with me."

Tony could hear the pleasure and relief in Loki's exhale; he could also feel it in the way Loki relaxed completely into the mattress and Tony's hold.

*There, that's better,* Tony thought, feeling relief as things slowly began to slot back into place around them. It wasn't perfect, but it would get there soon enough, hopefully when they were finally off Asgard.

It was with that thought in mind that Tony closed his eyes; breathing in the multitude of scents that made up Loki, feeling the warmth of the mage against his body and the way Loki's long fingers shifted to link with his own.

Smiling against the back of Loki's neck, Tony allowed himself to slowly drift off to sleep with the knowledge that this time tomorrow, they'd both be back home.

Awh, look at that! After all the emotional upheaval and truth, Tony is still standing strong and cuddling Loki close :3 I hope that was worth the wait and a satisfactory chapter ;P

Thanks for continuing to read this story everyone!

# Chapter 40

## Chapter Notes

Ack, sorry this chapter is a few days later than I intended! But I hope the content makes up for it ;P

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

When Tony woke up in the morning, it was to find Loki wasn't lying beside him.

The mage was sitting on the edge of the bed, his back to Tony as he put on his boots. His shoulders seemed slightly tense and that made Tony instantly sit up, shaking himself awake in a moment.

"Loki?" he asked, his voice still slightly rough from sleep. "Somethin' wrong?"

Loki paused before looking over his shoulder, his expression carefully relaxed. "I have received a request to assist Fandral with the rhinoceros. I thought to let you rest."

The uncertainty and insecurity of yesterday might not have been as prevalent, but Tony could still see a hint of it lingering in Loki's eyes. It made Tony frown and hold the man's gaze. "I'm up now. I can still come."

*You don't have to distance yourself from me. I thought we talked about that?*

Loki seemed to notice his meaning and he gave Tony a small smile. "You do not need to attend, Anthony," Loki gently assured him. "I am merely tying up some loose ends, as you Midgardians say. So stay, enjoy the bath as you have long wished to. I will return after seeing him."

Tony still felt suspicious, unsure if Loki's answers and motivations were entirely truthful. "We usually do things together."

"And we still will," Loki answered firmly. "When I finish with Fandral, I will return and we can visit my mother's gravemarker, as discussed. Then, once I have gained what we need from Heimdall, we will return to Midgard."

Tony still felt wary - the mage had always preferred Tony by his side; always enjoyed the touches, contact and support he constantly offered.

... But then, the few times he had retreated from Tony in the past was when he wished to be alone with his thoughts. Leaving to spend time with Fandral was the complete opposite of that, but wasn't Tony hoping that the swordsman could turn out to be a friend for Loki in the centuries to come?

“Alright,” Tony agreed. “How long do you think you’ll be?”

“Not more than an hour,” Loki informed him. “If it looks as though it will take longer, I will have someone inform you-”

“Or,” Tony interrupted, “you could come yourself and we’ll *both* go and help Fandral.”

Loki smiled, but there was still something about it, some faint shadow to his eyes that Tony didn’t like. “Very well,” he turned back to his boots, finishing tying the last of them as he remarked, aiming for a teasing tone, “Although I do not know why you would choose to subject yourself to such a painful endeavour.”

“That’s what partners do,” Tony told him firmly, still watching the mage carefully, “make sure the other doesn’t suffer things alone.”

Loki briefly stilled, no other indication that the words had affected him before he was standing swiftly and magicing his jacket into his hand. He didn’t look at Tony as he slipped it on. “Enjoy full and unlimited use of the bath, Anthony. I’ve already eaten, but I will have the servants bring you food.”

He didn’t wait for Tony to respond before he stepped out of the bedroom and left his chambers. It left Tony sitting on the bed staring after him and sighing softly.

*Yup, Tony thought sadly, still doesn’t believe I’m not going to throw him away.*

But Tony knew that pushing Loki to trust him would have the opposite effect. Loki wasn’t going to believe Tony’s acceptance of Loki’s past and their continued friendship and relationship overnight. Just like everything else that had occurred between them, Loki had to doubt and distrust it before he could be convinced to believe it. Loki was expecting a fallout. He expected that Tony would regret and change his decision with time so he was hurrying to minimise his hurt.

In the meantime, Tony had to continue to show the mage that Tony wasn’t backing out.

Tony sighed again and dropped back onto the bedding, staring up at the ceiling.

He could remember curling around Loki last night, their hands linked and Loki pressing back into his hold. It had seemed so simple then, but now Loki had started letting his thoughts run rampant and in the wrong direction. Something that Tony had experience with himself.

Maybe leaving Loki to his own thoughts wasn’t the best idea, but Tony knew that the mage would be back, and when he was, Tony would set to work breaking down the trickster’s barricades and getting right up into his personal space until Loki realised things were okay between them.

But, for now, Tony had a glorious bath to enjoy on his final day on Asgard.

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Tony spent so much time in that bath he was practically a prune when he made his way into the living space in a fluffy towel. The servants had brought the promised food and he dug in



happily, before dressing in one of his new Asgardian outfits.

When Loki returned it had been just over an hour. Tony resisted the urge to leap on the mage in a hug the moment he appeared, *barely*, and instead just gave Loki a wide smile and asked how the rhino was doing. It turned out Fandral and the rhino were already exceeding Loki's expectations and forming a surprisingly strong bond. The mage had only needed to see Fandral for about fifteen minutes before he'd left, seeking out Heimdall at the bifrost and performing the spell to track the Animal Whisperer.

Tony was a little irritated that he hadn't been there to watch, but Loki assured him that it had been a fairly boring bit of magic and something Loki had wanted to do quickly before the woman had a chance to slip from under Heimdall's eye. The engineer hadn't been able to deny the logic in that and was just grateful Loki was able to monitor the woman until they arrived home.

It left them with only one more thing to do before they left. They set off from Loki's chambers in a sombre mood to make their way to the marker that Loki had commissioned to honour his mother. It was a large stone placed among beautiful gardens and under the shade of an ancient tree. Runes and pictures had been painstakingly carved and painted into the elegant stone. There was Asgardian writing around the edges, the World Tree in the centre as well as an image of the Queen herself, standing among the realms in a pose of love and reverence. There were various other pictographs; images that told stories of the woman who had been lost, and all she had done for Asgard and for Loki.

It was without prompting and having noticed Tony's interest, that Loki recounted the tales inscribed in the stone without hesitance, his voice rough and his eyes wet. Tony stood by his side, slipping his hand into the trickster's and resting their shoulders together as he listened. When Loki's grief stole his voice, Tony spoke about Maria into the silences; allowing Loki the ease of listening and in knowing his grief was understood.

It was a time that seemed to go forever and yet pass in the blink of an eye, and when they were both drained and pensive; lost in memories of the women they had lost and still loved. Loki had led Tony to a stone bench not far from the grave marker for them to sit down on. Their hands had never let go of one another and they came to rest on Tony's thigh.

They were silent for a good few minutes before Loki softly spoke, his voice still slightly rough, "Thank you, Anthony."

Tony just squeezed the mage's hand and leant a little more against him, even going so far as to rest the side of his head against Loki's. "Always."

Loki smiled softly and they lapsed back into silence. There was little they could say or do and so they did nothing; they stayed where they were, lost in their thoughts and drawing comfort and reassurance from one another's presence and the understanding and compassion that they both provided.

When they eventually did decide to leave, it was to return back to Loki's chambers and pack. Well, for a given definition of 'packing' since it mostly involved Loki using magic to pull

everything into a pocket dimension for ease of travel. Tony was both fascinated and a little jealous. He may have also, semi-seriously asked if Loki could take the bath too.

Loki chuckled at him softly, but otherwise didn't respond; instead he fell into an odd and almost pensive silence, his gaze travelling over the room; lingering on the settee, the bookshelves and the bedroom.

Moving to stand beside the mage, Tony quietly asked, "You okay?"

The mage glanced down at him with a peculiar smile. "I have not had cause to miss these rooms in many years." His gaze moved back over the space. "Yet, for the first time in many centuries, I have fond memories to recall."

A small part of Tony was... surprised to hear that; these rooms had been filled with more than a few bad conversations between them after horrible days with asshole Odin trying to come between them--last night being a great example of that. And while it had also been a refuge for them both, a place where they had kissed and decided to start a new, deepening of their relationship, Tony hadn't expected those brief moments to outweigh the darker days of Loki's past that was layered into every piece of furniture.

"The place had its perks while we were here," Tony told him after a few moments of consideration. "But a lot of that had to do with the person I was with, not the place I was staying." Loki glanced over at him and Tony offered the mage a small grin. "And I bet we'll have even more fun, fond memories when the backdrop we experience them in isn't *Asgard*."

Loki gave another soft laugh. "Quite right."

He seemed to shake off his nostalgia moments later, pulling away from Tony and giving the room a final magical sweep to make sure there wasn't anything else they wanted. When they were certain Loki locked up his room once more with magic and wards before leading them out of the palace and towards the bifrost.

There were a few other ambassadors who were leaving as well and Tony and Loki joined the small group. Loki and Tony didn't talk much as they walked, Tony was taking in his final sight of Asgard's city and Loki as absently listening to a conversation between three Alfheim dignitaries who were debating a magic text. There were people and children in the streets, watching the parade of foreign officials all making their way towards the rainbow bridge and Tony found himself staring up at the alien sky and thinking about everything that had happened and what it would mean for them when they returned to Earth.

Frankly, there was a lot to do, and as much as Tony would like to take a couple of days to rest, relax, and work things out with Loki, the two of them would likely be forced to hit the ground running when it came to explaining the contracts with the Nine Realms.

Tony had just started to pull out his phone, making a few notes on meetings he'd need FRIDAY to set up for him when he heard his name called. A moment later, a friendly hand was coming down to clap his shoulder. He glanced to the side to see Fandral falling into step with him; smiling bright and friendly. Loki had also glanced over, but the swordsman was focused on Tony. "I had hoped to see you before you departed, Anthony."

Tony just raised his eyebrows. “Oh? Why?”

“I wish to give my regards and wish you luck in your battles with our foes!” He squeezed Tony’s shoulder lightly. “You are a fine warrior, as is Loki, but I shall wish good luck regardless. I hope I will see you again in the future as well.”

Tony wasn’t quite sure what to say to that, but Loki interjected for him. “We are unlikely to return to Asgard, Fandral.” Tony glanced over to find the mage with an almost contemplative expression. “But, if Odin should feel the need to send another messenger... our inclination to listen will be far higher if it is you.”

It was backhanded praise, but Fandral looked as if he’d been paid a high compliment, his smile only brightening further. “Then I hope I am needed on Midgard.”

Tony knew the likelihood of Thor being called on was far higher than him or Loki, but that didn’t mean the swordsman still couldn’t be useful. “Even if you’re called down for Thor,” Tony remarked casually, “feel free to stop by the Tower and tell us how the rhino’s getting on.”

Fandral squeezed Tony’s shoulder with gratitude, looking as if Christmas had come early. “Indeed, I shall!”

Loki just rolled his eyes at Fandral’s reaction; he also snuck a hand down to Tony’s hip, ever so gently tugging him out of the swordsman’s grip. Tony couldn’t tell if that was jealously, a blatant reminder of their relationship or an attempt to keep Tony close as they reached the start of the rainbow bridge.

It might even have been all three.

One way or another, Fandral didn’t seem perturbed, but he did stop walking with them to linger just before the bridge. They stopped, letting the other ambassadors go on without them as they looked back at the swordsman. His smile was small and almost soft. “I am glad to have met you, Anthony.” He nodded at the engineer before turning to Loki, his expression warming further. “It has been good to see you, Loki. I am glad you have found one to understand you.”

Loki’s face slackened with surprise before he hurriedly masked it into something bland and disinterested. “Do not impale yourself on your new pet, Fandral.”

The swordsman just laughed, unconcerned. “I shall make certain to remember your advice, Loki.”

He followed it with a dramatic bow, but there was a certain familiarity and *formality* to his movements that hinted at something more than a joke. Fandral was bowing for a *prince*, and the way that Loki’s eyes widened indicated that he had noticed it too.

Loki didn’t say anything however and neither did Fandral. When the swordsman straightened, Loki gave him a small nod before guiding Tony down the rainbow bridge, his fingers digging slightly into Tony’s hip.

Tony waited until they were far enough away that Fandral wouldn't hear them to ask softly, "Did he just imply he still considers you his prince?"

Loki swallowed thickly, and when he spoke, his words were more vulnerable than he likely realised, "I... don't know."

Wrapping his own arm around Loki's back, he lightly squeezed the mage's hip. "Maybe Fandral's not as bad as you thought?"

Loki didn't say anything in reply and Tony didn't push. They lapsed into silence as they made their way across the bridge; the water lapped beneath them, the warm wind lightly rustled their jackets and the bifrost loomed before them.

It wasn't a short walk; by the wide expanse of space before them kept Tony distracted. Loki, by comparison, still seemed lost in thought as he walked a path as familiar to him as the palace corridors.

Entering the bifrost chamber it was to find Heimdall sending the last of the dignitaries back to their planet. When the Gatekeeper turned to them, Tony had a momentary burst of panic that the Aesir would suddenly turn on them and throw them in a cell, but he just repositioned his sword and started rearranging the direction of the transporter.

The Gatekeeper didn't say a word, not until he started to activate the bifrost and Loki was guiding him forward. Heimdall's voice echoed around them moments before they were leaving Asgard, an ominous promise that they had no chance to reply to: "Asgard will be watching you. You have not won the trust of *this* realm, Liesmiths."

The spectacle of the bifrost and the journey was almost enough to make Tony forget Heimdall's remark. It certainly distracted him as he gasped and stared as he was dragged through space to land with a faint wobble on the landing bay of Stark Tower.

Loki kept a firm hold on him and Tony leant back into that supportive touch. He also couldn't help quirking his lips into an entertained smile as he asked, "Did he just call *us* Liesmiths?"

He heard the smile and amusement in Loki's voice. "Yes, he did. It seems you now share my moniker."

Tony was kind of proud of that, but before he could say as much, Loki was unwrapping his arm from Tony and gesturing the engineer follow him inside the penthouse. Tony was happy to comply, especially since he probably only had a handful of minutes before SHIELD would be banging on their door.

He took in a deep, relieved breath when he stepped back into the safety and sanctuary of his penthouse where-

"Boss?" FRIDAY asked, sounding completely confused.

Tony frowned, but Loki quickly explained, "I masked our arrival - only FRIDAY knows we are here. I wished for at least some time before your realm descends on us."

Tony sent Loki a look of utter relief. "Have I mentioned how much I love you and your magic? I'd been hoping for some time to decompress."

Loki gave a faint smile, but otherwise ignored his declaration to continue, "I will work with FRIDAY to better locate our," his lips twitched, "'Animal Whisperer', but I thought that other than Dr Banner and Colonel Rhodes, we might delay the knowledge of our return until tomorrow."

Tony was all for that plan.

"Come on," Tony gestured at the mage. "Let's go down to the lab. FRIDAY, break the good news to Rhodey and Bruce and tell them it's need to know only. Don't want anyone spoiling our day off."

"Yes, Boss," she agreed and Tony let out another deep, relieved breathe.

Damn, but it was good to be home.

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Bruce was thrilled to see them and when he heard about their requested "day off", and had assured himself they were okay, he seemed happy to leave all discussions about Asgard and what had happened until tomorrow morning when Rhodey would be able to join them. Bless him.

The three of them settled instead into pinpointing exactly where Animal Whisperer was and finding a way to track her with something other than magic. The spell that Loki had cast on her was not as sharp or sophisticated as one that was attached directly. He'd had to work off information gained by Heimdall as opposed to casting on someone in front of him. His spell had located her but 'Texas' was all Loki had. While his magic would be able to get more specific the longer it remained in place, they were hoping that with FRIDAY scouring the area for her, they'd be able to locate something more definitive faster.

They spent a good few hours working on it, pausing only for a lunch break, after which, Loki retired to his room to work on the magic side of things in solitude. Tony had waved him off, barely noticing as he re-tweaked the code he was working on.

"Loki seems distracted," Bruce remarked.

"Well, Asgard was a shitstorm and an emotional upheaval for him," replied Tony, most of his concentration still on his coding. "I think he's allowed a little preoccupation."

Bruce shook his head. "That's not what I mean. He seems distracted around *you*, like he's not sure what to do with himself."

That... wasn't good, and Tony gave a bit more of his attention the other man, halting his fingers on the keys to look at Bruce. The scientist was watching him with a small frown as if he was still puzzling the situation out. His words were cautious as he asked, "Did you two... fight?"

Tony blinked, not only because he had no real idea how to answer that, but because despite seeming uncomfortable Bruce genuinely seemed to care that something might be wrong between the two of them. And that was... kind of touching.

“Something happened,” Tony admitted, “but we’re working through it. We’re fine, or we will be.” He let out a rough breath. “Asgard was just a mess and it was hard, especially on Loki.”

Bruce nodded accepting it without further explanation. “If you want to spend some time with him.” He made a gesture at the lab. “I can finish things up here.”

“Didn’t know you could code whole new tracking programs, Bruce,” Tony said, with as close to a teasing grin as he could muster.

“If you can learn astrophysics in a night,” Bruce told him, his eyes full of good humour, “surely I can learn programming in an afternoon.”

That made Tony laugh. “You are making me *very* tempted to hold you up to that challenge.” Unfortunately, Tony did soon sober. “But not when we’re tracking someone we really need to find.” Tony turned back to his computer determined to finish, but he did pause to add, “But if Loki doesn’t come down in a few hours, I’ll check on him.”

In the end, Loki did come back down to the lab and by dinner time they might not have had a working tracker, but it was damn close. They left FRIDAY to monitor the program and see if it picked their Animal Whisper up before the three of them headed to the kitchen where FRIDAY had sent their ordered Thai.

It was a simple meal with Bruce mentioning the little that had passed in their absence (SHIELD and Thor both throwing a tantrum about not being involved and the opinion polls mostly accepting Loki’s story but still wanting to hear and learn more about him). When Loki decided to leave halfway through the meal, claiming he wasn’t hungry and wished to rest, it left Tony staring at thin air as the mage disappeared.

Bruce had simply given him a look before offering to pack up their takeout boxes and head down to the lab for a few more hours while Tony headed to bed. Tony had just wrapped the other man into a hug, grateful, beyond words, that the man was in the tower; Bruce had just softly hugged him back.

Tony had waited until he was in the elevator before he asked FRIDAY. “Which floor did he go to?”

“His, Boss.”

Tony sighed and told Friday to take him there. It didn’t take long for the elevator to arrive, and he walked down the hall and knocked on Loki’s door. When the mage eventually opened it, Tony found Loki eyeing him more than a little warily.

It made Tony, for a moment, miss the simplicity that came from being on Asgard and sharing a room and a bed; they hadn’t been *able* to avoid either each other or awkward conversations. Everything had needed to run smoothly or their ruse was shot to hell, but down here, they

didn't have half as much pressure and it meant everything had the potential to go back to the way it *used* to be; separate floors, separate beds, a completely fake relationship and all the distance Loki had been placing between them since they'd woken up this morning.

"I'm going to ask you something," Tony started, his voice carefully free of emotion and his eyes on Loki, "and I don't mind what your response is, but I want you to answer it honestly, okay?"

Loki looked uncomfortable but gave a very small, hesitant nod. Tony allowed his features and his voice to soften as he questioned, "Do you want to spend the night by yourself, or do you want to share a bed with me?"

Loki swallowed and his eyes widened slightly, Tony just stepped a little closer, holding his gaze and keeping his voice low, "Because I told you last night that I thought distance was the last thing we needed and you still don't seem to believe me. You're pushing me away, Loki, and if you want your space, I'll accept that and head up to the penthouse, but if you think *I'm* the one who needs space, you're miscalculating and I'm here to tell you that you're wrong."

Tony stopped just in front of him, not touching and looking up at Loki's unreadable features that were still trying to mask what he felt and wanted. "So tell me, Loki, do you want me to stay?"

The mage's eyes ran over his face, but it didn't take him long to see the truth in Tony's gestures. It didn't take him long to reach out and tentatively grip Tony's hips. It didn't take him long to whisper, "*Stay.*"

Smiling, Tony just brought his hands to Loki's waist, and when the trickster lightly tilted his head down, Tony didn't hesitate to accept and when Loki's mouth brushed his, Tony swore he could feel all of Loki's reservations melt away as he tugged Tony even closer into the circle of his arms.

Tony just continued to smile into the kiss; a chaste, whisper of a thing until they pulled back. They still stayed closed and Tony stroked his thumbs against Loki's sides.

"You going to believe me now when I say things are okay between us?"

He felt Loki's smile even as the other man buried his face slightly in Tony's hair. "I had thought your mind might change, back on your world surrounded by the familiar. The relationship we used to share would be easy for you to resume."

"Doesn't work that way, Loki," Tony promised him. "I made my decision and it's being with you. I'm not opting out."

Loki breathed in shakily before he let it out in a rush of pure relief. He nuzzled Tony's hair gently, seemingly unable to stop the display of affection. Tony just found himself smiling and tilting into it, feeling remarkably... *warm* when Loki did that.

But as much as he liked standing here, they couldn't do it all night. He pulled away from Loki but only to step further into the room and to shut Loki's door. Their sides brushed as

they made their way to Loki's bed - and it was just like being on Asgard. Tony migrated to the side that had become his, Loki teleported him in pyjamas and the two of them got ready for bed.

They slipped under the sheets and, unlike last night when he'd tried to pull them apart, this time Loki slid in close, wrapping his arms around Tony and pulling his back against the mage's chest. Tony just smiled as FRIDAY dimmed the lights. He relaxed back into the other man's touch, feeling Loki bury his nose in Tony's hair and breathe him in.

It was the safest and most relaxed Tony could remember feeling for a long time. His chest also felt... warm, so incredibly, remarkably warm, and instead of trying to put a name to it or wonder what was going on, Tony just decided to close his eyes and enjoy the feeling and the way that Loki was wrapped around him, without a hint of distance between them.

## Chapter End Notes

YES! Finally got them off Asgard, you have no idea how long I've been trying to do that! And I had to end on another cuddle scene and bed sharing back on Earth. The poor boys need it. ♥

I have also been waiting until this moment to tell you all. WELCOME TO THE END OF 'THE FIRST ARC'. Yes. *ARC*. This story is nowhere near finished. In fact, there's definitely one, probably two more arcs of similar length to come. SO ENJOY THAT THOUGHT. Or you know, back out of the story now, whichever you prefer XD

Thank you, as always, for reading!

**And if you want to see/check out more of my writing** I am on tumblr [here](#). Feel free to come say hi :)



# Chapter 41 - Full Version

## Chapter Notes

So, that was a *fun* experience. I was moving over/editing in my beta's notes and fixing up some things myself when my documents crashed, taking all my work with it. I was *so* pissed off. But, luckily, I had c/p-d most of the notes into a separate program for formatting reason and was able to restore that to get most of them. But still. *super irritated*. And if I've missed other errors? Idec anymore, lol.

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

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## ARC 2

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When Tony woke up the following morning, it took him a few moments to register that he was home. His eyes then drifted down to Loki who was wrapped around him; their legs were tangled, the mage's head was resting on his chest, and Loki's arms were around Tony's waist.

Loki was so close and relaxed that Tony couldn't help smiling softly. He only glanced away when FRIDAY silently started projecting the usual morning statistics and information. When Tony saw it was barely seven in the morning, he made a dismissive gesture with his fingers and she closed everything off.

Tony just looked back down at Loki, holding him close and lightly stroking his hand over Loki's back through his shirt. A small furrow creased Loki's brow, but he otherwise didn't stir beyond tightening his grip even further on Tony and somehow snuggling closer. It made Tony huff out a quiet chuckle before gently hovering his hand over Loki's lower back. He hesitated for only a moment before gently slipping his hand under the shirt to rest against warm skin.

Loki made a small sound but pressed back into the touch, and Tony smiled while lightly stroking his fingers over Loki's skin. He felt the mage shiver slightly and shift against him. It made Tony debate stopping so that Loki could wake up in his own time, but Tony figured Loki would be disappointed if he missed out on what Tony had in mind, so Tony continued the soft, slow strokes of his fingers.

It took Loki a handful of minutes before he stirred enough to blinkingly open his eyes and shift his head to look up at Tony with a mix of confusion and surprise as he registered the gentle touches that Tony was still administering.

“Anthony?” he questioned, his voice sleep-roughened.

Tony smiled and stroked his hand further up Loki's back, following the curve of his spine. He was able to watch the way Loki's attention abruptly sharpened as he woke more fully.

"Morning, Loki."

Loki swallowed. They were so close together that Tony could already feel Loki's interest becoming known the more that Tony's fingertips traced and explored warm, pale skin.

"Anthony..." he murmured again, his voice low and his eyes darkening with desire.

"I think we deserve a lazy morning in bed," Tony remarked, "don't you?"

Tony wouldn't have been surprised to gain a protest after yesterday's events and attempt at distance, but while Loki did hesitate--licking his lips and shifting his position until he was able to look down at Tony--he didn't object. Instead he questioned with a new roughness to his voice, "What did you have in mind?"

Grinning, Tony brought his other hand to Loki's cheek, pulling him down until their lips could brush together softly. "I think you had a list we needed to go through. Anything you want to pick?"

Loki looked abruptly torn, a thousand scenarios likely running through his mind as he stared down at Tony, but the engineer just relaxed back into the bedding and smiled up at his friend, waiting for Loki's choice.

Tony already knew that whatever it was, he'd enjoy it.

Loki moved to straddle his thighs, the sheets falling down around them, leaving them in nothing but their sleepwear. Tony brought his hands to lightly cup Loki's hips, stroking his thumbs gently over the soft cotton of the mage's pants.

The trickster licked his lips, looking down at Tony in a way that made the engineer want to roll his hips against the other man's forming arousal. But he didn't; he wanted to hear Loki's decision. Loki's eyes watched him hungrily as he decided what he wanted. It was almost identical to how he'd looked the last time they'd been in this position back on Asgard before Loki had blown him and Tony stroked Loki's hips again, encouragingly.

When Loki finally made his request, it honestly surprised Tony, "Our hands on each other."

Tony hadn't known what to expect, but with an all access pass to Tony Stark, he'd kind of imagined that Loki would go for gold; reaching for third base without any hesitation - but he hadn't, and Tony honestly had to wonder... "You know you can have more, right?"

Loki's hands froze, hovering over Tony's chest. His green eyes flicked up to Tony's, looking uncertain and faintly uncomfortable; caught out. Tony brought up a hand to cup Loki's cheek and smiled softly. "Neither of us are blushing virgins, Loki, and I've told you I'm not backing out. You want handjobs? You got it. You want to fuck me," and oh, Tony liked the way Loki let out a soft groan at the suggestion. He couldn't resist pulling the mage down and brushing their mouths together before he whispered, "Then you got it, Lokes."

Loki's eyes had closed as they kissed and he kept them shut, remaining close. Tony just kept quiet, knowing that there was a host of arguments, doubts, emotions and lingering insecurities going on inside the trickster's head.

When he eventually gave a small, soft negative shake of his head, Tony felt something ache inside him and he pressed his lips against Loki's jaw, wishing he could do more to assure him. Loki, however, seemed to realise.

"I know you don't hold my past actions against me," he murmured, shifting so his lips could graze Tony's cheek. "I know you are still here, by my side and in my bed, despite there being ample reason for you to leave. I also know you're attracted to me," he let out a huff of almost incredulous laughter, "though that is something I still find difficult to believe. "

When Loki trailed off, Tony brought his hands up to Loki's back and ran them gently and soothingly over him. "Then what's holding you back?"

Tony could see Loki swallow, his eyes still carefully averted. "I am more than just attracted to you, as you know, and you are still discovering your feelings for me."

He paused, seemed to be struggling with what he wanted to say, but Tony had a fair idea, sadly looking at the other man as he acknowledged, "It's easier to hold back. It's easier to test the waters than to find out what you really want isn't something you can get."

God, it was like looking in a mirror some days.

Loki just shifted, his green eyes finally meeting Tony's and they were filled with a dozen emotions all shifting too fast for Tony to grasp beyond *aching*, *longing*, *resigned* and *wistful*.

"This is not something I want to lose, Anthony," Loki told him softly. "I wish to have you underneath me and moaning my name, believe me," he laughed wryly, "I want that." His smile was still slightly sardonic even as his hand came to Tony's chest, lightly stroking him through the material of his shirt. "But I also enjoy this, especially when I know that you are still learning to see me as someone you wish to take to your bed." Tony started to protest that he was already *completely on board with this* and no learning was required - but Loki silenced him by bringing his long fingers to press over Tony's lips. "I am also learning to accept that I can have you; that you would lean into my touch rather than withdraw from it. So yes, perhaps I ask for the simpler suggestions and pleasures, but that will change, given time, given the chance for us *both* to decide for something more."

Resisting the urge to let out a soft sigh that would have come out sad yet fond, Tony instead took the other man's hand in his own, pulling it from his mouth even while he linked their fingers. "Well, I can't complain about the idea of exploring each other and taking our time."

"Good," Loki murmured and while he kept their eyes linked, he also unwound his hand from Tony's in order to start trailing it gently and *purposefully* down Tony's chest, making the engineer's breath hitch. "Because I have every intention of *exploring* you thoroughly."

Swallowing, Tony couldn't help arching slightly into the other man's touch. "I like this plan."

Loki just grinned wickedly before letting his hand slide lower, cupping Tony's cock through his pants and making Tony's eyes flutter shut as he groaned at the feeling. Loki's hand was firm and warm, rubbing him in all the right places to encourage his arousal. He also seemed to be learning the feel and shape of him, but all Tony wanted was to get the other man's hand directly touching skin. He also wanted to get his hands on *Loki*.

Bringing his hands down, Tony quickly found the waistband of Loki's sleep pants and didn't hesitate to slip his hand right inside in order to cup Loki's hardening cock. Loki moaned and his head dropped slightly to rest near Tony's shoulder, making Tony grin at the achievement. He also turned his head, whispering near Loki's ear. "Want to use your awesome magic like last time?"

Loki's breath hitched slightly before oil was coating Tony's hand but something... else was also happening. A tingle that started at his hand before vibrating through his entire body, it made him gasp and try not to squirm. "What the-? What the hell was that, Loki?"

Loki had gone slightly tense and his voice was both breathless and uncertain even as he admitted, "My magic is... fond of you. Sexual magic is... common among mages. I didn't mean to-"

"What happens when you *mean to*?" Tony breathed. "Because fuck, I want to explore the *hell* out of that sometime."

There was a moment where Loki didn't seem to be breathing. "You do?"

"*Fuck* yes, I do," Tony assured him. "Loki, that felt amazing. It was like-" but Tony didn't get a chance to finish explaining, not when Loki was almost frantically reaching for Tony's pants and all but ripping them down past his thighs. "What? Loki - *oh fuck*," he moaned the last two words, jerking his hips into the warm, slick grip of Loki's hand.

When another burst of that same vibrating tingle went through him, this time starting from his *cock*, Tony moaned long and loud. He also hurried to push down Loki's pants to better grip his cock and start stroking it as well. It was *amazing* and he didn't hesitate to tell the other man, gasping the words beside Loki's ear, "Magic. *Awesome*."

Loki laughed; the sound coming out bright, thrilled and with a hint of disbelief, but the magic still sparked again, and they both groaned with it, their hips stuttering as they desperately sought more friction.

"Fuck," Tony hissed while speeding up his strokes and feeling Loki do the same. "You're getting it," he gasped and shuddered when the magic burst over him once more, "too?"

"*Yes*," Loki hissed beside Tony's ear, his hand and magic unfaltering in their constant use. It made Tony thrust up into the most *gorgeous* feeling. "Only works," they both moaned as another jolt went through them, "when on both."

"*Shit*," Tony cursed and arched further towards Loki as the back of his head ground into the pillow.

It was so intense, so *good*; their hands slick, their strokes smooth and their arms almost knocking as they raced themselves towards their orgasms. Their breathing was heavy, sweat damp on their bodies and in their hair.

When the magic shot through them again, it was stronger than before it and it seemed to *linger*, vibrating over their bodies and especially over their cocks - it was all they needed. Loki moaned hoarsely and Tony swore, their voices overlapping as their hips snapped forward around clenching, stroking hands as they came together in a rush of intense pleasure. Tony's vision whited out slightly and bliss spread throughout his every muscle and nerve. It was one of the most powerful orgasms he'd had in years and he was still shivering with aftershocks when Loki let his cock go.

They both had streaks of their release coating their stomachs, but with a lazy gesture of Loki's hand they disappeared, and the mage rearranged them to lay down on top of Tony with a contented sigh. Tony just took a minute to even out his breaths and drape a hand over Loki's back.

"So, um," Tony eventually remarked, "magic can make another appearance in the bedroom again, right?"

Loki gave another one of those soft, happy laughs as he wrapped his arms around Tony even tighter. "If you like it, Anthony, I would love to continue using it."

Tony's eyes narrowed slightly as he looked down at the top of Loki's head. "A lot of your lovers haven't liked magic, have they?"

"No," Loki answered simply, and despite that no doubt being something that had frustrated and upset Loki for centuries, there was no sign of it in his voice. He sounded as if he was still smiling. Loki sounded as if he was still riding the endorphin high of having *Tony* enjoy it.

The thought made Tony smile faintly as he brought his free hand up to play with some of the tangled strands of Loki's hair. "Well, obviously your former lovers are idiots. Your magic is as awesome as the rest of you, so tell your *seidr* it can absolutely sex me up; I'll have no complaints."

Loki laughed; loud and hard, shaking against Tony as he tried to smother the humour into Tony's shirt. Tony's grin just pulled a little wider as he watched the other man and enjoyed the spectacle.

*Yup*, Tony thought, relaxing even further into the bedding, *it's damn good to be home*.

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Loki eventually stopped laughing and they lazed in bed for a few minutes, checking in with FRIDAY to make sure the world was still turning and that no one outside of Bruce and Rhodey knew they were back on the planet.

When she confirmed it and assured them that nowhere was under imminent threat and that the Animal Whisperer location tracker still hadn't pinged, they decided to climb out of bed and make their way to the communal kitchen for breakfast.

It was a simple relaxed affair as they walked casually through the halls and took the elevator to the right floor and discussed what to make. When they made it to the kitchen they worked together seamlessly; pulling out utensils, frying bacon, cracking eggs, toasting bread, making Asgardian porridge and using pre-prepared pancake batter at Tony's instance.

Honestly, no celebratory '*yay we're finally home!*' breakfast was complete without pancakes.

Bruce joined them just as they were finishing up, making himself a cup of tea and pulling out the cutlery, salt, pepper and maple syrup for them. He sent Tony a soft smile, his eyes flicking between them pointedly, likely noticing and pleased by the renewed ease between them. Tony lightly bumped his shoulder against the other man before setting down the small mound of bacon beside the pile of toast while Loki put down the rest of the food.

The three of them silently picked their breakfast with Bruce traitorously choosing porridge over pancakes. Tony had pouted and complained at him while Bruce teased him back and Loki hid a smile. When they were finished it found Bruce on Tony's left and Loki on his right, both men where steadfastly sticking to their porridge but Loki had also placed two pancakes on his plate, coating them with strawberry jam.

It was the kind of warm, *family* breakfast that Tony had always secretly imagined and hoped he would share with the Avengers. Once, that would have been a point of regret, now he was just grateful that it couldn't haunt the beauty of the moment he had *now* with the *right* people.

There was only one person missing, and as if summoned by his thoughts, FRIDAY announced, "Boss, Colonel Rhodes has arrived to welcome you and Mr Laufeyson home."

Tony brightened. "Yeah? Is he in the elevator? How far away is he?"

"He's here," came an amused from behind them, "and he's glad you're both back in one piece."

Turning in his chair, Tony grinned widely at the other man. "Platypus!"

Rhodey just smiled. "Hey Tony." He nodded at the others. "Loki, Bruce."

"Rhodes," Loki greeted in return, while Bruce just gave a friendly wave.

"Come sit down," Tony encouraged, waving him over. "We have pancakes! These two traitors are eating Loki's alien porridge, but *you* won't let me down right?"

"Oh?" Rhodey asked, his eyes twinkling. "But alien porridge sounds pretty good though..."

Tony gaped at him and pointed an accusing finger. "It's turning into a mutiny!"

Rhodey grinned, grabbed a plate from the cupboard and, despite his words, piling on pancakes, bacon, eggs and toast and not going anywhere near the porridge or the bowl of assorted dried fruits that was usually added--and while Tony did have to admit that the porridge was quite nice, it still had *nothing* on pancakes.

Rhodey took a seat beside Loki when he was done, spreading some jam on his toast before taking a sip of his coffee with a contented sigh. It made Tony feel a new surge of warmth to be surrounded by his close and *trusted* friends in the safety of his tower.

And while Tony knew that they still had things to talk about and a universe to protect, right now, Tony just wanted to treasure the little things. Loki seemed to feel the same way as he casually suggested, “Perhaps now would be an ideal time to reveal your purchases, Anthony?”

Tony brightened. “Excellent idea, Loki! Can you magic them over here?”

Smiling faintly, Loki did as requested and the wooden box of tea and the purple satchel filled of mechanical animals landed in front of Tony’s plate. Tony grinned and rubbed his hands together gleefully. Bruce and Rhodey had moved a little closer, peering curiously at the noticeably foreign items.

The box itself was elegantly painted in a design style that made Tony think of India. Bruce was eyeing it curiously as Tony turned it towards him before opening it with a flourish. “Tadah!”

Bruce’s eyes went wide but were quick to fill with fascination as he put down his drink in order to lean in close and, when he wasn’t stopped, he started to pull open one of the bags. He frowned slightly and glanced up at Tony. “Is this tea?”

“Yup!” Tony answered.

“Why would you buy tea?” Bruce grinned and teased. “I would have anticipated coffee beans.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Well, obviously I didn’t buy it for me.”

He made a gesture with the box, trying to make the other man take it, but Bruce’s hands had gone slack and his expression had turned terribly unsure. “You bought them for me?”

“Ah, *yeah*, once I knew they wouldn’t poison you, it was the perfect gift for my Science Bro.”

Tony made another, more impatient gesture with the box until Bruce took it. The moment it was in his arms, he was pulling it closer to his chest, staring at it with unreadable eyes.

“Thanks, Tony,” he whispered, his voice thick with gratitude and making Tony want to squirm uncomfortably.

He settled for clapping Bruce on the arm and telling him, “I expect to be the first to know about any and all tea related scientific breakthroughs you have.” He frowned. “Or health ones. Tea promotes health, right?” He glanced at Loki. “Maybe we’ll find the cure to aging in an Asgardian brew.”

Loki huffed out a laugh. “I doubt you will find that.” He paused, a thoughtful look coming over his face. “Although, they may help with some Midgardian ailments.”

“Oh?” Bruce perked up, embarrassed pleasure at the gift yielding to scientific curiosity. Tony grabbed the satchel of animals and hopped off his chair, walking around Loki to reach Rhodey without interrupting the sudden conversation that had started between Loki and Bruce.

Rhodey was still eating his breakfast with a small smile. He glanced over at Tony, his grin never fading. “Oh great, now it’s my turn. Let me guess, a keyring from the bifrost souvenir shop?”

“That was one time!” Rhodey just gave him an unimpressed look. “Okay, that was most times I travelled,” Tony admitted, “but I’ve seen the jar you keep them all in! You haven’t thrown out even one!”

“Thanks for reminding me, I need to take out the trash,” Rhodey answered around another bite of toast, his eyes bright with amusement.

Tony rolled his eyes, but he was fighting down a smile. “Just for that, I’m not even sure I should give it to you.”

“Oh good,” Rhodey remarked, “one less piece of junk to throw out.”

Tony pouted. “You’re so cruel to me, Platypus.”

“Someone has to do something about that ego of yours,” Rhodey instantly rebutted, but he also shifted a bit more to better see Tony and the satchel in his hand. “Now, come on, what monstrosity have you got for me?”

Smirking, Tony opened the satchel and felt around for the metallic bear, when he found it; he presented it on his palm to Rhodey. The other man’s brow furrowed with intrigue as he picked it up and examined it. “This is handmade, isn’t it?”

“They melt the metal in the forge then handcraft and magically charm it.” Tony brought a finger to scratch the back of the bear’s neck. Rhodey startled when it moved from its seated position to stand up on its hind legs and give an intimidating roar. It then, simple as you please, sat back down again in its happy sprawl once more.

“I’m not sure whether that is impressive or terrifying,” Rhodey remarked, but the way he scratched the bear’s neck to do it again, made Tony think he was already growing to love it.

“Go with the absolutely best thing to stick on your desk and scare annoying new recruits with,” Tony suggested eagerly.

It made Rhodey laugh before he placed the bear beside his plate. “Thanks, Tones.”

Tony just clapped a hand on Rhodey’s back before he was turning back to the other two men in the room. Tony had seen Bruce briefly glance over when the bear had roared, but he was already back to speaking animatedly with Loki.

The sight was so unexpected that Tony couldn’t help just... watching them, smiling at the way Bruce was gesturing with his hands and Loki was politely listening, continuing to eat his



meal but answering Bruce with ease and openness.

Tony didn't realise what he must have looked like--smiling softly and staring at the other man--until Rhodey cleared his throat. Tony jerked slightly before looking back at his best friend. Rhodey had his eyebrows raised and was repressing amusement. He kept his voice low so the other two wouldn't hear them even as he asked, "So, I guess this means you're *actually* dating him now?"

Glancing between the mage and Rhodey, Tony hesitated for a moment, unsure how to even describe their relationship at this point.

"We're... not entirely faking it," he eventually settled on.

"Uh, huh," Rhodey drawled, but he was watching Tony sharply; no doubt reading a whole host of things Tony couldn't begin to hide after years of friendship. Yet, Rhodey surprised him by--instead of chastising or pestering him--he softly warned, "Just... try not to hurt him, Tony. He's been through enough."

Tony blinked. "You're giving *me* the shovel talk?"

Rhodey snorted. "Oh, I'll give him one too, but right now, I don't think you're the one in danger of a broken heart."

Flicking his eyes over to the other man, Tony had to admit that Rhodey was right about that one. They both might not be at that level of investment yet, but Loki did like him, physically and emotionally, where Tony was still working out the depth of his own feelings.

"Yeah, I know," he murmured to Rhodey. "I'm keeping that in mind."

"Good."

And just like that, the subject was dropped as Rhodey took a sip of his coffee and Tony made his way back to his food that was getting cold. He placed the satchel filled with the other mechanical animals beside his plate and started eating his pancakes. The syrupy sweet texture felt almost cloying on his tongue as he thought not just about Loki, but about the world at large and how they were taking to the mage.

His downturn of mood must have been noticeable as not only did Bruce and Loki stop talking, but Loki placed a soft hand on his shoulder. "Anthony?"

Looking up at his concerned green eyes, Tony knew it wasn't something that they could avoid. He kept his tone light-hearted even as he braced for the worst, "If the world's going to find out we're back in a few hours, we should be ready for it." He glanced between Rhodey and Bruce. "How much trouble has our absence put us in?"

Bruce and Rhodey exchanged a glance before Bruce answered, "Not... a lot?"

"You're going to need to be seen more in public," Rhodey summarised, "both as a couple and as heroes for Earth. You'll need more positive publicity and probably a few more press

conferences. Loki's still a source of uncertainty and the two of you disappearing off world hasn't helped."

Tony nodded. "After the Animal Whisperer's been dealt with we'll set up some more appearances, go to some charity galas."

"And I hate to say it, Tony," Rhodey told him, his voice gentle. "But you're also going to need to work something out with Pepper."

Tony stiffened and his hand clenched around his fork. He didn't deny it though, he couldn't. Pepper had not only betrayed him personally but his decisions as director, inventor and majority shareholder for Stark Industries. Whether she knew the extent of what she had done or whether SHIELD had lied and manipulated her, it needed to be addressed and if that meant a new CEO of Stark Industries was needed, well, so be it.

Letting out a heavy breath, Tony nodded stiffly. "I'll go and see her."

When he felt Loki's hand lightly squeeze his shoulder in comfort and support, Tony flicked the mage a grateful smile.

Rhodey's voice was almost sardonic as he said, "Then all that leaves is SHIELD, The Avengers and the alliance you just brokered on behalf of Earth."

"Oh, so not much at all then," Tony quipped, but his heart wasn't in it. Running a hand over his face, Tony made himself sit straight. "Alright, Loki, can you make two copies of the Earth contract? One can go to Rhodey and he can give it to SHIELD or the Air Force or put it under his pillow," He briefly smiled at Rhodey's dry *'just what I wanted to hug at night'*, "the other we'll give to the UN." Turning his attention to the mage, Tony questioned, "How long until your spell runs out and people realise we're back?"

Loki grimaced. "If we do not wish to incite Thor and Asgard into believing we are hiding some treacherous plot, I would suggest removing it within the hour."

Tony tried not to sigh; after all, didn't people say you should always rip the bandaid off rather than slowly peel it?

"Okay, looks like we're getting the Cliff Notes version; so, who wants to start?"

Because if SHIELD were going appear on the horizon in less than an hour; Tony wanted to make damn sure he and Loki were ready for them.

## Chapter End Notes

I couldn't resist some more sexytimes~ and I hope you all enjoyed it! And *magic* sexytimes, even better right? Hopefully the boys will get more chances to indulge in

bedroom antics and happy family/friend times it in the future, but we'll have to wait and see what SHIELD, the Avengers and Animal Whisperer have in store for them... ;)

**Edit:** I meant to save this and not post it, but no, I ACCIDENTALLY POST THE CLEAN VERSION without proper coding, making me scramble to code it, jfc. Wonderful -\_- It's almost midnight here. I was going to do it in the morning and give the smut scene another read over since I wasn't certain about aspects of it. But, apparently not. Hopefully it reads okay, for now, I'm heading to bed, heh.

# Chapter 41 - Clean Version

## Chapter Notes

So, that was a *fun* experience. I was moving over/editing in my beta's notes and fixing up some things myself when my documents crashed, taking all my work with it. I was *so* pissed off. But, luckily, I had c/p-d most of the notes into a separate program for formatting reason and was able to restore that to get most of them. But still. *super irritated*. And if I've missed other errors? Idec anymore, lol.

**PLEASE NOTE:** There is some talk about sexual things happening in the beginning of this chapter because I believe it is relevant and important to the development of their relationship to include it, but still, please be advised of that :)

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

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## ARC 2

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When Tony woke up the following morning, it took him a few moments to register that he was home. His eyes then drifted down to Loki who was wrapped around him; their legs were tangled, the mage's head was resting on his chest, and Loki's arms were around Tony's waist.

Loki was so close and relaxed that Tony couldn't help smiling softly. He only glanced away when FRIDAY silently started projecting the usual morning statistics and information. When Tony saw it was barely seven in the morning, he made a dismissive gesture with his fingers and she closed everything off.

Tony just looked back down at Loki, holding him close and lightly stroking his hand over Loki's back through his shirt. A small furrow creased Loki's brow, but he otherwise didn't stir beyond tightening his grip even further on Tony and somehow snuggling closer. It made Tony huff out a quiet chuckle before gently hovering his hand over Loki's lower back. He hesitated for only a moment before gently slipping his hand under the shirt to rest against warm skin.

Loki made a small sound but pressed back into the touch, and Tony smiled while lightly stroking his fingers over Loki's skin. He felt the mage shiver slightly and shift against him. It made Tony debate stopping so that Loki could wake up in his own time, but Tony figured Loki would be disappointed if he missed out on what Tony had in mind, so Tony continued the soft, slow strokes of his fingers.

It took Loki a handful of minutes before he stirred enough to blinkingly open his eyes and shift his head to look up at Tony with a mix of confusion and surprise as he registered the gentle touches that Tony was still administering.

“Anthony?” he questioned, his voice sleep-roughened.

Tony smiled and stroked his hand further up Loki’s back, following the curve of his spine. He was able to watch the way Loki’s attention abruptly sharpened as he woke more fully.

“Morning, Loki.”

Loki swallowed. They were so close together that Tony could already feel Loki’s interest becoming known the more that Tony’s fingertips traced and explored warm, pale skin.

“Anthony...” he murmured again, his voice low and his eyes darkening with desire.

“I think we deserve a lazy morning in bed,” Tony remarked, “don’t you?”

Tony wouldn’t have been surprised to gain a protest after yesterday’s events and attempt at distance, but while Loki did hesitate--licking his lips and shifting his position until he was able to look down at Tony--he didn’t object. Instead he questioned with a new roughness to his voice, “What did you have in mind?”

Grinning, Tony brought his other hand to Loki’s cheek, pulling him down until their lips could brush together softly. “I think you had a list we needed to go through. Anything you want to pick?”

Loki looked abruptly torn, a thousand scenarios likely running through his mind as he stared down at Tony, but the engineer just relaxed back into the bedding and smiled up at his friend, waiting for Loki’s choice.

Tony already knew that whatever it was, he’d enjoy it.

Loki moved to straddle his thighs, the sheets falling down around them, leaving them in nothing but their sleepwear. Tony brought his hands to lightly cup Loki’s hips, stroking his thumbs gently over the soft cotton of the mage’s pants.

The trickster licked his lips, looking down at Tony in a way that made the engineer want to roll his hips against the other man’s forming arousal. But he didn’t; he wanted to hear Loki’s decision. Loki’s eyes watched him hungrily as he decided what he wanted. It was almost identical to how he’d looked the last time they’d been in this position back on Asgard before Loki had blown him and Tony stroked Loki’s hips again, encouragingly.

When Loki finally made his request, it honestly surprised Tony, “Our hands on each other.”

Tony hadn’t known what to expect, but with an all access pass to Tony Stark, he’d kind of imagined that Loki would go for gold; reaching for third base without any hesitation - but he hadn’t, and Tony honestly had to wonder... “You know you can have more, right?”

Loki’s hands froze, hovering over Tony’s chest. His green eyes flicked up to Tony’s, looking uncertain and faintly uncomfortable; caught out. Tony brought up a hand to cup Loki’s cheek and smiled softly. “Neither of us are blushing virgins, Loki, and I’ve told you I’m not backing out. You want handjobs? You got it. You want to fuck me,” and oh, Tony liked the way Loki

let out a soft groan at the suggestion. He couldn't resist pulling the mage down and brushing their mouths together before he whispered, "Then you got it, Lokes."

Loki's eyes had closed as they kissed and he kept them shut, remaining close. Tony just kept quiet, knowing that there was a host of arguments, doubts, emotions and lingering insecurities going on inside the trickster's head.

When he eventually gave a small, soft negative shake of his head, Tony felt something ache inside him and he pressed his lips against Loki's jaw, wishing he could do more to assure him. Loki, however, seemed to realise.

"I know you don't hold my past actions against me," he murmured, shifting so his lips could graze Tony's cheek. "I know you are still here, by my side and in my bed, despite there being ample reason for you to leave. I also know you're attracted to me," he let out a huff of almost incredulous laughter, "though that is something I still find difficult to believe. "

When Loki trailed off, Tony brought his hands up to Loki's back and ran them gently and soothingly over him. "Then what's holding you back?"

Tony could see Loki swallow, his eyes still carefully averted. "I am more than just attracted to you, as you know, and you are still discovering your feelings for me."

He paused, seemed to be struggling with what he wanted to say, but Tony had a fair idea, sadly looking at the other man as he acknowledged, "It's easier to hold back. It's easier to test the waters than to find out what you really want isn't something you can get."

God, it was like looking in a mirror some days.

Loki just shifted, his green eyes finally meeting Tony's and they were filled with a dozen emotions all shifting too fast for Tony to grasp beyond *aching, longing, resigned* and *wistful*.

"This is not something I want to lose, Anthony," Loki told him softly. "I wish to have you underneath me and moaning my name, believe me," he laughed wryly, "I want that." His smile was still slightly sardonic even as his hand came to Tony's chest, lightly stroking him through the material of his shirt. "But I also enjoy this, especially when I know that you are still learning to see me as someone you wish to take to your bed." Tony started to protest that he was already *completely on board with this* and no learning was required - but Loki silenced him by bringing his long fingers to press over Tony's lips. "I am also learning to accept that I can have you; that you would lean into my touch rather than withdraw from it. So yes, perhaps I ask for the simpler suggestions and pleasures, but that will change, given time, given the chance for us *both* to decide for something more."

Resisting the urge to let out a soft sigh that would have come out sad yet fond, Tony instead took the other man's hand in his own, pulling it from his mouth even while he linked their fingers. "Well, I can't complain about the idea of exploring each other and taking our time."

"Good," Loki murmured and while he kept their eyes linked, he also unwound his hand from Tony's in order to start trailing it gently and *purposefully* down Tony's chest, making the engineer's breath hitch. "Because I have every intention of *exploring* you thoroughly."

Swallowing, Tony couldn't help arching slightly into the other man's touch. "I like this plan."

Loki just grinned wickedly before letting his hand slide lower - and *damn* was it a good exploration.

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In the aftermath of their pleasure, they found themselves lazing in bed for a few minutes, checking in with FRIDAY to make sure the world was still turning and that no one outside of Bruce and Rhodey knew they were back on the planet.

When she confirmed it and assured them that nowhere was under imminent threat and that the Animal Whisperer location tracker still hadn't pinged, they decided to climb out of bed and make their way to the communal kitchen for breakfast.

It was a simple relaxed affair as they walked casually through the halls and took the elevator to the right floor and discussed what to make. When they made it to the kitchen they worked together seamlessly; pulling out utensils, frying bacon, cracking eggs, toasting bread, making Asgardian porridge and using pre-prepared pancake batter at Tony's instance.

Honestly, no celebratory '*yay we're finally home!*' breakfast was complete without pancakes.

Bruce joined them just as they were finishing up, making himself a cup of tea and pulling out the cutlery, salt, pepper and maple syrup for them. He sent Tony a soft smile, his eyes flicking between them pointedly, likely noticing and pleased by the renewed ease between them. Tony lightly bumped his shoulder against the other man before setting down the small mound of bacon beside the pile of toast while Loki put down the rest of the food.

The three of them silently picked their breakfast with Bruce traitorously choosing porridge over pancakes. Tony had pouted and complained at him while Bruce teased him back and Loki hid a smile. When they were finished it found Bruce on Tony's left and Loki on his right, both men where steadfastly sticking to their porridge but Loki had also placed two pancakes on his plate, coating them with strawberry jam.

It was the kind of warm, *family* breakfast that Tony had always secretly imagined and hoped he would share with the Avengers. Once, that would have been a point of regret, now he was just grateful that it couldn't haunt the beauty of the moment he had *now* with the *right* people.

There was only one person missing, and as if summoned by his thoughts, FRIDAY announced, "Boss, Colonel Rhodes has arrived to welcome you and Mr Laufeyson home."

Tony brightened. "Yeah? Is he in the elevator? How far away is he?"

"He's here," came an amused from behind them, "and he's glad you're both back in one piece."

Turning in his chair, Tony grinned widely at the other man. "Platypus!"

Rhodey just smiled. "Hey Tony." He nodded at the others. "Loki, Bruce."

"Rhodes," Loki greeted in return, while Bruce just gave a friendly wave.

“Come sit down,” Tony encouraged, waving him over. “We have pancakes! These two traitors are eating Loki’s alien porridge, but *you* won’t let me down right?”

“Oh?” Rhodey asked, his eyes twinkling. “But alien porridge sounds pretty good though...”

Tony gaped at him and pointed an accusing finger. “It’s turning into a mutiny!”

Rhodey grinned, grabbed a plate from the cupboard and, despite his words, piling on pancakes, bacon, eggs and toast and not going anywhere near the porridge or the bowl of assorted dried fruits that was usually added--and while Tony did have to admit that the porridge was quite nice, it still had *nothing* on pancakes.

Rhodey took a seat beside Loki when he was done, spreading some jam on his toast before taking a sip of his coffee with a contented sigh. It made Tony feel a new surge of warmth to be surrounded by his close and *trusted* friends in the safety of his tower.

And while Tony knew that they still had things to talk about and a universe to protect, right now, Tony just wanted to treasure the little things. Loki seemed to feel the same way as he casually suggested, “Perhaps now would be an ideal time to reveal your purchases, Anthony?”

Tony brightened. “Excellent idea, Loki! Can you magic them over here?”

Smiling faintly, Loki did as requested and the wooden box of tea and the purple satchel filled of mechanical animals landed in front of Tony’s plate. Tony grinned and rubbed his hands together gleefully. Bruce and Rhodey had moved a little closer, peering curiously at the noticeably foreign items.

The box itself was elegantly painted in a design style that made Tony think of India. Bruce was eyeing it curiously as Tony turned it towards him before opening it with a flourish. “Tadah!”

Bruce’s eyes went wide but were quick to fill with fascination as he put down his drink in order to lean in close and, when he wasn’t stopped, he started to pull open one of the bags. He frowned slightly and glanced up at Tony. “Is this tea?”

“Yup!” Tony answered.

“Why would you buy tea?” Bruce grinned and teased. “I would have anticipated coffee beans.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Well, obviously I didn’t buy it for me.”

He made a gesture with the box, trying to make the other man take it, but Bruce’s hands had gone slack and his expression had turned terribly unsure. “You bought them for me?”

“Ah, *yeah*, once I knew they wouldn’t poison you, it was the perfect gift for my Science Bro.”



Tony made another, more impatient gesture with the box until Bruce took it. The moment it was in his arms, he was pulling it closer to his chest, staring at it with unreadable eyes.

“Thanks, Tony,” he whispered, his voice thick with gratitude and making Tony want to squirm uncomfortably.

He settled for clapping Bruce on the arm and telling him, “I expect to be the first to know about any and all tea related scientific breakthroughs you have.” He frowned. “Or health ones. Tea promotes health, right?” He glanced at Loki. “Maybe we’ll find the cure to aging in an Asgardian brew.”

Loki huffed out a laugh. “I doubt you will find that.” He paused, a thoughtful look coming over his face. “Although, they may help with some Midgardian ailments.”

“Oh?” Bruce perked up, embarrassed pleasure at the gift yielding to scientific curiosity. Tony grabbed the satchel of animals and hopped off his chair, walking around Loki to reach Rhodey without interrupting the sudden conversation that had started between Loki and Bruce.

Rhodey was still eating his breakfast with a small smile. He glanced over at Tony, his grin never fading. “Oh great, now it’s my turn. Let me guess, a keyring from the bifrost souvenir shop?”

“That was one time!” Rhodey just gave him an unimpressed look. “Okay, that was most times I travelled,” Tony admitted, “but I’ve seen the jar you keep them all in! You haven’t thrown out even one!”

“Thanks for reminding me, I need to take out the trash,” Rhodey answered around another bite of toast, his eyes bright with amusement.

Tony rolled his eyes, but he was fighting down a smile. “Just for that, I’m not even sure I should give it to you.”

“Oh good,” Rhodey remarked, “one less piece of junk to throw out.”

Tony pouted. “You’re so cruel to me, Platypus.”

“Someone has to do something about that ego of yours,” Rhodey instantly rebutted, but he also shifted a bit more to better see Tony and the satchel in his hand. “Now, come on, what monstrosity have you got for me?”

Smirking, Tony opened the satchel and felt around for the metallic bear, when he found it; he presented it on his palm to Rhodey. The other man’s brow furrowed with intrigue as he picked it up and examined it. “This is handmade, isn’t it?”

“They melt the metal in the forge then handcraft and magically charm it.” Tony brought a finger to scratch the back of the bear’s neck. Rhodey startled when it moved from its seated position to stand up on its hind legs and give an intimidating roar. It then, simple as you please, sat back down again in its happy sprawl once more.

“I’m not sure whether that is impressive or terrifying,” Rhodey remarked, but the way he scratched the bear’s neck to do it again, made Tony think he was already growing to love it.

“Go with the absolutely best thing to stick on your desk and scare annoying new recruits with,” Tony suggested eagerly.

It made Rhodey laugh before he placed the bear beside his plate. “Thanks, Tones.”

Tony just clapped a hand on Rhodey’s back before he was turning back to the other two men in the room. Tony had seen Bruce briefly glance over when the bear had roared, but he was already back to speaking animatedly with Loki.

The sight was so unexpected that Tony couldn’t help just... watching them, smiling at the way Bruce was gesturing with his hands and Loki was politely listening, continuing to eat his meal but answering Bruce with ease and openness.

Tony didn’t realise what he must have looked like--smiling softly and staring at the other man--until Rhodey cleared his throat. Tony jerked slightly before looking back at his best friend. Rhodey had his eyebrows raised and was repressing amusement. He kept his voice low so the other two wouldn’t hear them even as he asked, “So, I guess this means you’re *actually* dating him now?”

Glancing between the mage and Rhodey, Tony hesitated for a moment, unsure how to even describe their relationship at this point.

“We’re... not entirely faking it,” he eventually settled on.

“Uh, huh,” Rhodey drawled, but he was watching Tony sharply; no doubt reading a whole host of things Tony couldn’t begin to hide after years of friendship. Yet, Rhodey surprised him by--instead of chastising or pestering him--he softly warned, “Just... try not to hurt him, Tony. He’s been through enough.”

Tony blinked. “You’re giving *me* the shovel talk?”

Rhodey snorted. “Oh, I’ll give him one too, but right now, I don’t think you’re the one in danger of a broken heart.”

Flicking his eyes over to the other man, Tony had to admit that Rhodey was right about that one. They both might not be at that level of investment yet, but Loki did like him, physically and emotionally, where Tony was still working out the depth of his own feelings.

“Yeah, I know,” he murmured to Rhodey. “I’m keeping that in mind.”

“Good.”

And just like that, the subject was dropped as Rhodey took a sip of his coffee and Tony made his way back to his food that was getting cold. He placed the satchel filled with the other mechanical animals beside his plate and started eating his pancakes. The syrupy sweet texture felt almost cloying on his tongue as he thought not just about Loki, but about the world at large and how they were taking to the mage.

His downturn of mood must have been noticeable as not only did Bruce and Loki stop talking, but Loki placed a soft hand on his shoulder. “Anthony?”

Looking up at his concerned green eyes, Tony knew it wasn't something that they could avoid. He kept his tone light-hearted even as he braced for the worst, “If the world's going to find out we're back in a few hours, we should be ready for it.” He glanced between Rhodey and Bruce. “How much trouble has our absence put us in?”

Bruce and Rhodey exchanged a glance before Bruce answered, “Not... a lot?”

“You're going to need to be seen more in public,” Rhodey summarised, “both as a couple and as heroes for Earth. You'll need more positive publicity and probably a few more press conferences. Loki's still a source of uncertainty and the two of you disappearing off world hasn't helped.”

Tony nodded. “After the Animal Whisperer's been dealt with we'll set up some more appearances, go to some charity galas.”

“And I hate to say it, Tony,” Rhodey told him, his voice gentle. “But you're also going to need to work something out with Pepper.”

Tony stiffened and his hand clenched around his fork. He didn't deny it though, he couldn't. Pepper had not only betrayed him personally but his decisions as director, inventor and majority shareholder for Stark Industries. Whether she knew the extent of what she had done or whether SHIELD had lied and manipulated her, it needed to be addressed and if that meant a new CEO of Stark Industries was needed, well, so be it.

Letting out a heavy breath, Tony nodded stiffly. “I'll go and see her.”

When he felt Loki's hand lightly squeeze his shoulder in comfort and support, Tony flicked the mage a grateful smile.

Rhodey's voice was almost sardonic as he said, “Then all that leaves is SHIELD, The Avengers and the alliance you just brokered on behalf of Earth.”

“Oh, so not much at all then,” Tony quipped, but his heart wasn't in it. Running a hand over his face, Tony made himself sit straight. “Alright, Loki, can you make two copies of the Earth contract? One can go to Rhodey and he can give it to SHIELD or the Air Force or put it under his pillow,” He briefly smiled at Rhodey's dry *‘just what I wanted to hug at night’*, “the other we'll give to the UN.” Turning his attention to the mage, Tony questioned, “How long until your spell runs out and people realise we're back?”

Loki grimaced. “If we do not wish to incite Thor and Asgard into believing we are hiding some treacherous plot, I would suggest removing it within the hour.”

Tony tried not to sigh; after all, didn't people say you should always rip the bandaid off rather than slowly peel it?

“Okay, looks like we're getting the Cliff Notes version; so, who wants to start?”

Because if SHIELD were going appear on the horizon in less than an hour; Tony wanted to make damn sure he and Loki were ready for them.

## Chapter End Notes

Sooo, one quick notes that wasn't able to be squished into the story but that might play a role later in the prose: Loki's former lovers never liked magic in bed but mages do. When it accidentally happens, Tony likes it and wants more of it and Loki is very grateful and happy about this :)

But yes, hopefully the boys will get more chances to indulge in bedroom antics and happy family/friend times it in the future, but we'll have to wait and see what SHIELD, the Avengers and Animal Whisperer have in store for them... ;)

**Edit:** I meant to save this and not post it, but no, I ACCIDENTALLY POST IT without proper coding, making me scramble to code it, jfc. Wonderful -\_- It's almost midnight here. I was going to do it in the morning and give it another read over. Apparently not ^^;

# Chapter 43

## Chapter Notes

\*appears in a sheepish puff of smoke\*

So it's, heh. Been a while?

\*dusts off the cobwebs in order to gently drop the chapter\*

Right, well. Um. Hopefully you're all still here, interested in reading and like the update... I can't promise when a next update will be, but I mean, I was suddenly inspired for this? Maybe I'll have time and inspiration for some more chapters sooner than later! We'll see :)

But until then...

\*hurriedly disappears before any angry hordes can get her\*

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

The Cliff Notes version turned out to be... not as bad as Tony expected.

Loki and Tony described the alliances made, showed them the contracts and gave an overview of everything that had happened, and in return, FRIDAY, Bruce and Rhodey summarised the world's reaction to Loki, their partnership and what had happened in their absence.

They actually managed to cover the salient points within forty-five minutes. It gave them time to finish breakfast and separate so Loki and Tony could shower and pull on something more impressive than *pyjamas*.

Tony had been tempted to pull on one of his best suits, but he decided for relaxed and casual. He was lounging in his tower with his *friends*.

When he came out of his bedroom, he found Loki already sitting on the couch. He was wearing tailored dark pants and green v-neck shirt. He looked *good* in Earth casual wear, and Tony didn't hesitate to appreciate it.

Loki was reading a book, but he'd glanced behind his shoulder when Tony entered the room. He smiled at the other man and Tony walked over to him. "Aren't you a sight for sore eyes?"

"You saw me less than ten minutes ago," Loki remarked, sounding amused.

Tony just dropped down beside him, leaning against the other man and instantly gaining an arm around his shoulders. “Still been too long.”

Loki chuckled softly and pulled him even closer until Tony was all but leaning against him. It was nice; it made him feel warm and protected. He felt like he could curl up here all day.

It was too bad that wasn't an option.

“Boss, SHIELD, are approaching the tower; ETA, ten minutes.”

Tony grimaced. “Thanks, FRIDAY. Tell Rhodey and Bruce, let ‘em know to either come up or hide on the lower floors, whichever they’d prefer.”

“Yes, Boss.”

“You believe Banner still wishes to remain hidden?” Loki questioned.

“Yeah, and I don't blame him for it.” Tony only just resisted the urge to rub his face. “Things were a bit of a mess even before everything that happened.”

Tony didn't even want to open the door on discussing the thing with *Natasha*. He hadn't even had a chance to bridge that subject with Bruce. It didn't feel right discussing that with Loki yet.

Later, maybe, but not now; there were bigger fish to fry.

“Perhaps it is wise he remains hidden then,” Loki said. “The less they will accuse and question you about, the better.”

Tony nodded absently. He also tilted his head a bit more, resting it more fully on Loki's shoulder. Loki just started stroking his arm in soft, soothing affection. It almost made Tony laugh at how quickly the coin had flipped now that they were back on Earth.

But, he appreciated the support. He appreciated *having* someone who would let Tony lean on them while making sure to keep him standing.

The sound of the elevator forced Tony to lift his head. It was Rhodey and he quirked a grin at their position. It wasn't as amused as Tony expected, instead he looked fond, *happy* even as he remarked, “All we need now is the pod and you're set. Two peas all snuggled together.”

Tony heard Loki huff a laugh and he was already wincing. *Don't say it, don't say it.*

“Well, he is a precious little vegetable.”

*Annnnd, he said it.*

Rhodey's grin stretched wide and delighted. Tony pointed a finger at him. “Not allowed. You can't use it. Loki only.”

“Awh,” Rhodey only looked more entertained as he took a seat on the armchair to Loki’s right. “He’s got a petname for you already? That’s sweet, Tones.”

“I believe it only fair, since he has numerous ones for me,” Loki remarked.

Tony looked up at the mage who was smirking down at him. “But, I give you *flattering* ones.”

Tony knew he was whining; he didn’t care. Rhodey was sniggering and Loki’s eyes were alight with amusement.

“You compare me to reindeers and infants,” Loki corrected, raising his eyebrows.

Tony wanted to protest, but didn’t have a leg to stand on, so he grumbled under his breath and mulishly fell silent. Loki just brushed a kiss to the top of his head.

“There, there, dear,” Loki reassured him, “you are the only one I have ever allowed such liberties. It is only fair I take my revenge.”

Tony sighed loudly. “*Fine.*”

He tried not to let his pleasure at being the *only one* show. He wasn’t sure he succeeded, but he didn’t have to worry about any teasing, not when FRIDAY announced, “Jet approaching, Boss.”

The good humour evaporated from the room. Tony tensed and pushed himself out of Loki’s hold, Rhodey’s expression had turned serious and Loki had vanished his book.

It was still a few minutes until the jet arrived, but the three of them watched the approach in silence. A spiteful part of Tony wanted to refuse to allow them clearance to land on his tower. The rest of him knew it would only come back to bite him in the ass.

Iron Man was willing to fight alongside the Avengers and refusing them entry to his tower wasn’t the kind of bad publicity he and Loki needed right now.

Tony’s skin still felt like it was crawling as he watched Rogers, Romanov, Thor and Fury make their way towards the doors.

“We’ve got your back, Tony,” Rhodey said, drawing Tony’s attention away from the approaching group. His voice was steady, his loyalty unwavering and Tony flashed him a brief smile.

Loki also reached out and lightly rested his hand on Tony’s knee, an affectionate and supportive touch. It helped to ground him a little bit more. He wasn’t in this alone; he had his best friends by his side.

When the doors opened and the group stormed inside, his and Loki’s position on the couch allowed them to face his former team head on. Fury was living up to his name and looking *furious*. Romanov was blank as ever and Rogers’ frown was deep and disappointed. Years

ago, that might have affected him, but now it only made Tony raise his eyebrows. Thor looked like someone had stolen his hammer and he planned to have a violent tantrum over it.

“Well, isn’t this a nice welcome home party,” Tony quipped dryly.

“You have been on Asgard,” Thor snarled. “You forbade me entrance. What wicked schemes have you-”

Loki snorted and Tony gave a loud bark of laughter. It stopped Thor in his tracks.

“Surely you were not *oblivious* to the Einherjar requesting our presence,” Loki drawled. “And let us not forget, that the only person capable of *forbidding* Heimdall to open the bifrost is the Allfather.” Loki smirked with genuine amusement. “It seemed he did not want you present for our negotiations.”

“And what *negotiations* were those?” Fury demanded.

Tony gave an absent shrug. “Oh, you know, brokering alliances with the Nine Realms against Thanos, that sort of thing.”

“What-?”

“Stark!”

“You lie!”

Three voices all spoke over each other with anger and confusion. Romanov was the only one to stay silent. She was too busy watching them with narrowed, suspicious eyes.

“Someone had to be the voice for Earth,” Tony answered with a bland shrug. “And apparently, me being a warrior prince and all, I garnered the most respect.” Tony smiled sharply at Thor. “Thanks for all the good press up there, buddy. You helped lend a lot of weight to my, hmm, *royal status*.”

“The Allfather would not-”

“Are you out of your fucking mind, Stark-”

“You should have consulted with everyone-”

“Oh, cut the bullshit,” Tony snapped, less concerned with Thor and more the disgusting irony dripping from Fury and Rogers words after what they did to him. “You don’t have a leg to stand on with ‘*consulting others*’ on decisions. You’ve got your own fucking medicine back. Decisions were made without you because, what was the phrase?” He gave his press smile. “‘*Time was of the essence*’.”

Rogers had the decency to cringe. Fury was unmoved and Romanov was still impassively analysing them; the silent spider waiting to strike.

Thor just seemed suspicious. “You speak lies! I demand to see this contract!”



Tony's expression didn't hold an ounce of good-humour. "Rhodey's got Earth's copy and if you ask him *real* nicely, he might give you a peek after he gives it to the United Nations. Since we wouldn't want anyone being *overlooked* or anything."

Was Tony having fun twisting the knife a little and locking SHIELD out of things? Maybe a little. Or a lot. Yeah, let's go with *a lot*.

"And as it is important to unite your *realm*," Loki interjected. "I have placed a spell on the contract to make sure that, for the present, only Rhodes is able to reveal the contract to your world."

Tony could have kissed Loki in that moment.

Mind you, Rhodey was probably cursing them pretty vehemently for putting him in the middle.

"This isn't a pissing contest, Stark," Fury growled.

"No, it isn't," Tony snapped. "But your little organisation isn't exactly the forefront in international security, is it? You're a shady as fuck government group that nobody trusts after HYDRA burst out of you. Why the *hell* would I put the contract in your hands?" Tony shook his head and scoffed. "You betrayed me, who knows what and who else you'd betray. Fuck that. This is a decision for the *world* not for *you*."

"We're the ones defending this damn world, Stark!"

"*Wrong*," Tony growled. "A handful of super-powered humans defend the world. SHIELD just brings the cleanup crew." Tony leaned forward. "And when Thanos knocks on our fucking door, we need more than that. We need troops, the *world's* troops, not just your loyal little spy band."

Fury looked ready to blow a gasket but Rhodey spoke up for the first time.

"The contract isn't something you won't see. It's something *everyone* will see." Rhodey's voice was firm and unwavering; the impassive Colonel speaking to a room. "This is more than the United States. It's more than anything the world has faced. This deserves to go to every organisation that can stand up and help. It's not about you - it's about everyone."

"He's right." Rogers said, and Tony was *so* glad he got Fury's surprised head-whip on camera as he stared at the Captain. Rogers was watching Rhodey and his frown had turned more pensive. "It can't hurt to get everyone's opinion."

"It's a disaster waiting to happen," Romanov announced blandly. "They'll despise Stark for his diplomatic attempt. They'll argue over what is meant to happen. They'll never agree on anything. Stark's contract will be filled with loopholes and disadvantages. His plan will lose us time and allies."

Loki leant forward and his smile was *vicious*. "Oh, little spider, I would take better care before insulting the Ambassador to Midgard and his contract. He has won the favour of

*numerous* political powers across the realms. Some of whom, would hear your words and take it as an insult to both his honour and theirs, and that is worthy of *death*.”

Romanov stiffened imperceptibly. “Was that a threat?”

“It was a glimpse at the inter-realm politics you so *naively* attempt to navigate,” Loki looked no less ready to verbally and physically eviscerate her on Tony’s behalf. “You should be praising the Norns for having *Anthony Stark* as your diplomat.”

Tony wanted to preen; he really, really wanted to preen. He also wanted to kiss Loki. He didn’t really need anyone to stand up for him; but would he ever get tired of Loki verbally flaying people in his defence? Nope. Never.

In fact, he reached out and linked his fingers through Loki’s and leant further against him. He didn’t say a word, but he hoped Loki felt his happiness and gratitude. He would have to thank Loki properly later. He didn’t know what he’d do, but he’d come up with something.

“Tony isn’t an idiot,” Rhodey added, his voice flat. “He knows what he’s doing. He also knows that keeping the rest of the world in the dark is the stupid idea, Agent Romanov.”

“Yeah,” Tony added, making a mental note to give Rhodey a hug later. “So how about instead of barging into my tower, you wait for the report card like a good little spy?”

Fury looked like he was mentally counting to ten. He also looked like he was desperately trying to find a way to argue Tony’s decision. But there was nothing he could fight against; everything Tony had done and was planning to do was sensible and logical. He was just angry that he hadn’t been involved and couldn’t gain information before everyone else.

The spy was out of the loop, and he hated it.

Honestly, Tony had no idea what SHIELD intended to get out of storming the Tower. Did they think intimidation would work? Were they hoping Tony would run back to them with his tail between his legs? Did they think he gave a *single damn* about them anymore?

Idiots, the lot of them.

He let go of Loki’s hand, but only to clap his together. “Right, well, now that we have this absolute waste of time out of the way. Do you mind, like, leaving my tower? I had a very long week on Asgard and I’d rather be spending the day in my bedroom with my boyfriend.”

Thor’s mouth twisted, but not as much as Tony had expected. He also flicked his eyes to Rogers a little tentatively. Interesting.

Romanov looked irritated and Fury openly glared. “You think everyone’s going to accept and trust you have the world’s best interests at heart when you’re sleeping with *him*?”

“Actually, I think a lot of people are probably picturing the *fabulous* sight we make in bed,” Tony rebutted with a lascivious grin.

“Do you think this is a *game*, Stark?”

Tony rolled his eyes. "I think chess is a game. I also think you're a shit player." Tony shook his head and made a shooing gesture with his hand. "I only play with worthy opponents. Go away."

"God damn it, Stark!"

"You can't just *order* us-"

"If you don't get out now," Tony said, raising his voice to be heard over them. "Loki's going to *magic* you out."

He saw Loki raise his hand, green magic sparking from his fingers in obvious promise.

In response to that, what else could they do but retreat? And seeing their frustrated figures stalking out of his tower would never stop being *incredibly* satisfying.

Unfortunately, one of them remained.

Thor was standing firm and unwavering as he glared at Loki. He even raised Mjölfnir to point it at the mage. "You will speak of what you have done while on Asgard."

"I see no point in wasting my breath," Loki drawled. "You will not believe me. You will only seek Odin or Heimdall for answers regardless of my words." The mage let more magic swirl around his hand. "Therefore leave now, Thor, or I shall send you somewhere far less pleasant than SHIELD."

Once again, there was no option but retreat. He still scowled at them. "I will discover what you have done. I will not stand for your deception!"

Tony rolled his eyes. He was sure Loki did too. And Rhodey probably wanted to, but had more restraint.

With a frustrated snarl, Thor turned and stomped out of the tower like a petulant child. Tony waited until they were out of the room (and FRIDAY gave the all clear on listening devices) before turning to Loki and saying, "Have I mentioned how much I *love* your magic?"

Loki smirked. "Perhaps once or twice."

"Well, I really, really love it."

Loki's smirk pulled wider. Unfortunately, before either could say more, Rhodey was pushing out of his chair with a groan and drawing their attention.

"Well," he said wryly, "thanks for the shitstorm that's just landed on my door. I'll just go and miraculously pull an emergency United Nations meeting out of my *ass*."

Tony gave a dramatic gasp. "Rhodey! You never told me the UN met there!"

Rhodey shook his head, trying very hard not to smile.

“Yeah, yeah. You’re so funny. So glad you’re back and fucking up my life again with brand new flair.” He softened his words by coming over and squeezing Tony’s shoulder in support. He also gave Loki a smile and a nod. “You’re both going to be needed sooner rather than later. I’ll let you know when I work things out. But, if you need anything, I’m just a phone call away.”

“Thanks, honey-bear,” Tony told him, grabbing Rhodey’s wrist and squeezing it affectionately.

“You have my gratitude, Rhodes,” Loki added, giving him a respectful incline of his head.

Rhodey flashed them one more smile before pulling away and heading to the elevator. He was already pulling out his phone and getting to work on wrangling the world’s governments together. Tony smiled after him with pure affection.

“You are lucky to have him, Anthony,” Loki told him.

“Yeah,” Tony agreed. “Way too good for this world, and me, but that’s James Rhodes.”

Loki squeezed his hand and Tony turned away from the elevator to look back at Loki. He could see the quinjet in the distance, retreating. Thor was either onboard or had flown off to places unknown. Tony really didn’t care where they were along as it wasn’t *here*.

Sitting on the couch, Tony really wished he could curl back into Loki’s arms, maybe spread out like they’d done on Asgard whenever they could catch a break. But that was the problem - they were back on Earth, so break time was over.

Sighing, Tony brought up a hand to rub his face as he started devising a plan of attack. And to start with...

“You need to get the animals’ off-world.”

“Yes,” Loki agreed. “I shall make sure Dr Banner has no further need for them and then I shall get them ready for transport.”

“Okay,” Tony lowered his hand. “I’ll go check on Bruce, see how our tracker is going and, if we can’t find her, I’ll use the time to review the footage FRIDAY’s been collecting from SHIELD.”

“A wise plan. We should review their contract as well,” he smiled faintly; “I shall be interested to see how often their document has flared with the colours of betrayal.”

Tony’s smile was bitterly amused. “Sounds like fun. How about we do it tonight? I’ll flag any videos for you and we can sit up here reviewing it with dinner and some wine?”

“I would enjoy that, Anthony.”

And oddly enough, Loki sounded like he *meant* it.

Tony's smile lost some of its sharpness for fondness. His expression caused something hesitant and hopeful to flicker over Loki's face. Confused, Tony sent Loki a quizzical look, but when Loki started to lean in, he understood. Tony instantly relaxed and let his eyes drift shut. Loki brushed their mouths together lightly, but Tony pressed into it, letting the kiss deepen. It was affectionate. It was *couple* behaviour. Their relationship was still up in the air and Tony was still unsure about himself, but fuck it, Tony was going to take this. It felt nice after that bullshit with SHIELD. Tony wanted it, so he was going to have it.

When Loki pulled back, Tony's eyes slowly fluttered open. Loki was smiling gently, but he pulled away soon enough and tugged Tony to his feet. "Come. We have things we must attend to."

Sighing, Tony let himself be lead to the elevator and down to the lab. He barely noticed that they were still holding hands.

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Bruce didn't have any further need of the animals, and once that was confirmed and Loki had explained how he would be sending them and himself to another realm (but should be back before dinner) he departed and left the two of them alone.

Tony did his best not to worry about Loki, telling himself the mage could not only handle himself but had the bracelet he could use if he needed any assistance. He was still nervous as he watched the surveillance footage of the tower, seeing Loki and the animals in the room one moment and gone with a flash of green the next.

"He'll be fine," Bruce said.

Tony glanced over at the scientist in time to catch his shy but kind smile.

Tony let out a long, loud breath. "Yeah. Yeah, of course he will. Badass space mage and all that."

He forced himself to ignore the screen behind him and focus on Bruce. "So, Rhodey's off to get a meeting with the UN. Loki's out doing an animal relocation. I'm about to pick through SHIELD's dirty laundry. Wanna help?"

Tony followed his words with a bright, enticing grin, but Bruce looked away. His face was tight with discomfort. "That wouldn't be a good idea, Tony."

"Oh? Why not?"

Bruce shifted further away from Tony and ran a hand through his hair. "Because I shouldn't be here at all."

Tony tried to hide the jolt of fear that went through him. "What do you mean? You're my Science Bro. Where else would you be?"

Bruce shook his head. "Somewhere far away from here. I'm *hiding*, Tony. This place isn't exactly the middle of nowhere."

“But the middle of nowhere is boring! It also doesn’t have tech! Or me! And tea!” Tony gestured animatedly. “You haven’t even finished your tea! We have to know if we’ve got the cure for baldness!”

Bruce’s lips twitched, but he didn’t fully smile. “I said I’d stay until the animals were sorted, Tony.”

“And they’re not! She’s still on the loose. Come on, buddy, stay until we’ve found her.” Bruce was wavering, he could see it happening. Tony reached out and touched his arm. “Come on, Bruce? Just a little longer?”

Tony knew the moment he caved. Bruce sighed and his shoulders slumped. “Okay, Tony. Until you capture her.”

Tony brightened. “Awesome. Great. So you experiment on tea and I’ll watch the videos?”

Bruce hesitated, looking torn, before shaking his head. “I shouldn’t, Tony. I don’t want to... see anything.”

Tony quickly pinpointed what the problem was. They hadn’t talked about it, Bruce preferring to ignore it and Tony tactfully doing the same. This didn’t seem like the best long-term plan though.

“You can’t avoid her forever.”

Bruce cringed, but he didn’t deny it. “I’m not. I...” Bruce pulled away and wrapped his arms around himself. “It’s... complicated, Tony.”

Tony snorted. “You think I don’t know complicated? I have one word for you: *Loki*.” It made Bruce crack a small smile. Tony sobered. “You can talk to me. Or FRIDAY. She can make the talk private and she’s a great listener.”

“I would be happy to assist, Dr Banner,” FRIDAY chimed in.

“Thanks, ah, both of you.” He sighed. “But I don’t really want to talk. About it. Her. Everything.”

Tony nodded. “Okay.” He squeezed Bruce’s arm. “What about science? How about we talk about science? We can test teas together!”

“I thought you had surveillance videos to watch?”

“It can wait a bit longer. FRIDAY’s still compiling, aren’t you?”

“Yes, Boss.”

Bruce gave him a look that said he didn’t believe it, but he let the subject drop. “I guess I’ll go get the teas.”

“Awesome!” Tony let him go and gave him a double thumbs up. “Cure for the hangover, here we come!”

Bruce shook his head but he was smiling more genuinely as he left the lab. It left Tony alone and he slowly lowered his hands, his smile fading. He brought one hand down to rub the bracelet on his wrist.

He knew Loki could take care of himself, but Tony still hoped he would come back soon. Tony couldn't help feeling safer and happier when the mage was by his side.

## Chapter End Notes

And as always. HUUUUUUGE thanks to my beta who didn't even blink when I threw a chapter at her after months of radio silence. A true trooper and gem. ♥

# Chapter 44

## Chapter Notes

WELP. LOOK AT THIS AN UPDATE.

I hope it's worth the wait? ^^;;

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

Bruce and Tony spent two hours in the lab. They worked on breaking down the properties of tea, they spoke about the animals and the extra enhancements Tony was worried any new ones might have, and kept an eye on the tracker.

But, as much as Tony wanted to stay there all day and keep an eye on Bruce so he couldn't disappear when Tony's back was turned - duty called.

So he left Bruce to experiment and made his way up to the penthouse. Taking a seat on the couch with a strong coffee, Tony asked, "Show me the highlights of the surveillance footage, FRIDAY."

She didn't hesitate, and a steady stream of footage started to run from the time Loki and Tony signed the contract with SHIELD. FRIDAY had filtered it to make sure he only saw the salient bits, but it soured his good mood from the lab.

SHIELD just wanted to get the benefits of Stark Industries technology without Tony attached. They had decided Tony was corrupted by his cock and was a dangerous loose cannon. Loki was a bag of cats and a malicious manipulator. They wanted them both out of the picture and were already trying to find ways to shift them out but keep the inter-planetary alliances.

And they wondered why Tony refused to trust them again?

Honestly, the only highlight from the whole situation was the scene FRIDAY showed him last. Bucky Barnes had learned of Thor's homosexual prejudice, called him on it and when Thor had started spouting Asgardian bullshit, Rogers had viciously ripped him a new one and even punched him in the face.

Apparently Barnes and Rogers had been in a relationship before the war. Who knew?

After that, Tony moved on to Earth's response to Loki. Bruce and Rhodey had summarised it, but he wanted his own view of things.

There was a lot to sift through. He was already on his third cup of coffee and had a tablet out, making notes on what he and Loki would need to do to bolster public opinion. He was trying not to check the clock or his bracelet as he worked, but it had been five hours since Loki left.



When he heard a familiar sound of swirling wind and saw green and gold from the corner of his eye, Tony turned to the side. He smiled with relief at finding the mage unharmed. Loki's gaze wasn't on Tony though. He was narrowing his eyes at an opinion poll showing how trustworthy the viewers thought Loki was. It wasn't a favourable response. Tony winced before dismissing it.

"Worst results, Loki," Tony told him. "I wanted to see the problem areas."

"It's to be expected," Loki answered dismissively, but Tony knew it couldn't be as simple as that.

He might have spent a lifetime expecting the worst, but the tightening of his eyes showed it still hurt when he was proven correct.

Putting down his coffee, Tony walked over to Loki. When he was close enough he took Loki's hand and gave it a squeeze. "We'll convince them, Loki. I promise."

Loki didn't look like he believed Tony, but he didn't fight it, choosing to change the subject. "The animals are settled and my acquaintance will take any others that we discover. She is appalled by what has been done and will do anything to help."

Tony was grateful to hear it. "That's good."

The mage nodded and pulled his hand from Tony. Loki was still in his Asgardian clothes, and Tony didn't know what possessed him to do it, but Loki looked like he'd had a long day. He found himself reaching out for the man's jacket and moving behind him to help him pull it off.

Loki stilled. "What are you doing, Anthony?"

"Taking off your jacket?" Tony suggested, tugging a little on the leather to get Loki to roll his shoulders and help. He didn't move. Tony huffed out an amused breath. "Is this a problem?"

"You are..." Loki swallowed, seeming to not know what else to say. Tony knew there was something happening he didn't understand.

"Tell me what's going on, Loki," Tony asked him with a firm but gentle tone.

"I have had a thousand servants remove my clothing," Loki spoke, his voice low. "Countless lovers as well." He looked over his shoulders, his green eyes wide and a little lost. "But no one has ever done this simply to show their care for me."

*Fucking Asgard*, Tony internally cursed, but he didn't let any of his fury and sadness for Loki show. Instead, he smiled and let his expression soften. "Well, that's a whole world's loss, and I'll happily make up for it." He tugged softly. "Let me take your jacket, Loki."

Slowly, Loki relaxed and Tony took proper hold of the leather and started easing it off Loki's shoulders and down his arms. It was heavier than it looked, but Tony didn't let it stop or faze him as he pulled it the last of the way off and folded it over his arm.

Loki turned to face him, still looking a little raw. Tony just placed his hand on Loki's back and started leading him towards the couch. "Come on; let me put some tea on."

"I don't need you to coddle me," Loki grumbled, but he didn't resist Tony's soft guidance. He took a seat and Tony dropped Loki's jacket over the back of the couch.

Tony stood in front of him and looked down at the discomforted, uncertain demi-god. He held Loki's gaze and stated something he was sure was true, "You'd do the same for me after a long day, Loki. It's not coddling. It's taking care of someone. It's putting the time and effort in because they're worth it."

Loki had nothing to say, and Tony just flashed him a grin before walking to where he now kept a teapot and tea bags. "What kind do you want, Loki?"

"Anything green," Loki answered.

Tony couldn't help laughing and he sent the mage an amused look. "Of *course* he goes with green."

Loki rolled his eyes, but said nothing more as Tony started setting up the teapot. He grinned when the mug he'd gifted Loki as an apartment-warming present appeared for him to use. He put the water on to boil before glancing back at Loki. He found the other man had picked up a tablet and was skimming through it with a frown.

"What are you doing?"

"Reviewing our problem areas. There are many."

Tony grimaced. "It's not as bad as it looks. A few press tours, some money and magic thrown at things and we'll be fine."

"Magic?" Loki asked, raising his head to frown at Tony.

"Yeah. I'm thinking; fix a few buildings, plant a few trees, offer some peace-offerings and charm the right people. It will make the world focus on the good."

Loki nodded slowly. "I was often the one sent on missions such as these when Thor had disgraced Asgard in some way."

*Huh*, Tony thought, *interesting*. It also threw a whole new light on why their negotiations had gone so well with the other realms.

"So, you were the one who cleaned up Thor's messes with the other realms?"

"Yes," Loki answered absently, still reading.

"So, when reparations needed to be made, *you* were the one to diplomatically find a middle ground for both sides?"

Loki raised his head. "Yes? What is your point?"

“Nothing,” Tony remarked casually, turning back to fixing Loki his tea. “Just that perhaps the rest of the universe isn’t as oblivious to your good qualities as you led me to believe.”

Turning back to Loki with the tea in his hands, he found Loki looking at him oddly. It was sad to see. It showed exactly how much Asgard and *Odin* had blinded Loki to all the good he was doing, all the connections he was fostering. Loki had no idea; he’d never even realised.

No wonder he’d been shocked when Hel sided with him. He didn’t expect anything but the worst from people.

Taking a seat beside Loki, he handed over the mug. Loki took it, but he was still eyeing Tony warily. “Do not think the realms will accept me just because you do, Anthony.”

“You do realise you personally got half as many personal alliances as Earth did, right?”

Tony’s response momentarily stumped Loki, and, not wanting to get into an argument about Loki’s unsteady self-worth, Tony changed the subject. “I also watched the SHIELD footage, and I can tell you their contract is going to be as colourful as a rainbow.”

Loki’s lip curled, but he didn’t look surprised. “At least we shall have the advantage of knowing *what* they have broken.”

“Yeah.” Tony sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

Loki took a sip of his tea before putting it down. “It is of little matter. We have no true need for them beyond cannon fodder.” Loki reached out and squeezed Tony’s shoulder. “And now that the animals are removed, I can give my full attention to the spell I promised to craft for you.”

Tony jerked his eyes to Loki, knowing exactly what the mage meant; all his weapons, removed from their traitorous hands. He knew Loki hadn’t been lying when he promised, but knowing that it was real, that it would *happen* - Tony could have kissed Loki.

And, in fact, he *could*.

Leaning forward, Tony pressed their lips together in a chaste, grateful kiss.

“Thanks,” he whispered.

Loki’s hand moved to his neck, just cupping it. He didn’t pull Tony any closer or shift him away. “Of course, Anthony.”

They lingered there for a long moment before Tony made himself pull back. They had things to focus on. Loki let his hand fall away and Tony picked up the discarded tablet.

“Okay, so, I know I promised you dinner and a show, but you kind of got home early.”

“Is that a complaint?” Loki asked, his tone teasing. Tony knocked their shoulders together, and sent the mage a mock-glare. Loki laughed softly. “We can do whatever you wish. I know there is much on your list.”

“Yeah,” Tony muttered. Normally, this would be the part where he called up Pepper and got her help and opinions, but he couldn’t exactly do that anymore.

It made him grit his teeth, his chest filled with the ache of sadness and betrayal. Loki noticed the change in mood.

“Anthony?” he asked with concern.

“I need to do something about Pepper.”

“Ah.” He could feel Loki’s eyes on him, watching Tony closely. “Will you replace her?”

“You mean get a new CEO of Stark Industries?” Tony ran a hand through his hair. “I have to talk to her first, try and work out where the fuck everything went wrong but... yeah. I think that’s what I’ll need to do.”

Loki’s hand touched his back, offering both comfort and support in a single gesture, and Tony relaxed into it.

It was going to be an uphill battle from here. They had SHIELD, Pepper and gaining the world’s good opinion to deal with, but Tony knew with his friends at his back and Loki at his side, he’d come out okay.

---

They spent the rest of the afternoon discussing tactics and going over everything FRIDAY had collated for them. Tony *loved* showing Loki the video of Rogers punching Thor. Loki had let out a loud, delighted laugh and watched it three times before he was prepared to move on.

When the sky finally darkened and FRIDAY became insistent they eat, they ordered Italian and invited Bruce up to join them. Rhodey phoned halfway through, complaining about all the bureaucracy they’d hurled at him. He did give them an update on when SHIELD and the UN would be likely to see the contract, and with a deadline of forty-eight hours, things suddenly became more serious.

Loki retired to his magic room to work on the weapons-retrieval spell while Bruce and Tony headed to the lab to synthesise a gas that would knock out any animals Animal Whisperer might create and send after them.

Tony didn’t know what time he and Bruce finally headed to bed, all he knew was that when his head hit the pillow Loki wasn’t there. He was even more disappointed when he woke up in the morning and found Loki hadn’t joined him in the night. He hoped Loki hadn’t thought he was unwelcome.

Tony did feel a little better when he walked into the kitchen and found a steaming hot coffee with a note beside it; *I will be busy crafting this spell and will not see you before you visit Miss Potts. Should you require me for any reason, use your cuff. No reason will be considered too small - L.*

Perhaps it was a little bit silly, but Tony took the note and folded it in half, slipping it into the breast pocket of his jacket and taking it with him. It was nice to know that no matter what happened, Loki would be there for him.

Tony was going to need that silent, unwavering support when he faced Pepper.

Especially since he didn't tell her he was coming. He just showed up, dressed in a suit looking ready for war. He waved off her secretary's fumbled greetings and attempts to inform Pepper.

He pushed open the door and walked right in. He was lucky she was alone, but Tony wouldn't have cared if she was with someone. He either would have kicked them out or waited until the meeting was done, his eyes on his CEO the entire time.

"Tony!" She was startled. "What are you doing here?"

"Time we had a chat." He shut and locked the door before dropping down in the seat in front of her. "About corporate espionage, betrayal, spying - that sort of thing."

Pepper didn't flinch but her expression tightened. She used her intercom to buzz her secretary. "Hold my calls and put back my appointments."

"Yes, Miss Potts."

Tony smiled but it was harsh and lacked warmth. He also pulled out his phone and put it on the desk. "FRIDAY, be a good girl and check for bugs, please."

"Yes, Boss," her voice came through the speakers as she did a scan.

"Do you really think I'd do that, Tony?" Pepper asked, sounding hurt.

Tony held her gaze unflinchingly. "I don't know what you'd do anymore, Miss Potts."

Pepper closed her eyes and slumped a little. "Tony. I didn't mean..."

"Mean to what?" Tony asked. "Support SHIELD finding a cache of my old weapons and instead of telling me or letting me decide what to do with them, using them anyway? Letting *enemies* run off with them when they couldn't plug traitorous leaks fast enough? Telling me my opinions on the matter *weren't* of any fucking consequence. For fuck's sake Pepper, you of all people should have known how I'd feel about that. Yet you supported *them*."

Tony was angry and hurt, and gearing up for an argument. He didn't expect Pepper to turn as white as a sheet at his words.

"What?" she whispered.

Tony frowned. "What?"

"They... they said..." but she didn't finish. She brought a trembling hand to her computer and typed things into it hurriedly. Tony was watching her warily, but she turned the screen

towards him and showed him documents.

Tony opened and skimmed them. She'd taken copies of everything SHIELD gave her; there was even a recording of a meeting with her and Natasha. Pepper had taken precautions, but it hadn't been enough.

Tony lifted his head and felt a hint of pity. "Yeah, guess what Pepper, SHIELD and The Avengers lie."

Her breathing was coming heavily and her face was filled with horror and the dawning of painful realisation.

"They manipulated me," she whispered. She closed her eyes but Tony could see a hint of tears. It made him want to comfort her, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. "We'd just broken up and they used it." She let out a harsh, painful laugh. "Emotionally compromised," her voice was thick. "We were barely talking, but I should have asked." Her hand shook as she brought it to her face. "I should have *asked*."

"Yeah," Tony's voice had softened. "You should have trusted me, Pep. You *used* to trust me."

"I did," she whispered, sounding gutted. "But they made it so easy to believe it was the break up. That it was... my fault. That you turning to Loki was *my fault*." The tears were sliding down her cheeks freely. "I'm so sorry, Tony. I shouldn't have... I broke everything, I-"

Tony reached out and touched her wrist. "Oh, Pep."

Looking at her, Tony felt so much of his rage shift towards SHIELD for their part in this mess while pity replaced what he felt for her.

Yet, his mind was also whirring, wondering what SHIELD hoped to gain by manipulating Pepper this way. Then it came to him.

"They hoped to use you to control me," Tony said. Pepper finally pulled her hands away to look at him, her eyes were still filled with tears and her makeup was smeared, her face blotchy. Yet despite it all, she was listening to him, *finally* listening to him. "They thought you'd convince me to agree with them. They thought you'd be a spy inside Stark Industries."

"And I played into their hands," Pepper said, sounding completely devastated. "I *was* their spy." She pulled away from Tony's touch, like she didn't deserve his compassion. "I couldn't see a thing." She closed her eyes, more tears escaping. "You have every right to fire me." She shook her head. "No, you *should* fire me." She opened her eyes and they blazed with the determination she was known for. "And if you don't, I'll resign anyway."

Tony nodded, being far gentler than he'd intended earlier this morning. "Yeah, I think a new CEO would be best."

Pepper nodded, and he saw her pulling herself together, focusing on the task ahead. "I know you'll find a good replacement, Mr Stark. I can help with the transition, or leave by the

afternoon.” She held his gaze, meaning every word. “Whatever will be best for Stark Industries, and for you.”

“Thank you, Miss Potts,” Tony answered. “I’ll decide and let you know.”

He started to stand, planning on leaving it there, but Pepper spoke, “SHIELD and the Avengers.” Tony looked over his shoulder at her. “You would be within your rights prosecute them. I would testify and admit my own culpability.”

It tempted him. It *had* tempted him, more than a hundred times, and while it would give him satisfaction, Tony still shook his head. “The war for the universe is coming. They need to be able to fight in it.”

Pepper nodded and a sad smile touched her lips. “You always have put the world first, and we never realise how lucky we are, until it’s too late.”

Looking at her, Tony saw everything they could have had and everything they’d lost.

It was with disappointment and sadness that he told her, “Goodbye, Miss Potts.”

“Goodbye, Mr Stark,” she whispered.

Turning on his heel, Tony walked out of her office. It hadn’t been as he’d imagined, and he didn’t know if that made it better or worse. Tony brought up his hand to touch his pocket where Loki’s note was folded.

He was looking forward to getting back home.

## Chapter End Notes

And, yuuuup. I know a few of you might be surprised (others unhappy ~~they way some of you were talking was like you wanted her under a guillotine ala Marie Antoinette~~) but sadly, everyone is fallible.

Pepper is just a person, and we can all be blinded by emotion and manipulated by people whose *job* is to take advantage of a weak spot. And *that* makes things far more interesting than cut and dry betrayal.

It doesn't mean she's forgiven or everything is wiped away, but at least now she's seen exactly how far she's fallen.

# Chapter 45

## Chapter Notes

What is this? An update only one month since the last one? NO YOU ARE NOT IMAGINING THINGS. I'm just getting my act together thanks to **NamelesslyNightlock** and **Rabentochter** being an amazing cheer squad ♥

I hope you enjoy this chapter! :)

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

Loki regretted having Anthony fall asleep before him.

He'd been in the middle of a complex spell and hadn't noticed the late hour. When he'd stretched and finally contemplated resting, FRIDAY had promptly informed him that Anthony was already asleep.

While they had shared a bed in Asgard and were continuing to share one now; Loki did not know if he would be welcome without permission. Slipping into the same bed and curling around Anthony... it was a show of intimacy and trust.

Loki couldn't make the mistake of overstepping his bounds.

The bed on his floor was cold and empty, but it was safe. It also smelled faintly of Anthony. Loki buried his face in the pillow that his mortal had used the previous night.

When he woke in the morning, it was with his arm reaching for a body that wasn't there. He scowled and forced himself out of bed.

“Good morning, Mr Liesmith,” FRIDAY greeted him. “Will you be dining with Mr Stark for breakfast?”

Loki wanted to, but if last night had shown him anything, it was that he should try and clear his head. This was still new for Anthony and there was no guarantee he would choose Loki permanently or develop a romantic interest in him. If that outcome occurred, Loki had to be ready.

“No, FRIDAY, I will dine privately and work directly on the spell.”

“Yes, Sir.”

He knew Anthony would be seeing Miss Potts today, and he quickly found pen and paper and wrote the other man a note. He sent it to Anthony's floor before eating a quick meal and teleporting to his magic room.



He locked the door and warded the space before he lost himself in spellwork. It had always been easy to fall into the routine and complexities of manipulating his seidr, regardless of whatever else was on his mind.

In the past, there had only been one thing that could disturb him in such a state and that was a disruption to his wards; now, Loki made allowances for the bracelet, for FRIDAY and for his cellular phone. He wanted to be ready should Anthony have any need of him.

Yet, when his phone rang and drew him from his magic, it wasn't the engineer who sought him.

Loki's mind was still half on the spell and when he pressed the phone to his ear, his voice was curt, "Yes?"

"Loki," Rhodes greeted him. He sounded concerned. "Is this a bad time?"

Closing his eyes and taking in a breath, Loki forced his mind to settle and his irritation at the interruption to fade. "I was perfecting a spell. It can wait. Has something gone wrong?"

"No, but I wanted a chance to talk to you without Tony around."

Loki frowned. "Oh? Why is that?"

"You're dating him for real now."

Loki stiffened at the blunt statement. Nervous tension rushed through him. His hand clenched into a fist at his side; he didn't even notice.

"Is this a problem?" Loki asked, feeling wary of the answer.

"That's what I want to know," Rhodes answered. "Tony's amazing, and I love him, but relationships aren't his strong suit." Rhodes let out a rough breath. "I'm worried he's going to hurt you, Loki."

Loki blinked, feeling surprised and remarkably touched. "You are concerned for me."

"I am," he admitted. "And I wanted to say you can come to me if ever you need to. I know Tony better than anyone; if you want advice, I can help. If you want someone to agree that he's being an idiot and help shake him to his senses, I'm your man. If you just want to talk, then I'm only a phone call away."

Loki didn't know what to say. He knew Rhodes meant every word and yet, it seemed impossible.

"Anthony is your friend," Loki said. "It is he you should be giving these options to."

"Tony already knows he can come to me," Rhodes answered. "He knows he's got a friend who will have his back. I want you to know you have someone too."

It warmed Loki's heart, but he still shook his head. "He is your oldest friend. He is the one you should give your loyalty to. I am-"

"I'm not allowed two friends? I'm not allowed to be happy when they're together, but supportive when they're having a rough time and need a mediator?"

"But if our attempt at a relationship fails..."

"It will suck," Rhodes answered. "But as long as one of you doesn't do something horrible to the other. I'll still be here, friends with you both."

Loki couldn't stop his smile. He felt pleasantly surprised and incredibly fond. He didn't know how his life had, with one simple deal, become far from the bleak, lonely future he had once envisioned.

"I told Anthony he was lucky to have you in his life," Loki murmured. "I never thought I would be so fortunate as to share that gift."

There was a moment's pause before Rhodey said, "Well, no wonder you're called silvertongue."

Loki laughed gently; not feeling the slightest irritation at what was once an insult, not when it was now said with such fondness and in a soft tone by a *friend*.

"Was there anything further you wished to speak to me about, Rhodes?"

"No. Unless you want to talk about anything?"

Loki gave that genuine consideration; did he wish to speak to Rhodes about Anthony? About the slow relationship they were kindling? Perhaps even about his magic and the fondness it had for Anthony? He had never had someone ask or to so genuinely *care*. Loki had only had his mother who would listen to his concerns and even she had not been privy to everything.

His brow furrowed and he questioned, "If I was to do so, would you tell Anthony of what was discussed?"

"No," Rhodey vowed. "This is between you and me. Hell, you can even spell me to secrecy if you want."

Loki smiled. "Thank you, Rhodes, but that will not be necessary."

"I want you to trust me, Loki," Rhodes insisted. "I want you to know you can come to me and I'll have your back." He sighed. "But I recognise after all the shit you've been through, that's hard for you to accept. That's why if you want to perform the spell, we can do it."

It was tempting; speaking with no fear that others could learn what was discussed, all while knowing that Rhodes accepted the silence - he even *welcomed* the spell. It was an amazing consideration of Loki's comfort. He didn't think of himself or the inconvenience. He thought of *Loki*.

Loki could not express how much that meant to him. It was why he couldn't dismiss it out of hand, both the gesture and the option. While Loki hoped his relationship with Anthony would go well and that a lifelong partnership could be before them... he was also realistic. Things could fall apart, screaming rows could be in their future.

Having a support who could not leak his secrets and whom he could seek advice from would be invaluable.

And yet, it was all offered so artlessly and without any manipulation on Loki's part.

It was obvious that James Rhodes was as important and precious a friend to gain as Anthony Stark.

"Thank you," Loki said sincerely and added, for the first time, "James."

He could hear the smile in the mortal's voice. "You're welcome, Loki."

A silence fell but it felt good, *comfortable* even, yet it was broken too soon. "Well, I should let you get back to your spell." He let out a groan. "And return to politicians."

Loki chuckled gently. "Do not forget your bracelet, James. You can always flee."

"You're a bad influence," James muttered, but there was nothing but affection in his voice.

"I'm sure Anthony would adore having you in the tower for a few days."

"I'm sure he would," James agreed. "But, as much as I'd enjoy being there, I need to smooth things over with the UN. So, I'll take a raincheck."

"Very well," Loki agreed. "Take care, James. Contact us if ever you are in need."

"Will do," he agreed. "Bye Loki."

"Farewell," Loki returned before Rhodes ended the call and Loki removed the phone from his ear. He stared at it for a long moment, thinking of the mortal and smiling softly. He would have to find some way to repay James for his kindness and his friendship.

Yet, before he could give it too much thought, FRIDAY was speaking, "Mr Liesmith?"

"Yes, FRIDAY?"

"Mr Stark is en route to the tower and should arrive within ten minutes."

Loki was surprised; he was finished with Miss Potts so soon?

"Thank you, FRIDAY. How does Anthony seem?"

"He is not angry or upset. The conversation with Miss Potts went well."

*Interesting*, Loki thought.

While he did want to finish perfecting the location and transportation spells that would regain Anthony's lost weapons, he also wanted to know what had occurred.

"I shall head to the penthouse and ready coffee for Anthony."

"Very good, Sir."

Packing up the few things he no longer needed, Loki reordered his magic room, but as he worked his mind was on Anthony and the man's former lover. He knew Pepper Potts had betrayed Anthony and that Anthony could no longer trust her and yet... a small part of Loki felt worry.

What had she done to make the conversation go '*well*'?

---

Loki appeared in the penthouse a few minutes before Anthony was due to arrive. He turned on the coffee machine and made himself a pot of tea. His thoughts hadn't wandered far in the eight minutes that had passed.

Pepper was Anthony's former lover, and while Loki trusted Anthony wouldn't fall back into the woman's arms at the first flutter of her lashes, he recognised that residual feelings could remain. Loki knew Anthony wouldn't do anything to jeopardise their ruse. He also knew that should Anthony wish to end their physical and romantic relationship, he would tell Loki directly.

It was also highly unlikely Pepper Potts would have enough sway to convince him to do so.

No, Loki's greatest concerns were that Anthony might be subject to emotional manipulation. Anthony was suspicious and hardened from his dealings with SHIELD and his former comrades. But, guilt and compassion could be insidious emotions, and he might not enjoy Loki pointing out such tactics.

But then, it was yet to be seen *how* Pepper Potts managed to turn what should have been a difficult conversation into one that went '*well*'.

Loki hoped, for Anthony's sake, that the mortal was not being fooled.

Coffee and tea prepared, Loki took a seat at the bar and was having a sip of his cooling beverage when the man from his thoughts walked into the room. Anthony was relaxed and at ease. He was also incredibly handsome; Loki felt no shame in looking his fill, especially while Anthony was distracted.

"Coffee!" He hurried over to the bar and took a seat beside Loki. He grabbed the cup and took a sip, his eyes closing in bliss. "Mmm." He turned to Loki and smiled. "Knew I kept you around for a reason; you make the best coffee."

Loki smirked. "After years of spellwork, Anthony, such a simple beverage is not difficult."

"*And* you used the self-warming, never cooling mug. I needed that this morning." Anthony's eyes sharpened, his good-humour still present but secondary to his piercing, knowing gaze. "I

hope you didn't think coming to bed after me would be a problem."

*He noticed, Loki thought, warmth filling his chest. And he's offering permission.*

Loki knew he could respond in the same, teasing, light-hearted tone, but Loki didn't want to be misconstrued, not about this.

"I didn't want to presume," Loki said quietly. "The intimacy was forced on you in Asgard." He gave a half-shrug. "To choose to share a bed of an evening is one thing, to have the option removed however..."

"Loki," Anthony said, his voice serious, but his eyes gentle. "You can always join me. I won't say no."

"You are sure?" Loki questioned, unable to fully accept it.

"Of course I am. The bed was cold without you."

The words had Loki sighing in pure relief.

"As was mine," he admitted.

"Then, we're decided?" Anthony asked. "No more lonely beds?"

Loki grinned. "Yes."

"Awesome," Anthony said with a beaming smile.

He then turned back to his coffee, conversation finished and settled and coffee now his number one priority. Loki shook his head fondly but allowed the man a few moments of indulgence before raising the next topic they needed to discuss.

"FRIDAY said your meeting went well."

Loki couldn't keep the suspicion and doubt from his voice. Anthony sent him an amused glance. "You were expecting something else?"

"Weren't *you*?" Loki parried.

It made Anthony sober, his humour fading for a frown of contemplation. "I was. I expected a screaming row, like always, and a really bitter confrontation that would end in me threatening a lawsuit if Pepper didn't back down and leave the company gracefully."

"But?"

Anthony sighed. "But, it turns out she fucked up, and I probably did a little bit too."

"Did she make you think that?" Loki demanded, tensing in his seat and ready to find the woman and flay her. "Did *she* make you feel guilt for her own stupidity and cowardice? Did *she*-"

“Calm down, Loki,” Anthony hurriedly interjected, reaching out and touching Loki’s arm. “It’s okay. She didn’t try to guilt-trip me. Really, she didn’t.” Loki was still glaring and unhappy with the response, but Anthony hurried to explain. “SHIELD lied to her. It was probably Romanov who delivered the spiel and the two of us were still so raw from our breakup we never stopped to check facts.”

Anthony let out a heavy sigh, and Loki could already see the tension and anger on his shoulders and the *culpability* forming behind his eyes. “We played right into their hands. Pepper, mostly. Maybe they hoped she’d get me back on side, maybe they just wanted to use Pepper as an unwitting spy.” Anthony ran a hand through his hair. “One way or another, Pepper and I weren’t talking and SHIELD was feeding our antagonism. We didn’t notice what was going on.”

“And I appeared and only made it worse,” Loki realised.

“Or made it better,” Anthony suggested, “depends how you look at it.” He shrugged. “I found out how far she was in their pocket, and I confronted her.”

“What happened?”

Anthony’s face showed compassion and a hint of hurt. “She realised what had happened and that she’d been tricked. She told me if I didn’t fire her, she’d resign.”

Loki was surprised. “An unexpected surrender.”

“Yeah, well, that’s Pep.” A hint of a smile touched Anthony’s lips. “She might have fucked up, but that doesn’t mean she won’t own up to it.”

Loki’s eyes narrowed. “You respect that about her. You call her by an affectionate nickname. Do you *forgive* her?”

Anthony shook his head. “No. I don’t forgive that easily. She should have known better.”

Yet, Loki could hear there was more. “But?”

Anthony gave a loud, long sigh. “But, I dated her for years, and I loved her.”

“And you cannot give up on her entirely,” Loki summarised.

It was a sentiment Loki could well understand, and he reached for Anthony and placed a hand on his back, offering comfort and support.

Anthony gave him a weak smile. “What was it you say?” He attempted to adopt Loki’s accent; “‘*Sentiment*’.”

Loki shook his head. “You are too lenient.” But, he brought a hand to squeeze Anthony’s shoulder. “Yet, what fool would I be to complain, knowing I have benefited from that same kindness?” Anthony opened his mouth to protest, but Loki spoke over him; “We shall watch her carefully and see if she is worthy of your good graces. But, I will not have her harm you again, Anthony.”

“Oh, I’m not welcoming her in with open arms,” Anthony insisted, and a hint of the steel Loki saw around the Avengers returned. “And if we never cross paths again, so be it... but if she wants to earn something back? Well, I won’t slam the door in her face. She made a mistake. I’ve made more than enough of those in the past.”

“Just be careful, Anthony,” Loki advised.

“I will be,” Anthony insisted, but he also flashed Loki a grateful smile. “But, thanks.”

Loki nodded, and although he didn’t want to, he removed his hands from Anthony and brought it back to his tea.

They fell into a brief silence, but it was broken by Anthony, “I’m going to have to interview for a new CEO.” He looked at Loki. “Will you help me?”

Loki blinked. “I have no knowledge of how-”

“You can ferret out lies; you can even *spy* on them prior to the selection process. You’re an amazing diplomat and you’ve had centuries of practice.” Anthony held Loki’s gaze with hopeful eyes. “I trust you, and I would like your help. Please, Loki?”

Loki couldn’t have said no if he tried. “Of course I’ll help you, Anthony.”

Anthony let out a relieved breath. “Okay. Good. We’ll add that to our to-do-list along with a publicity run, catching Animal Whisperer and preparing to save the universe. Cool, great, fun times.”

Anthony looked tired just thinking about it, which just wouldn’t do.

While Anthony was right that they needed to handle all of those things, not to mention the removal of Anthony’s weapons from SHIELD, their contracts with the realms and the diplomacy with Midgard; it didn’t mean Anthony couldn’t have fun at the same time.

“Well, perhaps we should also add additions to your armour.” Loki made a gesture with his magic and allowed five books to land on the bar in front of the engineer.

Anthony was instantly curious and abandoned his coffee to open the first one. His eyes went wide as he realised what he was looking at.

“This is a book on Asgardian plasma gun schematics.”

“You did request them,” Loki remarked with a smirk. “While we made scans of most of the Asgardian library, sometimes it is useful to have hard copies.”

Anthony looked over the other books opening them and finding metalwork texts, manuals on melding magic with metal and even a book on the workings of the bifrost.

Anthony raised his head, looking at Loki with wide, awe-filled eyes. “You *stole* plasma gun and bifrost schematics as well as manuals on how to build them for me?”

“I doubt Asgard will even know they are missing.”

When Anthony smiled, the happiness went all the way to his eyes. He also leant from his chair to Loki’s, leaning against the mage to keep his balance. Loki didn’t care about the additional weight, not when Anthony only did it so he could press a fierce, affectionate kiss to Loki’s lips.

It only lasted a few seconds—*far* too short a time—before Anthony was pulling back. “God, I fucking love you.”

The words made Loki pull in a shaky breath. His traitorous heart *leapt* at both the praise and those *words*, but Loki hurriedly stamped down on his feelings or his reaction. Anthony was already burying his nose in a book; completely oblivious to his absent phrase.

‘*I love you*’ after all, was often said by Anthony to his friends. It was casual and affectionate, but it wasn’t *real*.

It was too early to be real, even from Loki, and he already knew how deeply he cared for the mortal. Anthony was just excited and pleased, and Loki needed to dismiss the phrase and pretend it hadn’t happened.

It was as Loki was trying to calm his racing heart and will his mind away from the words, that an alarm blared through the tower. Loki jerked his head to the ceiling and Anthony did the same, completely rigid in his seat.

“Boss,” FRIDAY announced, “The tracer has failed. Animal Whisperer has appeared on the Brooklyn Bridge. Avengers en route.”

Loki glanced back at Anthony and caught his harsh, determined eyes.

It was time for battle.

## Chapter End Notes

Soooo, I was worried the Rhodey&Loki convo was too corny and I wanted to scrap and re-write it, but I was told I WAS NOT ALLOWED. And that it was to be a birthday gift to **Rabentochter**. So, blame her for that remaining the way it is XD

Hope you liked the update! Even if there is a bit of a cliffhanger ;)



# Chapter 46

## Chapter Notes

Here it is, the next Animal Whisperer battle. Hope you like it ;)

Also, this story has just hit 200k! Hooray!!

Tony pushed up from the bar and turned away from the books.

*Damn, damn, damn.*

“FRIDAY, get my suit. Start feeding information to Bruce; find out if Big Green will make an appearance. Tell Rhodey, if we need him, we might get Loki to teleport him in. Loki,” he turned to the mage. “Bruce and I made a gas that should knock out the animals, but it’s untested. Can you put them to sleep instead?”

“Probably, but it will depend on the nature of their enhancements and how many there are.”

Tony nodded, but was distracted by his suit arriving. He stepped inside and let it fold around him. He’d have to look at something sleeker, more portable. Maybe something with nanotech. He pushed the thought aside for later pondering.

“Can you teleport us, Loki?”

Loki placed a hand on Tony’s armour. His casual outfit had already been replaced by his battle armour and Tony could see the communicator he’d been given last time was now in his ear. “Will Banner be joining the fight?”

“I’ll stay,” Bruce answered. “I’ll coordinate with FRIDAY, but if you need me,” he sounded resigned but no less determined, “Loki can teleport me into the battle.”

Turning back to Loki, Tony said, “Okay, Reindeer Games. Let’s take her down.”

“As you command, my little vegetable.”

Tony rolled his eyes at the nickname, a smile tugging at his mouth, but he didn’t get time to do much else before the tower was disappeared and in its place was the Brooklyn Bridge.

Animal Whisperer was standing in the middle. People were running and screaming, there were four bulls smashing into cars and running like a New York version of the ‘Running of the Bulls’.

“We have to get people off the bridge and create a roadblock. Loki, if you-”

But before Tony could say another word, Loki's hands were glowing green and the hundred or so people on the bridge were transported to land safely behind the two of them.

"God, your magic is amazing," Tony said. "I'm never going into battle without you ever again."

"I should certainly hope not," Loki remarked before moving his hands again. A number of the now empty cars slid into position as a makeshift barricade to keep people from harm. "This should limit casualties, although, we are now the target for these creatures."

"Right. You focus on the bulls, I'll take down-" Tony stopped when something large and brown slapped against the bridge. "Oh for fucks sake, is that a *kraken*?"

"That is a *kravkashinc*," Loki whispered, completely astounded. "They are not native to the nine realms, but are often brought to them for sport. How in the *worlds* did it end up here?"

When another tentacle wrapped around the bridge and started to pull, it made the whole structure groan, and Tony made a quick decision.

He fired up his repulsors and said, "Less theorising, more killing. You take her and I'll take the alien squid. How the fuck do I kill it?"

"Aim for the eyes or the underbelly," Loki answered while breaking into a run and jumping over cars to reach his quarry.

"Eyes, eyes, where the fuck are the eyes," Tony muttered while flying around the bridge and shooting repulsor blasts at the tentacles. It only seemed to piss the creature off as it tried to swat at him like an annoying bug.

"Boss," FRIDAY chimed in. "The Avengers are approaching and trying to contact you. Shall I let them through?"

Tony made an unhappy face, but as much as he'd like to ignore them, the sooner the battle was over and with as less structural damage as possible, the better. "Let them through."

It took only a moment before, Rogers started, "Stark-"

Tony interrupted. "The squid is from space. Akravka-something. Eyes and underbelly are its weakness. Loki evacuated the bridge. He's going for the girl, but he has four bulls up there with him."

There was a pause before, "Understood. Thor's on route. Romanov and I will assist Loki. Hawkeye will pilot the quinjet and try to get the kravka to let go of the bridge. Falcon will help with air support."

Tony would have replied, but another flick of the tentacle came perilously close to hitting him. After that, it just didn't seem relevant; The Avengers arrived and despite their many problems and the distrust between them, they *did* know how to fight together.

It was like a well-oiled machine, and even adding Loki to the mix didn't derail them. He blended in like he was always meant to be there.

Tony was keeping his attention on the squid, but it didn't mean he wasn't listening as FRIDAY relayed information to him. He also kept an eye on Loki and how he was going against Animal Whisperer.

She wasn't letting him get close, but she *was* talking to him. Tony couldn't hear what was being said, but he could spot a villain monologue a mile away. Strangely though, she had no interest in either Rogers or Romanov; her attention was solely on Loki.

"Loki?" Tony asked, concerned. "What's going on?"

Loki didn't answer, but Romanov did. "She was waiting for him to return from Asgard. She's asking where Thor is. Doesn't like that you and Loki are lovers; you're *'tainting'* him, apparently."

"*Tainting?*" Tony demanded. He was *really* sick of people being homophobic assholes, if that squid gave him a single opening; he was flying down to the bridge and repulsoring her in the face.

"Not because you're a man," Rogers answered, sounding a little out of breath. He was, after all, battling three of the bulls. "Because you're human."

"Because I'm *what?*"

"Human, darling," Loki drawled. "Apparently, you are not worthy of a god." He could hear the smile in Loki's voice. "Clearly, she has not met you."

The compliment soothed some of Tony's indignation, but didn't help his worry. "Why does she care?"

Unfortunately, instead of getting an answer Animal Whisperer said something and waved her hands. Whatever it was, it made Loki shout, "*Anthony!*"

It became very apparent that she'd just commanded the squid as five tentacles all shot out of the water and tried to grab Tony.

"Fuck!" he cursed, shooting at the tentacles and dodging them before flying higher, trying to get as far away as possible.

"She seeks to remove you!" Loki shouted, followed by; "Birds!"

FRIDAY sent him a warning and Tony hurriedly swerved to the left and out of the way. He then took off further down river, the flock of pigeons hot on his tail and the squid swimming along beneath him, its tentacles reaching up and trying to catch him.

He could hear the Avengers shouting and trying to subdue the Animal Whisperer while Falcon and Hawkeye tried and failed to shoot at the squid. Tony was more relieved than he

wanted to admit when he heard a roar followed by Thor diving from the sky with his hammer extended. He smashed into the squid and sent them both hurtling into the Hudson.

“About fucking time,” Tony hissed, continuing to twist through the air with a white and grey feathered blur behind him. *Damn* these pigeons were fast.

Thankfully, Thor was now bashing and splashing with the squid while Hawkeye and Falcon looked on, offering support when needed. It gave Tony the perfect opportunity to fly for the bridge, twist between the cables and head for Animal Whisperer.

She looked pretty messed up; blood dripping from her eyes and ears. She was leaning heavily on a bull and when she saw Tony she let out an inhuman shriek. Tony readied his repulsors, planning to blast her into unconsciousness.

But, before he could do it, she whispered something at the bull and from one blink to the next; she and the animal were gone. It made Tony come up short. The pigeons fell from the sky to land, alive, but exhausted on every available surface.

“That vile, disgusting, plebeian, *useless* waste of a fool,” Loki snarled.

Tony turned to the mage to find he was already walking over to the pigeons. He had one hand out and a shimmer of green was falling over the birds like dust. Slowly, one by one, they all started to lift their heads and stand on their feet.

“Are you *healing* them?” Rogers asked, coming up to stand beside Tony.

“Of course I am,” Loki snapped. “These poor creatures are defenceless pawns pulled into her madness and don’t deserve an early death because of it.”

When Loki finished and lowered his hand, some of the pigeons flew away, others start to explore the cars, a few actually came over to Loki and poked him with their beak. It almost seemed like they were saying thanks. The thought made Tony crack a grin. He also pulled up his faceplate.

“That’s it,” he said, “if one lands on your finger and you start singing, you are officially my very own Disney prince.”

Loki quirked an amused eyebrow and looked at Tony. “I am not sure if I am being complimented or mocked.”

Tony would have responded, but Rogers’ words halted him. “Falcon, what’s the situation with the kravka?”

“It’s stopped trying to follow Stark, now it’s trying to eat Thor.”

*Let it,* a small part of Tony thought, but he managed to keep the words from escaping. The smirk that touched Loki’s lips showed that he knew exactly what Tony was thinking.

He then winked at Tony before-

“Woah,” Falcon said. “It disappeared. I mean, it completely vanished.”

Tony grinned. The unconscious bulls were gone too.

Rogers turned to Loki and demanded, “Where did you send it, Loki?”

“I don’t believe that is any of your concern,” Loki stated. He held out his hand, not looking away from Tony.

Tony instantly walked over to him and retracted his gauntlet. Their hands came together and their fingers linked. Tony felt a part of him that had been tense throughout the battle loosen and relax.

“What about the bulls?” Romanov demanded.

Loki shrugged, but otherwise ignored her to ask Tony. “Are you ready to return to the tower?”

“Yeah-”

“Wait!” Rogers interrupted. “We need to talk about the battle and plan for if she attacks again. We need to *coordinate*. I know you won’t come to a debriefing, but we need to be on the same page about what’s going on.”

Tony gritted his teeth. He really hated it when people he disliked made valid points. It made it so much harder to dismiss and ignore them.

“Email FRIDAY with what you have and we’ll respond back,” Tony compromised. He flicked a glance at Rogers, expecting frustration, but Rogers looked relieved to have even gained that much.

And, before he or any of the other Avengers could respond, a swirl of magic enveloped them and he and Loki reappeared in the familiar comfort and safety of the lab.

Bruce was already there and he smiled at them with relief. “I’m glad you’re both okay.”

“Pfft, that fight? Nothing to it.” Tony let Loki’s hand go and stepped away to more easily let the armour retract and be stored away by FRIDAY. When he was done, he ran a hand over his face and through his hair. “So, the bulls are on the magic floor?” He frowned. “What about the squid?”

“No, they are all off-world. My acquaintance and I devised a swift means of travel on the chance our foe would return. They are slumbering and awaiting her care and relocation.”

“Huh,” Tony remarked. “Very cool. Gotta love magic.”

“Indeed,” Loki agreed, yet, instead of sounding pleased, he remained pensive.

Tony instantly frowned and stepped closer to the mage. “Loki? What’s wrong?”

“The woman is unstable,” Loki said, still glowering. “The forces she’s manipulating are destroying her mind and her body. She will be dead before long, but in the time she has remaining,” Loki raised his head and held Tony’s gaze; “I worry what she will do in a bid to harm *you*.”

“Why is Tony even a target?” Bruce asked. “You said something about her tainting you?”

“Yes,” Loki admitted, dragging his gaze from Tony’s. “She was not forthcoming in her speech, so I used a small amount of magic to read her surface thoughts. She has been corrupted. I am not certain of how, but she worked for that agency,” he made a gesture with his hand, “the one named after the creature - a hydra?”

Tony gritted his teeth and exchanged an unhappy look with Bruce.

Loki continued, “She was experimenting on another lost trinket from Asgard’s vault. It was destroyed along with her lab, but she survived and gained some of its power.” Loki shook his head, disgust curling his lip. “She believes humans are a disgrace and should be slaughtered. Thor and myself, not being mortal, are exempt from her anger. Animals are tools for her to manipulate and yet, she somehow sees them as greater beings she wishes to elevate.” Loki sighed and pinched his nose. “The notions of the insane are often twisted past comprehension. She will continue her quest until she succeeds or until she dies.”

The silence that fell was heavy and filled with dread.

“Fuck,” Tony broke the quiet to mutter. “We need to stop her, fast.”

“But how are we going to do that?” Bruce asked. “The tracer didn’t work.”

“It is being distorted by her corruption,” Loki answered, scowling. “A spell of this nature follows a personal energy signature, but hers is unstable and changes constantly. It makes her difficult to pinpoint.”

“Okay, so we need to get her to come to us,” Tony said, already running different scenarios through his mind. “If she’s out to target me then-”

“No,” Loki interrupted. “Out of the question.”

“But, Loki-”

“I will not put you in harm’s way.” Loki glared at him.

“But this could work!”

“Or you could be *killed!*”

“He’s right, Tony,” Bruce said, and Tony scowled at him for being such a traitor. Bruce was unmoved, he also gestured at Loki. “Wouldn’t it make more sense to make Loki draw her out?”

Tony tensed. “What?”

“He’s the one she thinks highly of. Wouldn’t make more sense that she’d come out for him?”

“No!” Tony instantly protested. “She’s too fascinated with him. He could be put-”

“In danger?” Bruce cut in softly, but with a knowing smile as he looked between Tony and Loki.

Tony’s mouth fell open before he shut it with a scowl. He couldn’t *believe* he’d walked into such an obvious manipulation. He crossed his arms and pouted. “That was an unfair tactic, Bruce.”

“I believe it was rather skilfully done,” Loki complimented and gave Bruce a small nod of respect. “I’m glad it also allowed you to see sense. We, *neither* of us,” Loki insisted, “will be used to lure her.”

Tony let out a sigh, but lowered his arms and agreed. “Alright, fine. But we need to figure out how to find her.”

“And what we’ll do with her when we do,” Bruce said, taking off his glasses and rubbing his eyes. “We have to contain her, even if her powers will kill her; she’s still a danger until that happens.” Bruce paused and he sounded tentative, but he still questioned, “Do you think Vision might be able to do something?”

Tony was better at hiding his flinch at the reminder, but he still twitched. God, he missed JARVIS.

“Yeah, maybe,” he made himself admit. “But, Vision chose to go to the mountains and be left alone. We’ll call him only as a last resort.”

Looking around the lab, and desperate for a distraction, Tony alighted on a different tactic. “Why don’t we work on something to contain her? Odds are she’s going to come looking for us first, right?”

“Perhaps,” Loki agreed, watching Tony carefully. “And it is possible SHIELD may have information that we can use. There is no need to craft our entire solution now.”

Relieved, Tony agreed, “Right, excellent. So, Bruce,” he turned back to the scientist. “Science-magic binge? You up for it?”

“Always,” Bruce said with a gentle smile.

Tony turned to Loki but the mage was already nodding his agreement. “Of course.”

Tony knew his friends were probably only going along with it and dropping the subject because they noticed his tension, but Tony didn’t plan to ask. He wanted to get lost in creation and experimentation. He didn’t want to think about Ultron and JARVIS and all the things he’d lost in that single moment which had forever fractured everything.

---

They worked through the day and into the evening creating manacles similar to those found on Asgard (thank you, stolen metalwork books!). They didn't have anyone to test them on since the cuffs wouldn't work on Loki—what with his magic being an integral part of the device—and short of slapping them on the Hulk, Tony and Bruce wouldn't be much of a gauge of its success.

It left them with nothing to do but place them somewhere secure in the lab and head up for a late dinner. They ordered takeout and sat in the penthouse. Tony, wanting something to laugh about, put on Snow White and introduced Loki to the wonders of a Disney prince.

The hilarity of his reactions was well worth almost choking on a dumpling.

When they finished eating, Bruce wished them goodnight and headed down to his floor, leaving Loki and Tony alone.

The penthouse was quiet, the movie long ended, and they were sitting on the couch with their bodies pressed together. On another night, it could have turned intimate and physical, but Loki's expression was too weighted for that.

“You miss your lost creation.”

Tony sucked in a sharp, pained breath. He felt like he'd been punched. He had to swallow twice before he could even speak, “He meant a lot to me. I...” Tony closed his eyes. “I lost him and we made Vision. The world needs him, apparently, but sometimes...”

“All you see is your lost son.”

Tony jerked his head up to Loki, feeling like he'd just been scraped raw. Loki's eyes were full of compassion and when he held out his arms, Tony immediately crawled into them and pressed his face against Loki's chest.

It was *comforting*, and this was the first time anyone apart from Rhodey had seemed like they understood.

Loki had known about Ultron and JARVIS even before their alliance, but it was only the basics, and the rest he'd inferred from being around Tony. He didn't have all the facts, and most people wouldn't care about learning them, but Tony felt long fingers start to card through his hair.

“Tell me about him,” Loki said softly. “Tell me about what happened. Tell me whatever you wish, and I will listen.”

Tony's hands gripped Loki's shirt and he just wanted to burrow even further into Loki's warmth. He didn't, instead, he shifted to get more comfortable and closed his eyes.

It took him a few moments to collect his thoughts, but then he opened his mouth and started to speak; recounting JARVIS' life from the very beginning to what became his end.



# Chapter 47

## Chapter Notes

I'm not sure how this chapter came out. But, well, hopefully you all enjoy it! I had a lot of loose threads to mention in this chapter so, that's what you get ;)

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

Tony didn't know how long he spoke about JARVIS, but he felt exhausted by the time he was done. He'd told Loki everything; about their bond, their friendship, the first trials of the Iron Man suit when he'd returned from Afghanistan and how JARVIS had always looked out for him.

His voice choked up when he explained exactly what had happened with Ultron, but Loki's fingers never stopped running through his hair. Tony ended up falling silent with his head resting on Loki's chest, feeling soothed by the mage's grounding touches and even breathing.

They were quiet for a long time before Loki said, "He meant a great deal to you. I'm sorry I never met him."

Tony let out a rough laugh. "Well, you kind of did." He lifted his head and caught Loki's confused gaze. "When you invaded my tower and threw me out a window."

Loki snorted. "And a fine meeting that was."

"Well, it worked out in the end. I mean, we ended up here."

Loki's expression softened. "Yes, that is true."

Tony smiled back, but he didn't hold Loki's gaze for long as he placed his head back on the other man's chest. He felt good here, *safe* even... but that didn't mean things would remain simple.

"You probably shouldn't stay tonight," Tony murmured.

Loki stiffened. "Oh?"

"Yeah." Tony's fingers played with Loki's shirt. "I don't sleep well, when I remember things."

Loki, if possible, stiffened further. "The invasion."

He sounded pained and Tony hurriedly sat up. Loki's expression was guilt-ridden and Tony hurried to reassure him.

“No! I mean, okay, maybe, but not *you*. It’s not *you*, alright? I have a fucking mountain of nightmares, and the Chitauri barely scratch the surface.”

“But if my presence will not help you-”

“No, no, *no*,” Tony insisted. “You *would* help, you already do - I feel... I feel *safe* around you, Loki. It’s like nothing bad will happen because you’re here.” Tony didn’t know if he was explaining this right. He hissed and ran a hand over his face. “It’s not you. It’s... it’s me.” He grimaced. “No one wants to share a bed with someone who wakes up in the middle of a panic attack.”

Loki didn’t say anything for a moment, but his fingers soon came back to run through Tony’s hair. His eyes flew to the other man’s face to find Loki’s expression now soft and understanding. “I would happily share your bed, Anthony. No nightmare or panic could force me away.”

Tony wanted to protest, to say ‘*you don’t know that*’, but the truth was, Loki *did* know it. He was telling the absolute truth. He would stay and he would help. He wouldn’t run or cringe away; how could he? Loki had as many nightmares as Tony did.

And Tony had made a promise to stay when they were in Asgard and Loki had warned him of the same thing. Neither of them would leave over a little disrupted sleep.

Tony swallowed down his instinctual protest. His voice was a little rough, but he still managed to say, “Thanks, Loki.”

Loki smiled and his hand moved from Tony’s hair to lightly brush his cheek. It was an affectionate and comforting gesture and Tony leant into it. Tony had always been fond of physical contact, and not everyone (not even Pepper) understood that it meant more than just sex. He was lucky that Loki was just as keen to soak up affection as he was.

“Are you ready to retire and sleep?” Loki asked gently. “Or shall we stay up longer and find something else to occupy us?”

It was an offer of distraction; a way to switch tracks and think of something else, but Tony didn’t want to throw himself into a project and he couldn’t afford to stay up half the night. There were too many things they needed to do.

Sighing, Tony laid back down against Loki’s chest. “Can you just talk to me for a bit?”

“About what?”

“I don’t know. I don’t care. Something that won’t make it hard to sleep.”

Loki made a thoughtful noise, but it only took a few moments for something green to shimmer out of the corner of Tony’s eye. Tony turned to better see it and he frowned. “A book?”

“I thought I might read to you.”

Tony frowned, but amusement was in his voice. "I'm not a child, you know."

"You are not, but this was a favourite novel of mine as a youth. I thought you might enjoy it."

Tony instantly brightened; curiosity and enthusiasm taking over. He got himself more comfortable. It took some rearranging, and Loki ended up using magic to make the couch a little bit bigger, but they got there in the end. Loki also conjured a green blanket to throw over them.

When they were settled, Loki had one arm around Tony while the other held the book propped up in front of him. It was comfortable, warm and perfect.

When Loki found the first page and began to read, Tony closed his eyes and let Loki's voice sweep him away from every memory that hurt.

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Tony slept through the night.

He woke up still on the couch which had been converted into a bed, his legs tangled with Loki's and his head still cushioned on the demi-god's chest. The book was closed with a bookmark on the coffee table and Loki was sleeping soundly.

Tony smiled as he looked at the other man. He really was lucky to have gained Loki.

He could have stayed curled around Loki for hours, but his bladder was demanding he move. He tried to wiggle out from Loki's hold, but the mage just held him tighter. He also scowled in his sleep. Tony chuckled and thought fondly, *possessive reindeer*.

Knowing he wouldn't get free on his own, he went to poke Loki in the chest, before he remembered something from weeks ago and his smirk turned devious. He wiggled his fingers before digging them into Loki's sides. The reaction was instantaneous, Loki jolted and his eyes snapped open, a laugh already slipping past his lips.

Tony couldn't help giggling in return and continuing his onslaught.

"A-Anthony!" Loki gasped, squirming and laughing. He hurriedly caught Tony's wrists and pulled them away. Tony tried for a few seconds to fight the grip before going slack in Loki's hold.

The mage was only just awake, but his glare was still fierce. Tony put on his most innocent expression. "I had to go to the bathroom and you wouldn't let me go."

"So you *tickled* me," Loki hissed. He didn't sound angry, more put out; like a cat who'd been dumped in water.

His expression was also scrunched into a pout and Tony impulsively leant forward and kissed Loki's cheek in both affection and apology. Loki's expression instantly softened and Tony gave Loki a charming smile for good measure. "I'll make you a pot of tea in apology?"

Loki let out a sigh, all the fight going out of him. A smile pulled at his lips. "Very well."

Tony's grin spread wider and was filled with triumph. He darted in to kiss Loki's lips briefly before he was pulling away from the other man and scrambling over his body to get off the couch and to the bathroom.

He didn't even think about what had happened or how affectionate he'd been, not until he was washing his hands and grinning at himself in the mirror. Tony wanted Loki to wake up laughing more often. He wanted to be the cause of Loki's smiles.

It was... interesting. Promising too. After all, they'd only agreed to a trial relationship while Tony sorted out his feelings. He still wasn't sure about what he felt, but reactions like that and a longing to make Loki happy... surely that could only mean good things?

Tony had never been great with emotions, and he'd made a hell of a mess of things with Pepper. He didn't want to fuck this up. He also didn't want to give Loki false hope. So, he'd just keep doing what he was doing and letting his instincts guide him.

Hopefully, things would turn out okay.

Stepping back out into the living room, he found Loki sitting on the couch that was once more in its usual proportions. Tony headed to the kitchen and asked, "What kind of-oh." He picked up the small satchel filled with leaves and looked over his shoulder at Loki, holding it up. "This one, I take it?"

"Yes," Loki agreed, happily relaxing against the couch.

Tony hid his grin by turning back to the tea and coffee. FRIDAY had already started the machine and was boiling the water, so all he had to do was put some leaves into the infuser and pour the hot water over it. Easy.

When he was done, he brought the pot and a mug over to Loki. He then went back for his own coffee before taking a seat beside the mage on the couch. It was nice. *Domestic*. He watched Loki pour his tea and sit back, drawing his feet up underneath him.

Things had never been this easy with anyone.

"I like starting the morning with you," Tony announced, well, more like *blurted*. The words came out without any thought or filter. "I liked it in Asgard but I like it... I like it *here*. In the penthouse. Just us."

Loki startled, his eyes widening briefly before he smiled, his dimples showing with his delight. "So do I."

"Good." Tony nodded, feeling happy. "We should do it more often."

"I would gladly do that," Loki answered softly, but his eyes were also amused. "Perhaps next time, in a proper bed."

Tony laughed. "And we can read more of the book. How about tonight?"

Loki looked delighted. "Yes."

“It’s a date,” Tony declared, still smiling. He did see Loki’s eyes flicker at his turn of phrase and Tony caught surprise, yearning and uncertainty, but it was only for a moment and was swiftly masked.

“But that is tonight,” Loki declared. “For now, we have things we must do. I plan to work on the spell to regain your weapons and there are a few steps that will require you.”

Tony felt a thrill of vindication and glee at the prospect. “Whatever you need.”

“Good.” Loki placed down his tea and stood from the couch. “We shall have breakfast and then head to my floor.”

“Sounds good,” Tony agreed, standing up as well, but taking his coffee with him as he followed Loki to the kitchen.

He wasn’t the best cook, but he was happy to help, even if that just meant manning the toaster and spreading butter and jam. After all, it was fun to watch Loki, especially when it meant seeing him use his seidr.

Only, Tony found he was getting a little more up close and personal than normal.

He was leaning against the counter, watching Loki cut vegetables for an omelette while his magic pulled out utensils and ingredients and hovered them through the air. That was fine, normal even (hah, this was now *normal*. He loved his life) but what *wasn’t* normal was feeling something... touch him.

It wasn’t a bad feeling, it felt warm and happy. It was like a buzz under his skin, or a cat rubbing against his leg. It took Tony a moment to realise what it was.

“Um, Loki. Is your magic kind of... nuzzling me?”

Loki froze, his body going rigid, and everything in the kitchen stopped. Tony tensed in response, worried he’d done something wrong.

“I didn’t realise.” Loki licked his lips and bowed his head. “I’m sorry.”

Tony could feel Loki pull at the magic, trying to withdraw it, but the seidr clung to him, trying not to let go. Loki gritted his teeth and Tony knew he was about to *yank* the magic free and Tony... Tony didn’t want that.

He stepped over to Loki and placed a hand on his arm. “Hey, it’s okay. It wasn’t a complaint. I just wasn’t sure what was going on.”

Loki swallowed. He still didn’t look at Tony. “I like you, Anthony, and my magic does as well. It seeks you, it...” he grimaced, “*wants* you.” He clenched his fists. “I should have better control over it.”

“Hey, it’s alright.”

“No, it is *not*,” Loki rebutted.

He looked like he was beating himself up and Tony didn't like that at all. Tony wrapped his arm around Loki's waist and decided to just get to the crux of the problem: "What about this is stressing you out? Your magic feels nice when it nuzzles me. I'm not angry. So what about this don't you like?"

Loki was still as tense as a bowstring, but he wasn't pulling away either physically or by withdrawing his magic. That was a good start.

It still took Loki a while to speak.

"Magic is a part of me," he explained. "It reacts to those around me. It can be violent, if I am threatened, it can be friendly, if I am fond of a person." He pulled in a breath. "I was taught as a child to keep it tightly reigned. The Aesir despise magic."

"I'm not Aesir," Tony said gently. Even while a whole new reason to punch Odin was springing to life. "If this is an important part of you, I'd never ask you to hide it."

Loki let out a rough laugh. "Of course you wouldn't, but it is not so simple, Anthony."

"Then explain it to me," Tony requested gently.

"Romantic entanglements and bonds are important to mages," Loki bit out. "Our seidr searches for compatibility. You," Loki clenched his teeth and pulled in a fierce breath, "are *compatible* to me."

Tony's eyes widened. "Oh."

It was all he managed to get out before Loki was pulling away and keeping his back to Tony. He crossed his arms defensively. Loki's laugh was bleak and his words bitter, "As if I have not burdened you with *enough* unwanted overtures."

"Hey," Tony instantly protested, stepping close and placing a hand on Loki's back. "We've been over this; they're not unwanted."

"But we are *new*," Loki hissed. "To add my seidr into such a fledging relationship?" He barked out a laugh. "I would never have dared."

"Well, your magic dared for you," Tony pointed out. He also rubbed his hand soothingly over Loki's back. "It also entered into our sex life which, as you know, I didn't complain about once." He squeezed Loki's shoulder. "If your magic wants to give me a hug, I'll open my arms gladly."

Loki was still tense against him, but he cautiously looked at Tony. His eyes were wide and wary, but underneath that was awe. "You truly meant that? You truly... do not mind?"

"Not at all," Tony told him, offering a smile. "You and your magic can cuddle me anytime."

Loki bit his lip, hesitance obvious, but slowly, Tony felt the same warm feeling from before flood over his skin. It was a gentle wave and each caress was full of affection and delight. It felt *amazing* and he didn't hesitate to say it.

“It’s incredible-”

His next words were cut off by the wind being knocked out of him and his mouth filling with Loki’s shirt as the mage spun in his hold and dragged Tony into one of the tightest hugs they’d ever shared.

“*Thank you,*” Loki whispered.

Tony wrapped his arms around Loki without hesitation. “Always, Lokes.”

He finally felt Loki completely and fully relax.

And even though this wasn’t over—they would need to talk about what exactly ‘magical bonds’ and ‘compatibility’ meant—right now it was more important to run his hand over Loki’s back and assure the mage that Tony wasn’t running for the hills.

They could work the rest out later.

---

It took a while to pull apart, but when they did, they returned to breakfast and didn’t say anything else about Loki’s magic. Tony continued to feel it buzzing around him, but it was easy to relax into the touch and focus on discussing the spell Loki would be crafting.

Loki needed to know as much as he could about what was stolen so that he could find each item and relocate them. The spell also had to be able to distinguish SHIELD agents from criminals. The idea was that any criminal would lose their weapons immediately, but while Tony hated SHIELD, he wouldn’t steal a gun from an active agent who would need it to save their life.

Loki suggested stealing extra weapons from the criminals to replace the ones they took from SHIELD. Tony didn’t mind that idea, but it did bring up the option of stealing a criminal’s entire arsenal just because they could.

But, the more they took, the harder and more magically draining it was for Loki.

The weapons that were stolen were easier to track since they bore Tony’s name. The possibilities that opened about regaining *all* his weapons from before he stopped weapons manufacturing was... tantalizing.

They spent hours discussing magic theory and spell-crafting. Tony wanted to know how everything worked and Loki wanted to make sure the spell would do exactly what Tony wanted. They ended up with magic books open all over the room and holograph screens showing Stark Industries weapons as Tony explained the components to give Loki a better understanding of each make and model.

It was complicated and *fascinating*, and each step closer filled Tony with glee and gratitude.

It was a shame the real world kept trying to butt in. Rhodey messaged him about the UN wanting more information on the alliances they’d forged. Pepper messaged him about

publicity interviews to discuss Animal Whisperer and get more positive exposure for Loki. SHIELD tried to contact them about a debriefing and exchange of information.

Tony just wanted to science in peace, but people were determined to ruin it.

When Tony glared at his phone for the third time in five minutes, Loki sighed. "It seems we will have to continue another time."

Tony let out a frustrated breath, but he knew Loki was right.

"I remember the days when Iron Man wasn't approved for hero work," Tony grumbled. "When the universe is safe, I want to go on vacation."

But that wouldn't be any time soon.

"Okay." Tony pinched the bridge of his nose. "We need to figure out how much we're telling the UN and what we're giving away to SHIELD. I can negotiate with Pepper about a publicity tour."

"Will that be wise, if she is soon to resign?" Loki questioned warily.

"I'll see what she's pitching and go from there, but she's not asking alone; she's cc'd the public relations head of Stark Industries into the email."

Loki nodded, accepting his decision. "SHIELD need not know anything but the bare minimum, but your UN will be more complicated."

"We need to put the fear of Thanos into them," Tony acknowledged. "But we can't make them fear *us* and the political power we hold. It's going to be a nightmare."

"We will need to join James at their offices and speak-"

"Woah, woah, woah," Tony interrupted. "*James?* I'm sorry, when did you and Rhodey end up on a first name basis?"

Loki raised his eyebrows. "Surely this is not pertinent information?"

"Of course, it is! My friends became first-name friends, and nobody told me?"

Loki rolled his eyes. "We spoke yesterday when you were visiting Miss Potts. He was worried. I realised I had grown very fond of him. I chose to use his first name." Loki still looked amused. "Are you now sufficiently briefed on the situation?"

Tony went to declare *no he was not*; he was curious about what they had talked about and *how* first names had come about, but before he could say as much, FRIDAY spoke, "Boss. Dr Banner is requesting your presence in the lab."

"Does *everyone* want a piece of us today?" Tony complained. Yet, a moment later he was giving a small nod. "Yeah, okay, tell him we'll be right down." He pointed at Loki and insisted, "Don't think this is over."



“Of course not,” Loki remarked, good-naturedly.

Tony wasn't fooled by that compliant tone. He knew Loki and he could tell that the mage would avoid explaining it. Tony could press him, but if Loki wanted to keep the content of their conversation secret, he'd let him. Tony might be curious, but he wasn't going to push.

So, he left it alone and headed for the elevator with Loki close behind. It only took a few minutes to arrive at the lab, and his instinctive smile at seeing Bruce was quick to fall when he noticed the pinched expression to the scientist's face.

“Bruce?” His eyes flicked over the lab, searching for a problem. “What's wrong?”

“There's nothing else I can do to help you with Animal Whisperer.” He looked away. “SHIELD are too close to knowing I'm at the tower. I... I shouldn't stay here anymore, Tony.”

Tony's stomach dropped. “What? No! We need you! You can't go.”

“You don't need me,” Bruce instantly disagreed. “You're fine on your own.”

“Absolutely not,” Tony protested stepping towards the other man. “I need my Science Bro, come on Bruce. Please?”

Bruce's eyes were apologetic and guilty when he raised them to look at Tony. “I'm sorry, but I shouldn't be here.” He very lightly and briefly patted Tony's arm, as if afraid to touch him. “You don't want people to find the Hulk here.”

“Fuck other people,” Tony instantly argued. “I want you here.” He reached out, gripping the other man's arm. “Stay?”

For a moment, Bruce seemed to waver before he pulled his arm away. “I'm sorry, Tony.”

Tony stared at the other man, feeling lost. He didn't know what to say or how to argue.

“I'll pack my bags and be gone by dinner. I know you'll sort everything out and I know Loki will keep you safe.”

“But, Bruce...”

“It's better this way,” he insisted. “I'm better off gone.”

Tony opened his mouth, wanting to protest, but Bruce was already turning away and stepping into the elevator. Bruce stared at his feet the entire time, and Tony watched as one more friend walked away.

Dun, dun, dunnnnn. Well, sort of. I mean, maybe some of you won't care about Bruce's declaration XD

He has been mentioning leaving for a while and never gone through with it. We'll have to see what the future holds for them all now ;)

Thanks for reading!

# Chapter 48 - Full Version

## Chapter Notes

It's that time of month again! Another chapter of SYT! And this time, we get some smut ;)

If, however, you want the chapter minus smut, then that is in the next chapter. Either way, enjoy!

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

Loki knew he wasn't the sole owner of Anthony Stark's kind regard and affection. He was a relatively new addition to the man's circle of friends. He was also the only one sharing Anthony's kisses and physical intimacy.

And yet, it didn't hurt any less, to watch the man he cared for stare after Banner looking hurt and adrift.

"Anthony?" Loki questioned, keeping his tone soft.

Anthony let out a frustrated breath. The engineer turned and ran a hand through his hair, but he didn't settle, instead he began to pace, his movements short and filled with unhappiness.

"Anthony-"

"Why can't he just *stay*?" Anthony demanded, cutting Loki off. "What is so hard about it? I said I'd keep anyone from knowing he's here and I *will*. I'd keep him safe! I'd fucking make the public see sense about the Hulk! It's not... I don't..." He stopped abruptly and he looked at Loki with sad eyes. "Why won't he let me try?"

*Why won't he trust me?* Loki heard, hidden beneath Anthony's words. It made him step forward before he could stop himself. He didn't touch his shoulder, instead, he pulled the vulnerable man into his arms and wrapped him in a hug.

Anthony stiffened for a moment before he melted into the embrace and his arms wrapped around Loki's back. He pressed his face against Loki's chest and when he spoke, it was a quiet mumble, "He can help. He doesn't have to fight. But he's *Bruce* and, I just... I want my friends close."

"You want to keep them safe. You want to reward the loyalty of the few you can trust."

Anthony gave a pained laugh. "And none of them want to stay."

"I wish to stay," Loki corrected. "So would James, if his duties didn't call him away."

“Two out of three. Three out of *everyone*. What the hell does that say?”

“It says most Midgardian’s are fools,” Loki insisted.

But Anthony was already shaking his head and he pushed away from Loki. The mage resisted for a moment before forcing himself to let the smaller man go. Anthony had his back to Loki. “I need to work in the lab.”

It was both a dismissal and a request to be alone.

Loki didn’t want to leave the man. He didn’t want to be pushed away or have Anthony believe he needed to suffer in silence. But, he also knew that right now, Anthony did not *want* company. He wanted to lose himself in work and push his feelings far to the side.

Loki recognised the tactic and while he would not deny the man his wish for privacy, he wouldn’t leave him to dark thoughts indefinitely.

He stepped close and placed one hand on Anthony’s shoulder. “I will leave you, but in one hour I will return.”

“Loki-”

“There is no argument you could make that would change my mind,” Loki stated forcefully. “I will return with lunch and spend the rest of the day with you.”

He felt the other man waver, but only for a moment before he relaxed entirely. He didn’t look at Loki, but he agreed, “Okay.”

Loki squeezed his shoulder before letting him go. He disappeared from the lab in a shimmer of magic, but he didn’t go far. He appeared outside a door in the tower and pulled in a calming breath, attempting to reign in his anger as he knocked.

He had to wait almost a minute before Banner opened his door, looking at Loki warily. “Loki-”

“I would speak to you, before you depart.”

Banner grimaced. “If it’s about the Animal Whisperer-”

“I could not care one iota for that stupid woman or your unfinished plans to help Anthony track her.” Banner frowned with confusion, and Loki had no concern with making his reasons for visiting clear. “I have come because your pathetic self-pity has hurt Anthony.”

Guilt instantly erupted in Banner’s eyes and he looked away. He hunched a in the doorway, as if hoping to make himself smaller. “I didn’t want to hurt Tony.”

“Half of his associates have betrayed him, broken his trust, and turned their back on him. If you cannot see the resemblance in your own actions, you are a fool.”

Banner snapped up his head, incredulity in his expression and beneath that, anger. “I would never betray Tony! I’m not turning my back on him-”

“Oh?” Loki needled. “Is that not the sight he has just had to witness as you walked from his lab?”

“We’re not talking about the physical action-”

“Oh? So, we are talking about the theoretical? The *emotional*? How you are one more friend in a line of many to leave once the situation grows too *difficult* or *unpalatable*-”

“Tony has enough problems on his plate without *me* to add to them,” Banner grit out.

“Oh? So, you are merely leaving him in his hour of need? Refusing to help when the universe and his reputation is in danger?”

“No! That’s not-”

“It isn’t it?” Loki scoffed. “Then please, Banner, *enlighten*-”

“I will only make things *worse*,” Banner shouted, his voice a rough growl. His skin even tinted a faint green. Loki had to force himself to stand his ground and not flinch at the hint of what lay beneath.

He waited until the colour had receded before he said, his voice softer, “I do not know how you could make things any worse than I have.” Banner raised his tired eyes. “Your world—most of the *realms* despise me, and yet Anthony not only stands at my side, but he proclaims me his partner. Anthony is the most selfless and loving soul I have ever encountered. He would move a mountain or sacrifice his very life for those he holds dear.”

Banner swallowed and looked at his feet. “He has a big heart.”

“He does,” Loki agreed. “And we are fortunate enough to have a place within it.” Banner looked back at him and Loki held his gaze. “He wishes for you to stay, but he will never demand that you do.”

A hint of a smile crossed Banner’s lips. “So, you’ll do it for him?”

“I will act in whatever way is necessary to make him happy,” Loki said simply.

“He’s lucky he has you.” The honest statement threw Loki for a moment and he blinked with surprise. It made Banner’s smile spread a little wider, but it remained a touch sad. “You’re both lucky to have each other.” He sighed. “But I still shouldn’t stay. I make everything worse.” He looked down at his hand and clenched it in a fist. “Something’s going to happen, and *he’s* going to come out.” Then, even softer, so quiet that Loki almost didn’t hear it, “Or she’ll find out I’m here.”

Loki frowned, filing that piece of information away for later.

“And if the worst should happen, wouldn’t it be best to have a friend?” He answered.  
“Someone who will protect you and those around you?” He could see Banner’s indecision and he added one final thing, “There is only one person I trust in all the realms. When I am so fortunate as to share his home and his good graces, why would I ever attempt to leave?”

Banner remained silent, his emotions and thoughts in turmoil as he considered everything Loki had said. There was nothing further he could do but hope Banner made the correct choice.

“I have said my piece,” Loki concluded. “The decision is yours.”

He gave Banner a polite nod, but didn’t wait for the man to reply as he teleported from the man’s floor and up to his own. The moment he was in the privacy of his rooms he let out a deep sigh.

“Mr Liesmith?” FRIDAY asked, concerned.

He waved her off. “It is nothing.”

Or at least, it was nothing the artificial servant could assist him with. He wanted Banner to stay to please Anthony and yet, a selfish part of him wished to have the engineer all to himself. He sighed again, but this time, it was a smaller sound.

He stepped into the kitchen and began searching through the cupboards and fridge for ingredients. He would not be able to focus on anything magic-related as he waited to return to Anthony. He decided instead to prepare a plentiful lunch of Anthony’s favourite foods.

He wished to show the mortal that, regardless of Banner’s decision, there was one person in this tower who cared for him and cherished his company.

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When he visited Anthony, he found the man bent over the table with the innards of some technological marvel spread out before him.

It took some coaxing to get him to wash his hands and eat, but when the engineer realised each item had been made by Loki, he offered the mage a small but utterly blinding smile. The quiet, shy “*thanks*” he received meant more to Loki than he could put into words.

After their meal, Anthony dragged him into the designs and creation of what turned out to be, not an improvement for Anthony’s armour, but a weapon for *Loki*.

Anthony assured him he didn’t doubt Loki’s fighting prowess or magic, but if Loki was tired or running low on seidr, Anthony wanted him to have a backup option. It was such a kind and *generous* gesture.

Yet, after all that had just happened, Loki felt it important to make one thing clear.

“You know you do not need to craft me items to keep me here,” Loki told him. It made Anthony jerk to look at him with wide, guilty eyes. Loki smiled. “I do not think there is anything that could drag me away.”

Anthony ducked his head and looked away. "I... I know," he whispered. "I know you don't care. You didn't even ask for it, but I... I *wanted* to make you something." He looked back up. "I want to know you're safe."

Loki felt his chest flood with warmth, and he couldn't stop his soft smile. "Then I will not dream of stopping you."

Anthony relaxed again and enthusiastically went back to gesturing at the weapon and explaining everything he planned to have it do. He didn't stop talking or working, not once. He also never glanced at the clock or made any comment about Banner.

Loki did catch him glancing at the elevator hopefully, but every time no one appeared, he forced himself back to work. Loki wished he could smooth the hurt from Anthony's brow, but he knew that this was not something he could solve, only Banner could do that.

Yet, when the scientist never appeared, Loki felt his agitation and disappointment grow. He had thought his conversation with the man would change Banner's mind. Apparently, it had not.

The hours passed them by without interruption and when evening finally approached, Loki had to insist, "It's time for dinner, Anthony."

"Don't need it," he muttered, not looking away from the project.

"You cannot stay down here forever."

"I'm working on your back up plan," Anthony declared, stubbornness in his voice.

Loki very nearly sighed. He was trying to devise an argument when FRIDAY announced, "Dr Banner has announced his own interest in dinner. He would like to share a meal with you and Mr Liesmith."

Anthony froze, for a moment he didn't even seem to be breathing.

"A farewell dinner?" Anthony asked warily.

"No, Boss. Dr Banner has made no indication he plans to leave the tower."

Anthony took a moment to process the words before he was up and out of his seat and darting for the elevator. "Where is he?"

"The communal kitchen," FRIDAY declared when Anthony was already half in the elevator. Loki barely managed to join him before the doors were shutting and they were moving towards the right floor.

Anthony was vibrating with repressed energy and the moment the doors were open he was out like a shot. Banner was standing by the kitchen counter and turned to face them. Anthony stilled a few metres from the other man. He looked him over like he didn't quite believe it.

"You're staying?" Anthony asked, a thread of vulnerability in his voice.

“Yes,” Bruce said. His eyes briefly flickered to Loki. “I-”

But anything further was cut off by Anthony throwing himself at the scientist in a hug. The air left Banner in a startled exhale and he stumbled before righting himself and hugging Anthony back.

The sight and Anthony’s happiness made Loki smile gently. He walked to the counter and took a seat at one of the stools. When Anthony pulled back his face was filled with delight. “You’re staying? Not leaving in a couple of days? You’re staying-staying?”

Banner laughed lightly. “I’m staying-staying.” Yet, a moment later his humour faded. “I’m not going to get involved in battles though, Tony. I’m sorry, but I don’t want people to know I’m here.”

“That’s fine. Totally one-hundred percent no problem,” Anthony hurried to assure him. “You can be our Science Guy. Hero from behind the scenes. You and FRIDAY, kicking ass and keeping me and Loki out of trouble.”

“Keeping you *and* Loki out of trouble?” Bruce glanced at Loki, his smile never fading. “Is that even possible?”

“Many have tried,” Loki said solemnly, “few succeed.”

“I’ll do my best anyway,” Banner said, his voice catching Loki’s attention more than the words. There was a promise laden within, and Loki knew, with one look in the scientist’s eyes, that he meant far more than curbing their mischief.

He was promising to do his best by *Anthony*. He had hurt the engineer once through fear and self-deprecation, but now he would no longer take their friendship for granted.

Loki gave a small incline of his head in both understanding and acceptance, and Banner nodded back. It allowed Loki to begin to relax knowing that, at least for now, Anthony had the companionship and support of his friend.

Anthony was not oblivious to the silent conversation and acknowledgment they had shared but, remarkably, he didn’t ask about it. Instead, he pulled back from Banner and smiled at them both.

“Okay! Celebratory dinner! Takeout and a bottle of wine; we’ll even do red, just for you Brucie-bear. We’re going to have a party! Movies until midnight, who’s with me?”

It was a testament to their affection for Anthony, that they both agreed without complaint or hesitation.

---

They didn’t stay up until midnight. They had dinner and moved to the penthouse where they watched a single film before Banner retired. He wished to read before bed, but he promised he would join Anthony in the lab tomorrow morning.



The moment they were alone, Anthony turned to face Loki. They had sat beside one another on the couch, with Banner on Anthony's right. Their legs and sides were pressed together, but Loki's focus was on the intensity of Anthony's gaze.

"You did something, didn't you?"

Loki debated deflecting, but in the end, he saw no reason to. "You wished for him to stay, I merely helped him reach the correct conclusion."

"You talked to him?" Anthony pressed, his eyes so close and yet, impossible to read. "Because you knew I wanted him here?"

"Yes," Loki agreed.

Anthony smiled, and the pleasure and happiness reached all the way up to his eyes. Loki grinned back, but before he could do anything else, Anthony was in his space and pressing their lips together.

Loki closed his eyes and kissed back. He expected it to be a short, affectionate embrace. He did *not* expect Anthony to break the kiss only to straddle his lap. He pulled in a startled breath and looked up at Anthony. The smaller man's hands had come to his shoulders and Anthony was looking down at him with wonder in his gaze.

"You're fucking amazing, did you know that?"

Loki swallowed and carefully brought his hands to Anthony's hips to help keep him steady. "It was nothing."

"No, it was a lot more than that."

Yet, before Loki could deny it, Anthony was bending down and kissing him again. His hands came to cup Loki's neck and his tongue swiped Loki's lips, asking for entry. Loki instantly complied while letting his hands trail over Anthony's back, catching in his shirt, but not yet skimming underneath it.

When Anthony broke the kiss, he gasped and leant his forehead against Loki's. "Tell me, if you want me to stop, okay?"

Loki planned to tell him he would *never* say that, but Anthony was already climbing off his lap, pushing back the coffee table and dropping to his knees between Loki's legs. Loki felt desire course through him as he looked down at the other man.

Anthony's eyes were dark and his smirk was devious as his hands ran over Loki's thighs. "I think I owe you a 'thank you'."

Loki swallowed. "The words would have sufficed."

Anthony tsked. "Only the best for you."

Licking his lips, Loki saw no reason to argue any further. He brought a hand to run through Anthony's hair. "If you insist."

Anthony, if possible, only looked more pleased as he reached for the ties of Loki's pants.

He undid them with ease, and Loki's cock was already half-hard as Anthony pulled it out. Loki tilted his head back against the couch. The touch of Anthony's hand was enough to have him biting back a moan.

Anthony stroked him with gentle but smooth strokes, designed to get Loki to full hardness, and the moment it had been achieved, Anthony was bending forward. Loki raised his head and was blessed with the sight of Anthony between his thighs, parting his lips and sliding his mouth around Loki's cock.

Loki moaned loudly and his fingers flexed in Anthony's hair. He felt Anthony's smile followed by an approving hum that made Loki's legs jerk as pleasure bolted through him.

"Anthony," he moaned, his voice wrecked and his fingers trembling in Anthony's hair.

The engineer just hummed again. He then shifted a little bit closer, and suddenly, Anthony was all business. His hand cupped the base of Loki's cock and he began to slide his mouth up and down. He used his tongue with precision and hollowed his cheeks in a way to make Loki cry out and close his eyes against the waves of sensation.

Oh, Anthony was *good* at this.

He knew exactly how to read Loki's body language and work his cock to bring him close to the edge. In what felt no time at all, Loki's orgasm was approaching. Loki almost didn't want to it to end. He didn't want to lose this moment.

Loki forced his head up from where he had pressed it back against the couch – having stared at the ceiling and panted Anthony's name. He looked down at Anthony, feeling his arousal surge at the sight.

"Anthony," he whimpered, and the other man shifted just enough to catch Loki's eyes. They were flooded with desire. He was *enjoying* kneeling at Loki's feet and pleasuring him. Anthony was beautiful and perfect and he desired *Loki*.

That knowledge and a low hum was all it took and Loki was coming with a cry. His hips jerked despite his best efforts, but Anthony was pulling off him, only the tip in his mouth as he swallowed Loki's release and stroked him through the last of his orgasm.

He went boneless as the pleasure left him, but he opened his eyes when he heard Anthony groaning. He looked down and found Anthony's eyes closed. His face was flushed as he rested his cheek on Loki's thigh. His hands weren't visible but judging by the motion of his arm, he was stroking himself off.

Loki let out a soft groan; and reached for him. He placed a hand on Anthony's hair and sent a small spark of magic into Anthony. It would send a small but intense vibration through his

cock. Anthony's back arched and he let out a shout that ended in a low, pleased moan as his orgasm overtook him. He collapsed further against Loki when he finished, panting heavily.

Loki smirked with pleasure and affection as he stroked his fingers through Anthony's hair.

It took the work of a moment to send out another burst of seidr, this time it cleaned the area around them and fixed their clothing. He saw Anthony smile from the corner of his eye.

His voice was a little rough as he said, "Have I mentioned I love your magic?"

"It's fond of you too," Loki replied. He could feel his seidr humming against Anthony, wrapping him in affection and warmth.

"It's nice," Anthony said, his eyes closed but his smile remaining. "I almost don't want to get up."

Loki chuckled. "But you cannot sleep on the floor."

"Mm," he hummed. "True."

It still took him a few moments to groan and push himself into a standing position. He stretched his back before holding out his hand. "Come to bed with me?"

Loki felt his heart flutter and he took the offering without hesitation. "Happily."

Anthony squeezed his hand and didn't let go even when Loki was standing. He pulled him gently towards the bedroom and Loki felt thrilled at the prospect of spending another night with Anthony wrapped in his arms.

## Chapter End Notes

Bruce stayed! He didn't even have to get some sense 'knocked' into him, just a few verbal daggers and some pacing and his big genius brain got the hint.

And Tony is so very happy with his boyfriend, and now, cuddles! Hopefully you all approve of such a chapter ;)

## Chapter 48 - Clean Version

### Chapter Notes

It's that time of month again! Another chapter of SYT! And this time, we get some further ~intimacy ;)

If, however, you want the chapter with smut, then that is in the previous chapter. This is the clean one for all who don't want to read about that!

Either way, enjoy!

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

Loki knew he wasn't the sole owner of Anthony Stark's kind regard and affection. He was a relatively new addition to the man's circle of friends. He was also the only one sharing Anthony's kisses and physical intimacy.

And yet, it didn't hurt any less, to watch the man he cared for stare after Banner looking hurt and adrift.

"Anthony?" Loki questioned, keeping his tone soft.

Anthony let out a frustrated breath. The engineer turned and ran a hand through his hair, but he didn't settle, instead he began to pace, his movements short and filled with unhappiness.

"Anthony-"

"Why can't he just *stay*?" Anthony demanded, cutting Loki off. "What is so hard about it? I said I'd keep anyone from knowing he's here and I *will*. I'd keep him safe! I'd fucking make the public see sense about the Hulk! It's not... I don't..." He stopped abruptly and he looked at Loki with sad eyes. "Why won't he let me try?"

*Why won't he trust me?* Loki heard, hidden beneath Anthony's words. It made him step forward before he could stop himself. He didn't touch his shoulder, instead, he pulled the vulnerable man into his arms and wrapped him in a hug.

Anthony stiffened for a moment before he melted into the embrace and his arms wrapped around Loki's back. He pressed his face against Loki's chest and when he spoke, it was a quiet mumble, "He can help. He doesn't have to fight. But he's *Bruce* and, I just... I want my friends close."

"You want to keep them safe. You want to reward the loyalty of the few you can trust."

Anthony gave a pained laugh. "And none of them want to stay."

“I wish to stay,” Loki corrected. “So would James, if his duties didn’t call him away.”

“Two out of three. Three out of *everyone*. What the hell does that say?”

“It says most Midgardian’s are fools,” Loki insisted.

But Anthony was already shaking his head and he pushed away from Loki. The mage resisted for a moment before forcing himself to let the smaller man go. Anthony had his back to Loki. “I need to work in the lab.”

It was both a dismissal and a request to be alone.

Loki didn’t want to leave the man. He didn’t want to be pushed away or have Anthony believe he needed to suffer in silence. But, he also knew that right now, Anthony did not *want* company. He wanted to lose himself in work and push his feelings far to the side.

Loki recognised the tactic and while he would not deny the man his wish for privacy, he wouldn’t leave him to dark thoughts indefinitely.

He stepped close and placed one hand on Anthony’s shoulder. “I will leave you, but in one hour I will return.”

“Loki-”

“There is no argument you could make that would change my mind,” Loki stated forcefully. “I will return with lunch and spend the rest of the day with you.”

He felt the other man waver, but only for a moment before he relaxed entirely. He didn’t look at Loki, but he agreed, “Okay.”

Loki squeezed his shoulder before letting him go. He disappeared from the lab in a shimmer of magic, but he didn’t go far. He appeared outside a door in the tower and pulled in a calming breath, attempting to reign in his anger as he knocked.

He had to wait almost a minute before Banner opened his door, looking at Loki warily.

“Loki-”

“I would speak to you, before you depart.”

Banner grimaced. “If it’s about the Animal Whisperer-”

“I could not care one iota for that stupid woman or your unfinished plans to help Anthony track her.” Banner frowned with confusion, and Loki had no concern with making his reasons for visiting clear. “I have come because your pathetic self-pity has hurt Anthony.”

Guilt instantly erupted in Banner’s eyes and he looked away. He hunched a in the doorway, as if hoping to make himself smaller. “I didn’t want to hurt Tony.”

“Half of his associates have betrayed him, broken his trust, and turned their back on him. If you cannot see the resemblance in your own actions, you are a fool.”

Banner snapped up his head, incredulity in his expression and beneath that, anger. “I would never betray Tony! I’m not turning my back on him-”

“Oh?” Loki needled. “Is that not the sight he has just had to witness as you walked from his lab?”

“We’re not talking about the physical action-”

“Oh? So, we are talking about the theoretical? The *emotional*? How you are one more friend in a line of many to leave once the situation grows too *difficult* or *unpalatable*-”

“Tony has enough problems on his plate without *me* to add to them,” Banner grit out.

“Oh? So, you are merely leaving him in his hour of need? Refusing to help when the universe and his reputation is in danger?”

“No! That’s not-”

“It isn’t it?” Loki scoffed. “Then please, Banner, *enlighten*-”

“I will only make things *worse*,” Banner shouted, his voice a rough growl. His skin even tinted a faint green. Loki had to force himself to stand his ground and not flinch at the hint of what lay beneath.

He waited until the colour had receded before he said, his voice softer, “I do not know how you could make things any worse than I have.” Banner raised his tired eyes. “Your world—most of the *realms* despise me, and yet Anthony not only stands at my side, but he proclaims me his partner. Anthony is the most selfless and loving soul I have ever encountered. He would move a mountain or sacrifice his very life for those he holds dear.”

Banner swallowed and looked at his feet. “He has a big heart.”

“He does,” Loki agreed. “And we are fortunate enough to have a place within it.” Banner looked back at him and Loki held his gaze. “He wishes for you to stay, but he will never demand that you do.”

A hint of a smile crossed Banner’s lips. “So, you’ll do it for him?”

“I will act in whatever way is necessary to make him happy,” Loki said simply.

“He’s lucky he has you.” The honest statement threw Loki for a moment and he blinked with surprise. It made Banner’s smile spread a little wider, but it remained a touch sad. “You’re both lucky to have each other.” He sighed. “But I still shouldn’t stay. I make everything worse.” He looked down at his hand and clenched it in a fist. “Something’s going to happen, and *he’s* going to come out.” Then, even softer, so quiet that Loki almost didn’t hear it, “Or she’ll find out I’m here.”

Loki frowned, filing that piece of information away for later.

“And if the worst should happen, wouldn’t it be best to have a friend?” He answered.  
“Someone who will protect you and those around you?” He could see Banner’s indecision and he added one final thing, “There is only one person I trust in all the realms. When I am so fortunate as to share his home and his good graces, why would I ever attempt to leave?”

Banner remained silent, his emotions and thoughts in turmoil as he considered everything Loki had said. There was nothing further he could do but hope Banner made the correct choice.

“I have said my piece,” Loki concluded. “The decision is yours.”

He gave Banner a polite nod, but didn’t wait for the man to reply as he teleported from the man’s floor and up to his own. The moment he was in the privacy of his rooms he let out a deep sigh.

“Mr Liesmith?” FRIDAY asked, concerned.

He waved her off. “It is nothing.”

Or at least, it was nothing the artificial servant could assist him with. He wanted Banner to stay to please Anthony and yet, a selfish part of him wished to have the engineer all to himself. He sighed again, but this time, it was a smaller sound.

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The hours passed them by without interruption and when evening finally approached, Loki had to insist, "It's time for dinner, Anthony."

"Don't need it," he muttered, not looking away from the project.

"You cannot stay down here forever."

"I'm working on your back up plan," Anthony declared, stubbornness in his voice.

Loki very nearly sighed. He was trying to devise an argument when FRIDAY announced, "Dr Banner has announced his own interest in dinner. He would like to share a meal with you and Mr Liesmith."

Anthony froze, for a moment he didn't even seem to be breathing.

"A farewell dinner?" Anthony asked warily.

"No, Boss. Dr Banner has made no indication he plans to leave the tower."

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"You're staying?" Anthony asked, a thread of vulnerability in his voice.



“Yes,” Bruce said. His eyes briefly flickered to Loki. “I-”

But anything further was cut off by Anthony throwing himself at the scientist in a hug. The air left Banner in a startled exhale and he stumbled before righting himself and hugging Anthony back.

The sight and Anthony’s happiness made Loki smile gently. He walked to the counter and took a seat at one of the stools. When Anthony pulled back his face was filled with delight. “You’re staying? Not leaving in a couple of days? You’re staying-staying?”

Banner laughed lightly. “I’m staying-staying.” Yet, a moment later his humour faded. “I’m not going to get involved in battles though, Tony. I’m sorry, but I don’t want people to know I’m here.”

“That’s fine. Totally one-hundred percent no problem,” Anthony hurried to assure him. “You can be our Science Guy. Hero from behind the scenes. You and FRIDAY, kicking ass and keeping me and Loki out of trouble.”

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“Okay! Celebratory dinner! Takeout and a bottle of wine; we’ll even do red, just for you Brucie-bear. We’re going to have a party! Movies until midnight, who’s with me?”

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They didn’t stay up until midnight. They had dinner and moved to the penthouse where they watched a single film before Banner retired. He wished to read before bed, but he promised he would join Anthony in the lab tomorrow morning.

The moment they were alone, Anthony turned to face Loki. They had sat beside one another on the couch, with Banner on Anthony's right. Their legs and sides were pressed together, but Loki's focus was on the intensity of Anthony's gaze.

"You did something, didn't you?"

Loki debated deflecting, but in the end, he saw no reason to. "You wished for him to stay, I merely helped him reach the correct conclusion."

"You talked to him?" Anthony pressed, his eyes so close and yet, impossible to read. "Because you knew I wanted him here?"

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Anthony smiled, and the pleasure and happiness reached all the way up to his eyes. Loki grinned back, but before he could do anything else, Anthony was in his space and pressing their lips together.

Loki closed his eyes and kissed back. He expected it to be a short, affectionate embrace. He did *not* expect Anthony to break the kiss only to straddle his lap. He pulled in a startled breath and looked up at Anthony. The smaller man's hands had come to his shoulders and Anthony was looking down at him with wonder in his gaze.

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Anthony's eyes were dark and his smirk was devious as his hands ran over Loki's thighs. "I think I owe you a 'thank you'."

Loki swallowed. "The words would have sufficed."

Anthony tsked. "Only the best for you."

Licking his lips, Loki saw no reason to argue any further. He brought a hand to run through Anthony's hair. "If you insist."

Anthony, if possible, only looked more pleased as he reached for the ties of Loki's pants. It was all too easy to give in to Anthony, and when they were both sated, Anthony was still kneeling with his head resting on Loki's thigh.

Loki ran his fingers through Anthony's hair with affection, having cleaned and fixed their clothing with a spell. He saw Anthony smile from the corner of his eye.

His voice was a little rough as he said, "Have I mentioned I love your magic?"

"It's fond of you too," Loki replied. He could feel his seidr humming against Anthony, wrapping him in affection and warmth.

"It's nice," Anthony said, his eyes closed but his smile remaining. "I almost don't want to get up."

Loki chuckled. "But you cannot sleep on the floor."

"Mm," he hummed. "True."

It still took him a few moments to groan and push himself into a standing position. He stretched his back before holding out his hand. "Come to bed with me?"

Loki felt his heart flutter and he took the offering without hesitation. "Happily."

Anthony squeezed his hand and didn't let go even when Loki was standing. He pulled him gently towards the bedroom and Loki felt thrilled at the prospect of spending another night with Anthony wrapped in his arms.

## Chapter End Notes

Bruce stayed! He didn't even have to get some sense 'knocked' into him, just a few verbal daggers and some pacing and his big genius brain got the hint.

And Tony is so very happy with his boyfriend, and now, cuddles! Hopefully you all approve of such a chapter ;)

# Chapter 50

## Chapter Notes

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

When Tony woke up, he felt warm and relaxed. There was an arm slung around his waist and his legs were tangled with another's. It took only a few moments to realise it was Loki and to remember what had happened last night.

Loki had convinced Bruce to stay, not because Tony had asked or because Loki wanted Bruce there himself; he'd done it unprompted, because he knew it would make Tony happy. There had been very few people in Tony's life who would do something like that for him.

Kissing Loki after confirming the truth had been instinctive, giving him a proper *thank you* had been more spur of the moment, but Tony didn't regret either. How could he? It had ended up with them in bed together.

They hadn't done anything but sleep. Tony was in boxers and a shirt while Loki was in black pants. Loki's magic was still kind of *around* him too. It was like a warm hug or fingers through his hair. It just felt nice, and it—along with Loki pressed against him—made waking up a pleasure rather than a chore.

He could stay here all morning.

When FRIDAY began to silently project the morning information, he lifted a hand and gently dismissed them. He didn't want to wake up just yet. He snuggled back against Loki and closed his eyes.

He didn't know how long he dozed for, but the next time he woke up, Loki's fingers were gently stroking his chest through his shirt. It was a soothing motion and he smiled.

Opening his eyes, he turned his head to find Loki's alert green eyes looking at him.  
"Morning."

"Good morning," Loki replied. "FRIDAY says you fell back asleep."

"Mm," he closed his eyes again. "Didn't want to get up."

Loki chuckled and his fingers came to Tony's hair, gently threading through it and making Tony barely resist a purr. He did arch into the touch, only wanting more. He had always been an affectionate person, especially with people he liked and trusted.

"Do you plan to remain in bed all day?" Loki questioned, sounding amused.

"Maybe," Tony mumbled. "I'm comfy."

"Lazy thing," Loki chastised. Yet, he also never moved away or stopped stroking Tony's hair. Tony closed his eyes, wanting to fall back asleep, but Loki gently pointed out, "There are

many things that require our attention.”

Tony groaned. “Why you gotta wreck my good morning?”

“I am loath to do it,” Loki assured him. He even bent down and pressed a soft kiss to Tony’s head. “But, the sooner we complete our tasks, the sooner we can *truly* spend a day relaxing.”

“You say that like something new won’t happen,” Tony mumbled.

He was well acquainted with Murphy’s Law. Or rather, what should now be dubbed *Tony Stark’s Bad Luck*. Yet, despite his complaint, he still groaned and pulled away from the warm cocoon of Loki’s arms and sat up in bed. The mage looked up at Tony fondly.

Tony flashed him a small smile. “Breakfast? I’ll make the tea and coffee, you cook?”

A grin danced at Loki’s lips. “I see you assign the easy task to yourself.”

“I choose the task I’m less likely to ruin,” Tony rebutted.

Loki chuckled, but he also gave a nod of agreement, and in unison they climbed out of bed and headed to the kitchen. It was just so *easy* to share the morning with Loki. They walked around one another, brushing arms in the kitchen as Tony made the drinks, and occasionally, was asked to pass things to Loki or help him with the toast. Loki knew better than to ask Tony to flip the omelette, but he did have him pop the toast down.

Loki was sipping his tea as he worked, while Tony leant against the counter with his coffee and watched. Loki’s seidr was normally used to cut the vegetables, but he wanted to conserve his energy for the day ahead. It meant their breakfast wasn’t as fancy as usual, but Tony didn’t mind.

When they sat down on stools beside one another, their elbows brushed as they ate. Tony could feel the warmth of Loki’s body as well as the warmth of his seidr. It settled over him like a blanket and Tony smiled at the feeling. It made him *want* to touch Loki, and he hooked his ankle over Loki’s. The mage paused mid-bite, sending him a curious look. Tony just grinned and pressed his body even closer.

Loki shook his head. “Are you trying to make it difficult for us to eat?”

“Nah,” Tony answered. “Just trying to get as much of you as I can.”

Loki’s expression softened. “Well, I shan’t complain about that.”

“Good,” Tony insisted.

He then went back to the last of his breakfast and his sweet, sweet caffeine. He had just finished the last sip when FRIDAY informed him, “You have an email from Miss Potts, Boss.”

Some of Tony’s good mood faded, but he knew he couldn’t avoid it. “Yeah, alright. Where’s my-” a shimmer of green and a tablet appeared before him. He flashed the mage a grin.

“Thanks, Lokes.”

He didn't wait for the other man's response as he dived into all the messages he'd dismissed from FRIDAY earlier, the email from Pepper being his top priority. It was long, but to the point. Loki and Tony needed publicity. She'd drafted him a week-long schedule filled with notes and plans on how to better the media profile of their partnership and Stark Industries. It was a draft, not yet sent to the PR department and awaiting his approval and any changes he might wish to make. She wasn't going to make another call without his say-so.

Tony appreciated it. He still fiercely missed their earlier ease, where he wouldn't need to check something like this, knowing Pepper would know exactly what he wanted. He doubted he would ever be able to trust his next CEO that implicitly.

Sighing, Tony pushed that thought to the side to focus on what he needed to do now. Thankfully, Pepper had laid everything out clearly and with no chances for loopholes. He was able to approve it after only five minutes. He didn't send it immediately though, there was someone else who needed to be happy with it.

“Hey,” Tony held out the tablet to Loki. “This is the plan for next week, assuming Animal Whisperer doesn't show up. Happy with it?”

Loki raised his eyebrows but took the tablet and read the information. His lips were pursed by the end. “This will not be an easy endeavour, Anthony.”

“Oh, it's going to be a media nightmare,” Tony answered with false cheer as he took back the tablet. “But we'll face it head on, and it will eventually calm down. We'll be old news before you know it.”

“I see she has also suggested travelling outside of New York.”

“Yeah, she wants not just America, but the *world* to love us. She has a point too. It's why I'm willing to agree to a few of these events. We'll have a drink, talk to the right people, dance a few times. It will help our case, and show you really are my significant other.”

Loki still looked a little dubious, but he agreed. “Very well.”

“Great.” Tony turned back to the tablet and sent through his approval which would get the ball rolling. “That gives us three days before we're *officially* needed anywhere.” He turned bright, hopeful eyes on Loki. “Magic-science binge? You steal back my weapons, I improve the armour by adding in your awesome magical runes?”

Loki snorted. “They are not *my* runes.”

“Your magic is channelling them; totally your runes.”

Loki shook his head and said seriously, “Anthony, that is akin to saying I have plastered my name across your armour. Words and intention have power. I am merely aiding you, not claiming you.”

*That*, made Tony curious.

“So, wait, what would happen if you *did* claim me? What would that mean?”

An odd expression crossed Loki’s face, but it was gone too quickly for Tony to decipher.

“It is a vow,” Loki said quietly. “It is one of the deepest forms of commitment, both for a mage and a warrior of Asgard. Wearing one’s colours, emblems and names, it is tantamount to marriage to the Aesir, and for a mage who’s very being is infused in their spellwork, it is a bond of even more emotional significance.”

“*Oh*,” Tony whispered, his eyes wide. He hadn’t the slightest inkling when he’d made his throwaway comment, but now he could see why Loki had looked uncomfortable and yet, longing.

He knew Loki didn’t want him that way - not now, not *yet* – but Tony could understand the longing to have *someone* show their love and commitment for you. Loki, especially, had probably craved that for centuries. A person by his side who felt pride in showing off Loki’s name, colours and magic.

“So, no, Anthony,” Loki continued gently. “They are not my runes.”

Tony nodded. He also felt the need to clarify. “I didn’t mean to make light of the significance or insult you. I just didn’t-”

“Understand,” Loki finished, his smile showing he wasn’t offended. “Yes, I know. It’s fine, I was not upset. You are aware now and will not make the mistake in future.”

Loki’s body was relaxed, his tone light. He truly wasn’t concerned, and that made Tony relax. “Okay, good. Not your runes, but still your badass help. Got it.”

The mage chuckled. “Something like that, yes.” He stood from the stool and picked up their dishes. He walked over and put them in the sink before questioning, “I shall work first on the contract, then join you in the lab to assist with your armour.”

“Awh, I can’t watch?”

“You may,” Loki agreed, “but much of what I do today will be on the astral plane. I will be in a meditative trance and it will likely bore you.”

Tony scrunched up his nose. That didn’t sound fun. “Okay. I suppose I should go work on my armour then.”

“Perhaps you could consider the schematics for the plasma guns?” Loki suggested. “It would be useful for your planet to possess some form of defence should someone attempt to attack it.

Tony stiffened. “Thanos?”

Loki tensed at the name, but made himself relax. “No. I would like to hope he never reaches your planet, and that our battlefield will be somewhere other than Midgard.”

“But, it would be good to have a defence, just in case.”

Loki nodded. “I do not relish the conversation with your United Nations, but perhaps it will help to appease them by offering a world-wide defence.”

It couldn't hurt. They'd just have to find some fail-safe to keep countries from attack each other.

Maybe, he'd just put FRIDAY in control of them, that would subvert the whole thing. It would piss off a few people too, but if he was the engineer who built them, that meant he had dibs on who controlled them, right?

*And while I'm at it, I'll become a dictator and take over the world.*

Ugh, Tony *hated* politics and people who didn't know what was good for them. This was going to take a lot of work. He might have to talk to Bruce.

*Because it isn't like the last time you tried to protect the world it didn't blow up in your face.*

But, it wasn't like others weren't to blame for that too. When Maximoff had admitted her part in it by playing with Tony's mind, it had eased some of his guilt.

It was still going to take a lot of convincing for *anyone* to trust him to build weapons to fight against Thanos. At least they knew the Titan was *there* now. That had to help. Right?

Tony was drawn from his spiralling thoughts by Loki's hand on his shoulder. His eyes were full of concern. “Anthony?”

“Sorry. Memory-lane. Bad place.”

“Do you wish to talk?” Loki asked, always ready and willing to lend an ear.

But, Tony shook his head. “Nah. I'll be okay.” He gave a wry smile. “My last ‘first line of defence’ went wrong. Hopefully take two will be better.”

Loki, well aware of Ultron, squeezed his shoulder and told him firmly, “You should not blame yourself for that.”

“I don't.”

Loki narrowed his eyes.

“Okay, not entirely. I only blame myself for most of it.”

Loki's frown deepened, but Tony lifted his hand and placed it over Loki's.

“Now, I'm going to make it better. We'll focus on that, alright?”

“You carry too much weight on your shoulders, Anthony.”



Tony smiled tightly, but didn't respond, instead, he brushed off Loki's touch. He felt uncomfortable and he didn't like it. This was why he tried not to think about things like this. This was why, he preferred to crack a joke and not look too closely at how he was feeling.

But, Loki wasn't letting him get away so easily. Tony had stood up, trying to put distance between them, but Loki stopped him with a gentle touch to his arm.

"You should not feel such guilt," he said quietly. "But, I understand how such a thing is not so easily let go of."

Loki's hand shifted, and before Tony knew what was happening, Loki was tugging him into the mage's arms and wrapping him in a hug. Tony's face was pressed to Loki's chest and he instantly closed his eyes and relaxed into the touch.

He still protested, "I don't need a hug."

"Well, you are getting one anyway."

The imperial tone made Tony snort and a smile catch at his mouth. He also brought up his arms, wrapping them around Loki gladly.

It didn't ease his guilt, but it wasn't meant to. It was merely a comforting touch and the promise that Loki was there if ever Tony needed him.

Tony sighed and closed his eyes. God, he was so damn lucky to now have Loki in his life.

"We do have things we need to do," Tony muttered, his lips brushing Loki's skin since the mage was still bare-chested.

He felt Loki shiver, yet, he didn't pull away. "They can wait."

Tony laughed. "No, they really can't." He pulled back and smiled up at the mage. "But, thanks for the sentiment."

Loki was watching him softly, and Tony tilted his chin a little more, asking for a kiss that Loki readily bestowed. It was sweet and chaste, and the easiest thing in the world.

When they pulled apart, it was a slow disconnection of their lips. Their eyes had closed, but they re-opened them to grin at one another.

"Call me if you need me?"

"I shall," Loki answered.

Tony smiled. "And come see me in the lab later?"

"Always."

Tony had to kiss him once more for that. It remained short, and this time, they did regretfully pull apart. Tony wanted to suggest they shower together, but when it came to their sexual

relationship, they were still feeling things out. Loki also kept his clothes on the other floor.

Loki made the decision in the end with a small nod and teleported down to his floor. Tony's smile turned a little sad, but he didn't focus on it. He turned to his bedroom and prepared for the day ahead. He'd see Loki soon enough, and maybe, in the coming weeks, sharing a shower would become as second-nature as waking up together.

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Tony wasn't in the lab for more than an hour before Bruce joined him. Tony showed him the plasma gun schematics he was working on, and although Bruce wasn't keen on covering the world with them, he could see the point in having a good defence system. Maybe Stark Industries could launch them into space like satellites?

Probably not, everyone would be nervous about them flying around. Because, what protected the world was only good when the world needed protecting, when the world was *safe* that's when everyone became nervous and started second-guessing.

In the end, Tony focused on miniaturising them for his suit while Bruce went upstairs to read some science journals he'd been neglecting. When Tony was alone, he had FRIDAY blast some music while he worked on building a scale-model of the plasma-gun. If it worked, he could always give it to Loki to use as a weapon when he was out of knives.

Tony didn't know how much time passed. He lost himself in the familiar routine of soldering, calculating and creating something brand new. He could have spent all day down there if the music didn't cut off abruptly followed by Loki's tired voice calling, "Anthony?"

Tony jerked around to stare at Loki. He looked like he'd just run a marathon. Tony was instantly out of his seat and coming over to the mage. "Loki? You okay? What happened? You look like you're going to fall down. Do you need to sit down? Do you need some water? Do you-"

"I'm fine, Anthony," Loki interrupted, smiling gently. "Merely drained. It has been some time since I've worked on the astral plane, it takes more of my reserves."

"Then you should *definitely* sit down." Tony took Loki's arm and led Loki to the couch. It said a lot for Loki's exhaustion that he didn't fight it and collapsed onto it gratefully. Tony eyed him with concern, even as he asked, "FRIDAY, order a big lunch. Send some to Bruce if he wants it, but make sure there's more than enough for Loki."

"Yes, Boss."

"I really will be fine, Anthony," Loki insisted.

"Damn right you will, and it starts with rest, food and water."

Loki's eyes were amused. "And have you had any of those yourself, Anthony? I have not been the only one working for most of the day."

As if to prove Loki's point, Tony's stomach rumbled. He decided to run with it. "I am having a break. See, this is me, having a break with you."

Loki chuckled, but he didn't argue. He actually held out an arm, something hopeful in his gaze and Tony instantly took a seat beside him. Loki's arm curled around his shoulder and tugged him a little closer. Loki let out a soft sigh. He also explained, even though Tony hadn't asked the question, "Working on the astral plane involves a disconnection from my body. It can be difficult to readjust, but touching another person helps."

In response, Tony leant his head on Loki's shoulder and placed his hand on Loki's knee. He rested as much of his body as possible against Loki. "We can stay here as long as you want, Lokes."

Loki let out another, contented sigh, his body going boneless.

"Tell me about your day in the lab?" Loki requested.

Tony smiled and happily did just that.

## Chapter End Notes

Sooo this chapter was a little bit filler and a lot fluff but it was all little notes and loose ends I need to shove/tie in. I hope you don't mind! ^^;;;  
Thanks for reading :)

# Chapter 51

## Chapter Notes

Biggest thanks to not only my stalwart beta Amara, but the awesome help of **Rabentochter** who helped me out with some queries as I kicked it into further shape.

Hopefully you like it :)

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

They spent fifteen minutes in the lab just sitting and talking. Bruce brought down the sandwiches for them and smiled at their affectionate position. Tony asked him to stay for lunch, and he did. They spent a nice hour talking and relaxing before Bruce left them to their work.

Tony sighed but didn't move away from Loki immediately. He played with Loki's shirt instead. "We need a vacation."

"I would not be opposed to that," Loki answered.

"Maybe we should schedule one? I'll take you out to Malibu and we'll ignore anything that isn't the lab, cocktails or the pool."

"Hmm, a fine plan." Loki's hand slid down his back, the gesture more soothing than sexual. "However, if we wish to have that, we need to finish what we have started. I must complete my spell, you must find your company a new leader and we must defeat the woman and her animals."

"And there's the UN, the publicity next week, SHIELD and, hey," he lifted his head. "We never checked their contract, did we?"

Loki frowned thoughtfully before his fingers twitched and a copy of the contract appeared before them. Tony let out a low whistle. There were maybe six patches that were still black.

"Well, they didn't waste any time."

"No," Loki stated. "But they have broken far fewer than I imagined." He pointed at the yellow patches. "These are mere side-steps. They are manipulations of the text, but ones I deliberately allowed so that I could gauge their intention."

"So, deliberate loopholes?"

"Precisely." He pointed at some purple text. "These are leading statements I hope they would catch and put into practice. They are designed to make them believe they are manipulating *us*

but they are instead falling into a perfect position for us to manoeuvre later.”

There was a single blue paragraph which he tapped next. “This is the most interesting.”

“What does it mean?”

“Exploitation was attempted but stopped.”

Tony frowned. “Bad timing? Put on hold until later?”

Loki shook his head. “No. This was an action that was ceased. Someone attempted to spy on us, and someone *else* stopped them.”

Tony sat up, looking at the contract more closely. “Do you know who?”

“Unfortunately not,” Loki admitted. “My magic does have its limits.”

“Hey, that’s okay,” Tony insisted, not liking the frown on Loki’s face. He placed a hand on his arm in comfort. “This is still amazing, and gives us an edge.”

Loki nodded. “I am hopeful, however, that this contract will prove immaterial given time.” He turned back to Tony. “We have other alliances far more important than SHIELD and the Avengers. They will be useful should your planet face a threat, but they should not be our focus.”

“You want us working with the people up in space. You said there was another team of people out there, looking to stop Thanos and keep him from his stones, right?”

“Yes, the,” he rolled his eyes, “‘*Guardians of the Galaxy*’ or so they call themselves. They are on the hunt for Infinity Stones. I check in with them when I can, but they have a tendency of finding themselves in trouble unrelated to their search.”

“Yeah,” Tony said dryly. “That tends to happen.”

Animal Whisperer was a great example of that. So was Asgard. The universe didn’t like to give its heroes a break.

“Indeed,” Loki murmured. “But they are not the one I would have us win the favour of.”

It didn’t take Tony long to make the connection. “Hel.”

“Yes,” Loki agreed. “She is more powerful than many believe or remember; those that pass through her realm have knowledge. What others see as dead and lost, she holds within her domain.”

*Damn*, Tony thought. He felt... okay, he felt a little weirded out by that. He could understand the potential that Loki hoped to exploit; a world of the dead. The amount of secrets that she could just... tap into was never-ending. Assuming everyone went there. Which was just... a Pandora’s box of a mess that he wasn’t going to go into.

He was an *atheist*, damn it. (But, if he did end up in a place ruled by someone, it was a smart idea to get on her good side, right?)

“Okay, focus on Hel,” Tony summarised. “Got it. Maybe we can invite her to visit after the publicity week. She said she wanted to catch up. Can you send her a letter?”

Loki nodded. “I will see what we can arrange.”

“Awesome. Ask for her favourite foods and drinks while you’re at it; I might have to go shopping.”

Loki smirked. “You do not shop, Anthony.”

“Okay, so FRIDAY will place an order, same thing.”

Shaking his head, Loki shifted from the couch. Tony had to resist the urge to grab onto him and keep him there. If Loki didn’t need the affection anymore, well, there was no reason to stay cuddling, was there?

“We must come to a conclusion on when I shall active the spell to retrieve your weapons. I believe it might be best to activate it after our week of publicity. It would not do to have an irate SHIELD agent spinning a web of accusations.”

“Let them try,” Tony snapped. “It would only dig their own grave even deeper.”

“Something,” Loki pointed out, “you do not want them to do. Additionally, we do not wish them to sell lies that the public prefer over our own truths. We must be careful, Anthony.”

He grimaced, hating to admit that Loki was right. “Okay, fine. We hold off.”

“In the time remaining, we can begin the hunt for a replacement for Miss Potts. Who are your candidates?”

Tony ran a hand through his hair. “Someone on the board, I guess. Maybe head hunt someone from another company. FRIDAY can you make us a dossier on potential replacements and send it to the tablet? I want to know any and everything about them.”

“On it, Boss.”

It left them surprisingly free of tasks. Oh, they still had a long list of things to deal with, but everything was on hold or waiting for someone to get back to them. They were, at least for a few minutes, *free*.

Looking up at the mage, Tony knew exactly what he wanted to do. He offered Loki a smile and asked, “Wanna help me improve my suit?”

Loki grinned back. “I would love to.”

When he offered his hand to pull Tony from the couch, Tony didn’t hesitate to accept.

---

Regrettably, they only got a few hours to enjoy their time in the lab.

One of the PR team contacted Tony, wanting to discuss their platform for the new week. He wanted to make sure they were as ready as could be should anything go wrong. It took almost twenty minutes to get him off the phone and he still planned to send through a schedule for Tony's approval by the end of the day.

The only reason they *got* him off the phone was because Rhodey sent through a message; the UN wanted to talk to them.

It was what they wanted. It was something they *needed* to do, but it was still a nightmare Tony could have lived without. They both dressed in suits and Loki teleported them to where Rhodey was waiting outside the UN's building.

"How are we doing?" Tony asked.

"Unhappy, but listening," Rhodey answered, not bothering to sugar-coat. "We're selling them on the universal threat. Loki's presence is going to take more work. They believe he was compromised, but trusting him means distrusting Thor and that's opening a can of worms about whether Asgard is someone we want to associate with."

"Wonderful," Tony muttered.

Loki's expression was sour. "Oh, yes, once again, I am *preferred* as a villain. The truth is so much more *bitter* to swallow."

"Well, they're going to get used to it," Tony said, catching Loki's eyes and holding his gaze. "They want Asgard, they've got to stomach the shit that's underneath the gold."

Loki almost smiled.

Rhodey muttered, "How about we *don't* open with that, Tony."

"What?" Tony looked at Rhodey, widening his eyes. "I can be diplomatic."

"Try to *stay* diplomatic even when you get frustrated."

"But bureaucracy moves so *slow*," Tony whined.

"Well, we don't have a choice," Rhodey said. "So, grab your boyfriend's hand and convince the UN you're the new power couple of the century."

Loki snorted and Tony grinned. "Wow, platypus, what a pep talk."

"I just want to get out of here," Rhodey muttered, but there was a hint of a smile at his lips as he turned towards the building. "I didn't sign up for this shit."

"I think Rhodey needs a drink," Tony whispered to Loki, acting conspiratorial but letting his voice carry. "Can I get Rhodey drunk?"

“Perhaps later,” Loki allowed even as his hand snuck down to take Tony’s. They started to follow Rhodey inside the building. “I think we will all enjoy one once this is over.”

And, that was a sobering truth which took some of the humour out of the situation. But, there was nothing to be done for it. They *did* have to take this seriously and win over a good portion of the room.

It was going to be difficult, annoying, and time-consuming, but the end result should be worth it.

*Vacation in Malibu*, Tony told himself as both fortification and a reason to succeed. *Beach chairs and little umbrellas and getting Loki in swim trunks.*

It was his reward, and Tony would be damned if he let the UN stop him from getting it.

---

They spent two days working with the UN before a conclusion was reached which, in terms of diplomacy, was practically supersonic speeds.

It said a lot about Loki’s way with words and the use of magic to make some very pointed remarks about how *fucked* Earth would be if it wasn’t for Loki and Tony taking charge when they did.

Loki also sweetened the deal by reminding them that when diplomats from other realms wanted to visit Stark Tower to see Tony, they would be able to introduce those delegates to Earth politicians. It was a manipulation but it was done so artfully that it didn’t even look like one.

They hadn’t solved everything, but they’d left everyone with enough thoughts to chew on that Tony hoped they wouldn’t be called in for a while. Tony was just glad to see the back of the building for a final time, as was Loki and Rhodey.

And, while it wasn’t cocktails with little umbrellas *yet*, Tony did still get his drink with Loki and Rhodey. Bruce joined in as well, but all too soon, it was time for bed. Rhodey has an early morning and while the UN might have been sated, the public wasn’t. Stark Industries’ PR department had a full week scheduled, and although Tony could think of a hundred better things to do, he knew they needed it.

They had attended interviews around the globe; some with soft-spoken news-reporters, some with sharp-tongued journalists.

They spoke about Thanos, Loki’s mind control (and maybe he dropped a few hints about the Hulk and Wanda as well – but who was going to call him on it?) when their relationship started, and how Loki was adjusting to Midgardian life. They glossed over Tony’s separation from SHIELD and the Avengers as well as the tension between Tony and Pepper.

They even did a spread for an LGBT+ magazine which involved some *divine* photos of Loki hugging Tony from behind and Tony kissing Loki’s cheek. Tony planned to get copies for both of them.



But when they weren't at interviews, they were gallery openings, charity balls, and conferences.

Tony had been expecting something would go wrong each and every day, but apart from a little bit of heckling, things remained smooth.

It made it even easier to enjoy their evenings together. It didn't matter if they were out at an event or spending a few hours relaxed in their hotel room; Loki always found a way to make him crack a smile.

Tonight, they were in Paris and while Tony had always known it was the city of romance, it felt especially poignant tonight. It was the last night of their press tour, they were dancing and there were fairy lights all around the room. Music was playing from an orchestra and Loki had stolen a rose from a vase and placed the flower in Tony's breast pocket.

"The world is starting to like you," Tony said as they lazily twirled around the dancefloor.

"Is it?" Loki asked with a smirk. "Or are they merely enamoured with the two of us?"

Tony smiled. After their LGBT+ spread, there was a whole wave of people who thought they were '*adorable*'. People thought Loki had been redeemed through 'the power of love' and while it was ridiculous and sappy, it was helping their cause, so Tony had no reason to argue it.

They were, as Rhodey had joked, the brand-new power couple.

"They might be," Tony admitted. "But the polls are still swinging in your favour. People *want* to like you."

Loki tsked, "What a strange planet this is; liking *me*?"

Tony rolled his eyes. "You're amazing and we all know it. I'm just the lucky one who found you first."

Loki's expression softened. "No, Anthony. I do believe the luck was mine."

"Maybe we're both lucky?" Tony suggested. "Maybe it was about time the universe gave us something *good* for a change."

Loki was smiling gently as they slowed to a stop at the edge of the dancefloor. The song was still playing, but neither of them were paying attention. Loki's hand moved from Tony's waist to brush his cheek. "Yes. I do believe you're right."

"I'm always right," Tony teased.

Loki chuckled. He also bent down and Tony eagerly moved forward so their lips could come together in a soft, affectionate kiss. Tony brought up a hand to cup Loki's neck, keeping him near as their lips caressed.

When they pulled back, they remained close and Loki's thumb continued to stroke Tony's cheek. It was a soft moment, and knowing it was the last night and they'd be going *home* tomorrow, Tony asked, "Want to get out of here?"

"Yes," Loki answered, in an instant.

Tony grinned and stepped back. He still kept his hand around Loki's as he pulled him from the room. His intent was clear and while a few people looked disappointed at not getting a chance to talk to them, others were smiling at their speedy exit.

Yet, instead of letting Tony take them to the door and call for a car, Loki quickly changed direction and pulled him away from the guests and the front door.

"Loki?"

The mage wrapped an arm around his waist and pulled him close. "I do not want to return to a hotel. I want to return *home*."

He followed the words with a flash of green magic and the world around them disappeared only for the penthouse to take its place.

"Welcome back, Boss, Mr Liesmith," FRIDAY cheerfully greeted. "Shall I cancel your flight?"

Tony grinned. "Absolutely, and the hotel, and the car and anything else." Looking over his shoulder and Loki's pleased features, Tony told him, "Magic is, and always will be, completely awesome."

"I am glad you approve." He shifted forward, pressing his forehead against the top of Tony's head. He let out a sigh that made him slump a little further against Tony. His voice was soft, "I will enjoy sleeping in a place I feel comfortable."

Tony understood.

Although he'd tried to hide it, Loki didn't like sleeping in hotels. They weren't as fortified as Stark Tower and while Loki did cast wards around them, they weren't as powerful as the ones on the Tower.

It had also been a draining week, both mentally and emotionally.

"Bed?" Tony suggested.

Loki nodded, the motion rubbing Tony's head and making him chuckle.

"Come on," Tony continued. "Let's get changed."

It had been late evening in Paris while the sun hadn't yet set in New York, but that didn't matter. FRIDAY just darkened the windows and they dropped their clothes on the floor. They slipped under the covers with a sense of relief.

The sheets were fresh and smelt like home. Loki's arms came around Tony and tugged him in close with Tony's back to Loki's front. Tony's hands found Loki's and he closed his eyes, feeling peaceful.

There really was no place like home.

## Chapter End Notes

I have issues with parts of this chapter, tbh, but I don't really have the time to fix it sooo, hopefully it's not too bad?

Thanks for reading :)

# Chapter 52

## Chapter Notes

And now, a brief interlude to catch up with the people everyone has been curious about.

~~Don't worry, you'll get another, longer update in a week since this is so small.~~

Hope you like it!

Steve had never expected everything to go so wrong.

His top priority always had and would be Bucky, but sometimes, that meant other people got pushed to the side. It had always been that way; the two of them against the world, because in the past, everyone had been opposed to them.

When the war happened, it was them against the enemy, first the Germans and then HYDRA. There was no time to think and they were the first line of defence. It made everything simpler.

Now, things were different. He'd chosen to stay in a room down the hall from Bucky, wanting to be close in case his friend needed him. Steve was living in the middle of SHIELD headquarters and relying on them for help. Steve hadn't minded at first. Everyone was polite to him, and sure, they were nervous and guarded around Bucky, but that was to be expected. He and Bucky didn't want for much, he thought things were fine - but, then when Tony left, Steve realised exactly how much Tony had helped.

He was always on hand to fix or outright improve any armour or weapons damaged in battle. He could even be seen with his head inside the quinjet engine. When he left, so did his inventions, so did his *funding*.

Steve hadn't realised how much money Tony was pouring into SHIELD. Everything got tighter. Hill told him that his apartment couldn't be paid for by government expenses anymore. Luckily, Natasha helped Steve find alternative income (his artwork from the 40's had sold well and were still being used, so he had back payments from his royalties. It meant he could pay the rent and keep a home for Bucky and him to eventually move into). He knew other people didn't have such an easy solution and they only hated Tony more for it.

Steve couldn't understand why Tony was being blamed for withdrawing his funding, especially when he had been hurt far deeper than Steve had understood at the time.

Bucky had been the one to talk some sense into him and explain exactly where he went wrong. Just like he had decades ago.

He'd been sitting with Bucky in the other man's room. They'd had their backs to the wall and their legs pressed together. It was quiet and comfortable.

"I heard what happened to Stark," Bucky said.

Steve turned to him with surprise. "You aren't supposed to know about that."

Bucky snorted. "I'm allowed to walk around the facility. For a spy agency, y'all shit at keeping secrets."

"Bucky..." Steve murmured, more worried that Bucky would be caught spying than he was about SHIELD gossip.

Bucky shook his head. "I didn't do anything. I just didn't say anything so they'd know I was there. I don't *mean* to sneak up on people, you know."

That was true. It had been engrained in Bucky to never make a sound and to still and collect information when people were talking. He might not have his old HYDRA programming but some habits were innate and difficult to break.

Steve also knew, Bucky didn't *want* to break those instincts. They were useful and could help him survive.

"Okay," Steve said. "So, you heard about Tony. What exactly did you hear?"

"That SHIELD took his weapons without his permission." His eyes narrowed. "And that the *Avengers* agreed."

His tone was almost accusatory.

"Are you... angry with me?" Steve asked.

"Ah, fuck. Stevie, you really did that?"

"SHIELD needed the weapons. They explained how there wasn't any time to make the decision. There were soldiers in need." He looked at him earnestly. "SHIELD soldiers, Bucky. Good men and women. I trusted Fury." He sighed. "We do things in war we're not proud of, and we *should* have asked Tony, but we didn't have the time we-"

"Steve," Bucky's firm voice cut through his explanations. "Do you actually know *why* Stark became Iron Man?"

"He was kidnapped in Afghanistan. He wanted revenge."

It wasn't the most honourable origin story, but there was no denying that Tony had done good along the way and *become* a hero.

Steve had read the SHIELD file, he knew the truth, so why was Bucky looking at him pityingly?

“Buck?”

“Steve. He was kidnapped and tortured because they wanted him to *build* weapons for them. His enemy. When he got back, he shut down his entire weapons manufacturing business.” Bucky’s eyes bored into him. “He also found out the person he trusted most was selling his weapons *without his permission* to those enemies.” Steve’s eyes went wide. Bucky gave a wry smile. “He killed Stane. You’re lucky he just decided to leave.”

Steve swallowed, feeling shaken and with the painful guilt of realisation slamming into him. “How... do you...”

“HYDRA knew. SHIELD did too. Hell, Stevie, have you never used the internet?” A split second after asking, he groaned. “Of course ya’ fuckin’ haven’t.” His old accent was slipping through and normally that would make Steve smile, but he was so horrified he barely noticed. “You’re an idiot.”

“I didn’t realise,” Steve whispered. “Oh, God, Buck. We looked just like...”

“Stane,” Bucky acknowledged. “And you wonder why he decided to never work with you again.”

“No wonder he went to Loki,” Steve whispered. “Loki might be a lot of things, but he was an enemy first and foremost. He wasn’t a friend that went behind his back. That didn’t *realise* why it would hurt so much.”

“And he only found out, ‘cause he doesn’t trust SHIELD and hacked ‘em,” Bucky pointed out. “He’s not going to trust you again anytime soon.”

“We don’t deserve it,” Steve said, feeling horrible but no less sure of his decision. “God, Bucky. I can’t believe SHIELD did that. They had to know.”

“Of course they did,” Bucky said easily. “Places like this,” he gestured around them, “it’s the bottom line. You’re an asset, *I’m* an asset. They fucked up when they chose Stark’s weapons over *him*. It’s why they’re angry. Easier to be mad at him, than a bad decision.” He snorted and tilted his head back against the wall. “Even worse; Stark came out better, that burns.” Yet, he grinned a moment later. “Personally, I’m glad Stark got a good boyfriend.”

Steve looked at him with surprise. “What?”

But, when Bucky’s eyes opened it wasn’t humour that was within them. “I was a weapon without permission, Steve.”

The words sent a cold chill down Steve’s spine.

But, SHIELD *weren’t* like HYDRA.

They didn't take a way a person's choice (they merely hid information to get the outcome they wanted). They didn't leave their people for dead (they merely betrayed them behind their back). They weren't the enemy (but they did *arm* the enemy when they couldn't fish out all the snakes within their midst).

They would do anything to protect the world and achieve their goals, but... but, that was the problem. They would do *anything*; including betraying someone they should have taken care to never lose. But, they hadn't thought he would find out, they had thought he would *stay* – but he hadn't, and then he'd turned to Loki.

A person who had been betrayed like him - and now they had found the loyalty (and perhaps, the love) they'd always wanted.

"I think you're right," Steve whispered.

"Of course I am, about *everything*," Bucky insisted.

Steve tried to smile, but it came out small and pained.

Bucky's expression was sad and he reached out and lightly squeezed Steve's arm. "Just remember, Stevie. You and me, we're here 'cause SHIELD *wants* us here."

*We're assets.* The words left a bad taste in his mouth and they also made him realise exactly how much SHIELD held over him. They housed Bucky, they kept his armour and weapons in working order. SHIELD might need him right now, but would they always need him? They had helped him keep Bucky safe, and were helping him gain a public pardon but... but *Tony* had already won the public over with Loki.

Tony had done with Loki (someone the public and the world had far more cause to hate) what SHIELD were still doing with Bucky.

*If I'd have asked Tony, if he'd had the time to forgive Bucky for what happened with his parents... would Bucky be free by now?*

Steve couldn't say for sure, but he had the sinking suspicion that he would be.

It made him feel tense and uncomfortable about being within the SHIELD compound. It was something Bucky had felt from the beginning and even now, he still worried about it. Bucky had worked the truth out a long time ago and was now waiting for the other shoe to drop.

He checked his room daily for listening bugs. A camera was in the room, but Steve had convinced SHIELD not to listen in on their chats at Bucky's request. Steve had insisted for months that it was just residual paranoia from Bucky's time as the Winter Soldier. Barton had backed him up. Now, it seemed like Bucky was more practical than paranoid. Now, Steve had to wonder, if SHIELD really had stopped monitoring their conversations. Or did they believe he was loyal enough?

Steve felt like he was in hostile territory, and he wasn't sure who to trust – but, that wasn't true there was *one* person he could trust.

“What do we do, Bucky?”

Bucky gave him a wry smile. “Play along. We’re in their pocket, can’t do anything about it now.”

“Yeah, but-”

“I know you’ve been helping Stark,” Bucky cut in. “Keep doing that. See if there’s anyone else in this place you can trust. You’re gonna have to act like a spy, punk.” He grinned. “Even if that means we got no chance in hell.”

“Jerk,” Steve muttered, shoving Bucky’s shoulder.

His friend just smiled wider. It was nice to see, like a reminder of good times past.

But, Steve couldn't admire it. He had more pressing matters.

It was going to be hard to try and blend in and pretend he wasn't angry, guilty and confused; but there wasn't much of a choice. They were *assets* and until they had a way out, Steve couldn't do anything to make SHIELD change their mind on helping Bucky.

Bucky and his safety were Steve's top priority, but if he had the chance, he could do his best to look out for Tony and his allies. It was the least he deserved after Steve had betrayed him in the worst way possible, no matter how unwittingly.



# Chapter 53

## Chapter Notes

Welcome to pure fluff XD

Tony woke up curled around Loki. There was no end to where one of them started and the other began. Tony smiled and buried his face further in Loki's chest.

Loki chuckled softly, proving that he was awake. "Good morning, Anthony."

"Noooo," Tony whined. "I'm asleep."

Loki laughed again and his fingers came to stroke through Tony's hair. "My apologies, I was unaware you spoke in your sleep."

"Mmhmm," Tony murmured.

Loki played lightly with the strands of his hair. Tony sighed and kept his eyes closed.

There was blissful silence for perhaps five minutes where Tony just enjoyed the contentment and comfort of being home.

"Are you going to fall back asleep on my chest?" Loki asked quietly, sounding as if he didn't mind in the slightest.

"Maybe," Tony answered, sliding his arm to better hug Loki close. "Our day off."

"Day off?" He could just imagine the mage's raised eyebrow.

"Yes," Tony insisted. "Deserve it."

"And what does a 'day off' entail?" He definitely sounded amused.

"Cuddles, laziness, lab, orgasms."

Loki sucked in a sharp breath at the last one. "Oh?"

"Mm," Tony hummed. "Cuddle first."

Loki's arms raised and pulled him that little bit closer, wrapping him in a warm, perfect hug. "I won't complain about that."

"Good," Tony said, sighing happily when Loki started to stroke his back in a slow, soothing rhythm.

It was all too easy to relax completely and let himself doze off, feeling safe and happy in Loki's arms.

He didn't know how long he napped, but when he woke up again it was to find he was alone, but the bed was still warm. He lifted up his head, a frown on his face as he glanced around in bleary-eyed confusion.

"Mr Liesmith is in the bathroom, Boss," FRIDAY answered.

He smiled and relax back on the bed; apparently, even demi-god's couldn't ignore the call of nature.

"How long did I sleep?"

"Forty-three minutes, Boss."

He rolled onto his back and stretched. "Did Loki sleep?"

"No, Boss." She paused before, "Mr Liesmith seemed happy just to be holding you."

Tony smiled again, feeling warmth flood his chest. He knew, of course, that Loki had feelings for him. It was one of the reasons Tony was being so careful with their relationship. He didn't want to hurt Loki.

But, the thing was, Loki was so incredibly easy to care for. And *fall* for.

Tony still didn't know how deep his feelings were, but they sure as hell weren't platonic. He'd worked that out a little while ago.

So when Loki stepped back into the room, Tony made grabby hands for him. Loki laughed but came closer and knelt on the bed. He was smiling. "You haven't had enough?"

"No. Never," Tony insisted, pulling Loki down and into his arms.

Loki instantly curled around him so that their arms were around each other's waists, their legs were tangled and Loki's head was on his chest.

"I was going to make you coffee," Loki said, although he didn't seem inclined to move.

"Magic?" Tony suggested hopefully. "Coffee and tea without having to leave the bed?"

"When you said *laziness*," Loki said, "I did not expect it to be to this degree."

"It's been a long week," Tony explained. "I want uninterrupted time with my boyfriend."

Loki froze, and it was only because he'd half expected it, that Tony didn't react.

The mage lifted his head, watching him carefully. "Anthony?"

There was a whole host of uncertainties buried in that question, but the main one was: *do you mean that?*

Because, this had started with Tony admitting Loki was attractive and being keen to see where this went. Loki had waited hopefully to see if his feelings could be reciprocated. While Tony couldn't say exactly how deep they were, he could say they were *there* and that was what mattered.

He brought up a hand and stroked the back of Loki's cheek.

"Not one-sided, Lokes," Tony told him gently. "You're the easiest person in the world to care for."

Loki's smile was, well, it was *beautiful*.

His eyes lit up and his smile was pure happiness. He shifted up and pressed his lips against Tony's in a motion that Tony only encouraged. The kiss stayed chaste, but was no less sweet for it.

When Loki pulled back, he was still grinning. "Say it again?"

"What, that you're my boyfriend?" Tony asked, eyes twinkling. "That you're my lover? My partner? The one person in all the *universe* that I'm choosing to date?"

Loki let out a contented little sigh and snuggled back down into Tony's chest. "Yes. All of those."

"Okay," Tony said. "You're my boyfriend, my lover, my-" Loki pinched him. "Hey!" he complained. "I'm just doing what you asked."

"I know," Loki said, still sounding delighted.

"Then why the pinch?"

Loki's head shifted and Tony looked down into amused green eyes. "Mischief?"

Tony snorted. "So, that's what I get for inviting a Mischief God into my bed, huh? Untimely pinches?"

"I would have pinched you somewhere else," Loki teased, "but you're in the wrong position."

It took him a moment, not quite used to Loki being so *flirty* but then he laughed. "Well, I'd roll over to encourage that, but I'm rather happy where I am."

*The day Tony Stark chooses cuddles over sex, stop the presses.*

"Yes," Loki said, his tone softening. "Me too."

It allowed Tony to relax a little more, to simply enjoy the affectionate morning. Sex, after all, could always come later, but this moment was... special. It was an acknowledgement of mutual interest, and that was important to their relationship. It was also important to *Loki* who hadn't had much opportunity to lazily cuddle in bed with someone who liked him.

Tony wasn't tired enough to sleep, but it didn't mean he wanted to move. He also didn't want to be reminded of the real world, so he decided on a compromise.

"FRIDAY, make a pick; next movie with a Disney prince."

Loki groaned. "Not another one of those singing movies."

"You loved it, don't lie."

"It was *ridiculous*."

"It's dark, yet sweet, has catchy tunes and is romantic. I'm also calling myself a Disney princess for you; take the compliment, enjoy the movie."

Loki made another half-hearted grumble, but when FRIDAY projected a screen and started to play *Sleeping Beauty*, Loki shifted to better see the screen and fell silent in order to watch. Tony tried not to smirk.

He also gave his boyfriend an affectionate kiss to the top of the head when a cup of coffee and tea appeared floating above their hands.

Definitely an awesome start to their day off.

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They paused *Sleeping Beauty* halfway through so that Tony could go to the bathroom and Loki could prepare them breakfast. Tony took the time to brush his teeth and wash his face and then he was in the kitchen to help Loki.

When they were done, they climbed back into bed to eat and watch the last of the movie. They spent the whole time cuddled up against each other.

Tony had never enjoyed another person's company so much. Sure, he often snuggled with Rhodey on the couch when he was tired or craving affectionate, but that was it. He'd never really been able to do it with Pepper. They could manage it for a half hour or so before Tony started to fidget and Pepper wanted to check her emails.

Loki was different.

He could relax with Loki and instead of feeling unproductive he felt calm and content. He couldn't even get bored, because Loki's reactions to the movie were *hilarious*. He was on Maleficent's side from the first moment. The royal family had insulted her, and she deserved to extract her revenge.

He hated the good fairies and their argument about the dress. Tony asked if he wouldn't like them more if they made a green dress. Loki had glared at him and Tony had winked. Tony did feel a little bad when Maleficent died, knowing how much Loki had liked the character (hell, he probably *resonated* with her).

Yet, Loki wasn't upset, he shrugged and declared, "No mage of her calibre could be so easily beaten. An illusion, obviously."

Tony's lips had twitched. "She, ah, faked her death then?"

"Yes," Loki stated, his tone resolute.

"I like it," Tony declared. "That's the new ending. No one can tell me otherwise." Loki grinned. He also ducked in and kissed Tony's cheek. He blinked. "What was that for?"

"I know you're humouring me."

Tony went to protest, but Loki's hand took his own and squeezed it. "I like that you do. I like that you accept my alterations of the story, knowing it changes nothing, but pleases me."

Tony squeezed back and linked their fingers. He questioned, "I can't just like your version more?"

In response, Loki leant back in, but this time he kissed Tony's lips, sharing a soft, affectionate kiss.

Loki wasn't usually so demonstrative, but then, Tony hadn't admitted his feelings before. Loki had been holding back a lot more than Tony thought. It made him deepen the kiss, wanting to assure Loki that this was real and that Tony wanted every second of it.

When they broke apart, Loki's expression remained soft, while his eyes flared with joy. Tony expected it would kick off another cuddle session, but instead, Loki kissed him again. This time, there was a noticeable change in mood.

Loki's free hand came to Tony's shirt, sliding underneath it and making Tony give a soft groan. The kiss broke and they looked at one another.

Loki's smile was very definitely *mischievous* as he questioned, "You said orgasms were on our list, did you not?"

"I did. I absolutely did," Tony agreed.

Loki chuckled before bending back in and kissing Tony. He also shifted closer to better straddle Tony's hips. Loki's hands made their way to Tony's boxers, and Tony reached for the mage's sleep pants.

It didn't have to be anything more than hands, after all, to be enjoyable and perfect.

---

When they were finished, Loki cleaned them with magic, and even though they'd both enjoyed their lazy morning, they weren't the type of people who could stay in bed all day.

Loki ducked down to his own floor for a shower and Tony had taken his in the penthouse.

Tony still planned to ignore the rest of the world today, but that didn't mean he would ignore the other resident of the tower.

Bruce had been up for a few hours and Tony made his way down to the communal living room where Bruce was sitting with a book and a cup of tea.

“Hey,” Tony said. “Lazy day all around?”

Bruce lifted his head and smiled. “FRIDAY told me about your imposed ‘day off’ and I thought it was a good idea.”

“Lazy day all around,” Tony repeated firmly. “You had breakfast yet?”

“Yes,” Bruce agreed. “I’m just having a pot of tea.”

“Oh?” Tony asked. “One of my super-duper Asgardian imported blends?”

“Yes, actually,” Bruce agreed. “Loki recommended it as the most calming.”

Tony’s eyebrows rose. “You and Loki talk about tea often?”

“No,” Bruce answered. “He told me when you first came back from Asgard.” Bruce glanced away from Tony. “I decided to try his suggestion.”

*I decided to **trust** him.*

Tony felt frozen and he knew he looked a little bug-eyed, but he couldn’t stop it. Bruce was saying so much in that single statement. He was giving Loki a *chance*, more than he ever had before. Bruce was going to make an effort to get to know the mage.

“You won’t regret it,” Tony whispered.

Bruce smiled faintly. “I know that already.” The statement lingered in the air, heavy and significant before Bruce turned back to Tony and lightened the mood. “He picks tea well.”

A startled laugh tore from his throat, but Tony was glad for the easier subject. “Of course you make friends based off tea.”

“Tea and science,” Bruce said seriously. “Only way to judge a friendship.”

“Absolutely,” Tony insisted while dropping down next to Bruce on the couch.

He bumped their shoulders together, and smiled in a way that he hoped conveyed his gratitude. Bruce’s soft smile back seemed to indicate it had been expressed.

“So, what *is* this tea?” Tony asked.

“Try it yourself.”

Tony eyed him suspiciously, especially when Bruce’s eyes were wide with a suspicious innocence. “What’s wrong with it?”

“Nothing’s wrong with it, Tony.”

“Then why do you look like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like there’s something wrong with it.”

Bruce rolled his eyes. “I wouldn’t give you tea that had something wrong with it.”

“I don’t trust you. That is an expression of false innocence. I can see the lies lurking within you.”

Bruce laughed. “Tony, it’s *tea*.”

Tony narrowed his eyes, examining every facet of Bruce’s face before slowly turning to the tea and reaching out for Bruce’s cup. The other man didn’t stop him and Tony brought it to his lips. He gave Bruce one more suspicious look before he tipped it to his lips and took a sip.

His face instantly shrivelled with disgust. Bruce’s loud laugh rang around the room. Tony jerked the cup away and swallowed only because he didn’t want to spit on the floor. The moment it was done he was trying to get the taste out of his mouth.

“*What*,” he hissed, “was *that*?”

“A lavender based tea,” Loki answered, sounding amused. Tony looked over his shoulder, finding Loki leaning in the doorway, his arms crossed and a smirk on his lips. He nodded at Bruce. “And that was well done.”

Tony turned back on Bruce with a pout. “You are mean.”

Bruce’s eyes were dancing with amusement. “I would be apologetic, but I just got a compliment from a Trickster God.”

Tony was still pouting, but when Loki walked into the room and not only ran a soothing hand through his hair but held out a magically conjured steaming mug of coffee, he decided to forgive them. He took the cup and smiled up at his boyfriend. “Thanks, Lokes.”

Loki stroked his hair again, but didn’t reply. He looked at Bruce instead and questioned, “You enjoy the blend?”

“Yes,” Bruce agreed. “It’s calming, just as you said.”

“I can source more, if you wish?” Loki offered.

“It wouldn’t be too much trouble?” Bruce questioned with a worried frown.

Loki shook his head. “It is a popular tea on Alfheim. I gain most of my own blends from a herbalist there.”

“Then thank you,” Bruce told him. “I would really appreciate it, Loki.”

Loki nodded, and just like that, the conversation was concluded and Loki started to walk away. Tony reached out and snagged his wrist. “Where are you going?”

“I thought I would retire to my room with a spell book.”

Tony frowned. “Why can’t you read here?”

Loki tilted his head quizzically. “I thought you might enjoy some time spent in one another’s company.”

“That doesn’t mean you have to leave,” Tony insisted. He looked at the spot on the couch beside him. “You can sit right here and read your book.”

Loki hesitated, still seeming unsure, but Bruce chimed in saying, “Maybe if you stay, we can convince Tony to try another tea.”

“That will not happen,” Tony told Bruce, sending the scientist a resolute glare. “I’m on to your wicked ways, Bruce Banner.”

“There’s nothing wrong with expanding your horizons.”

“My horizons are just fine,” Tony insisted stubbornly.

“Loki could pick a tea you’re more likely to enjoy,” Bruce attempted, playing dirty and involving Tony’s boyfriend.

He was a horrible friend – only, that was an utter lie. Bruce was *including* Loki and trying to get him to stay. Bruce was an *amazing* friend, and Tony would be willing to try all the cups of tea on Asgard if it meant Loki was sitting beside him rather than alone in his room.

Tony turned to Loki, looking at him with wide eyes. “You’re not going to leave me all alone to fend off Bruce’s attempts all by myself?”

Loki was smirking. “I do believe I am being recruited to work against you, Tony.”

“But you’re not giving in, right?” Tony asked, widening his eyes.

“I’m not sure, the sight of you scrunching up your face was dreadfully amusing.”

Tony gave a mock gasp, but despite his faux horror, he didn’t let go of Loki’s wrist, making it known he was still, and always would be wanted.

“It’s a mutiny!”

Loki was shaking his head, but the goal had been achieved. He was finally coming closer and when Tony shifted down the couch a little, he slid into place. The moment he was there, Tony leant against him, further securing him on the couch. Loki was forced to wrap his arm around Tony’s shoulders to better secure him.

Bruce was smiling at them, looking both amused and fond.



“I’ll be keeping an eye on you two,” Tony insisted, holding his coffee close to his chest. “You can try and sneak tea under my nose, but I’ll be ready.”

“Surely, you know better than to challenge me?” Loki questioned.

Tony gave a dramatic groan and tipped his head back on Loki’s shoulder. It put him in the prime position to see Loki’s smile up close. He was already rewarded with a soft kiss to his forehead. Tony smiled at the touch.

It took a long moment before he could force himself to pull away and lift his head. Bruce had turned back to his book, giving them their privacy but he looked relaxed and was still smiling.

“Here,” Loki said quietly. Tony shifted to see a tablet being held out to him. A leather-bound book was on Loki’s lap. Tony took it gratefully, after all, *he* didn’t have something to do; but there were a few fun projects he’d been putting off.

Nothing to do with Iron Man, saving the world or Stark Industries; just concepts he wanted to play around with. It was the perfect thing to do on a day off.

He had his friend at his side, and Loki a warm weight against him. It wasn’t cocktails in Malibu, but it was a worthy substitute until they got their vacation.

# Chapter 54

## Chapter Notes

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

They stayed relaxing together for an hour. They were all safe in the tower and had nowhere to be; it should have been perfect. A day off, what more could they want?

Only, it wasn't that simple.

It wasn't that Tony *wanted* to ruin things; it was that he couldn't switch his mind off. It started small with his fingers twitching, unable to fully focus on the tablet, but it soon evolved into shifting in his seat.

Loki noticed his discontent, but didn't say anything. He moved one hand from his book, wrapping his arm around Tony's shoulder and tugging him close. He stroked his fingers in a soothing gesture against Tony's arm. It helped, for a little bit – but, Tony's mind couldn't slow down.

The Mad Titan was out there. A new CEO wouldn't hire themselves. His *weapons* were still in the hands of the enemy. Animal Whisperer could appear at any moment. The suit needed to be upgraded.

There was so much to do and when would he next have the time to devote himself to those problems without interruption?

He didn't want to pull away from Loki, but he knew he couldn't stay sitting here. He shifted forward and stood up. Loki's hand only tightened for a moment before letting him go. Tony looked over his shoulder, Loki was frowning thoughtfully.

“Anthony?”

“Sorry. Day off still stands. I just gotta...”

He grimaced and glanced away. This had been the start of so many arguments with Pepper; his inability to truly relax. There was always something to do, and even though he could manage more time with Loki than he ever could with Pepper... he still couldn't do a full day.

Guilt and disappointment churned within him, but Tony shoved it down. What he did was important, they both knew that; Loki would understand.

*Just like Pepper did*, a dark part of him hissed.

He pushed the thought aside. He focused on Bruce who was watching him with equal concern.

“Have the day off. Drink tea. Do things.” He flashed a smile and hoped they bought it. “We'll have FRIDAY order dinner and make a night out of it.”

“And where will you be between now and then?” Loki asked quietly.

He didn't sound unhappy, he was merely curious, thoughtful even. Tony shifted on his feet and looked away. “Lab.” His shoulder twitched in a shrug. “See you at dinner.”

Tony walked away without another word. He didn't want to say something to upset someone. Or anger them. Or make them demand he *leave* the lab. The same way that-

“Anthony.”

Tony hesitated. He was in the hallway, the elevator in sight, but he couldn't walk away from Loki. He turned around carefully, swallowing when he found Loki within touching distance.

He expected annoyance, concern even, what he found was warmth and a soft understanding.

“You need not spend time in the lab alone. Banner or I can join you.” Loki rested his hand on Tony's shoulder. “Does something weigh on your mind?”

Tony let out a loud huff of breath. He still felt tense, but with Loki watching him without irritation or demand, Tony admitted, “Too many things. I can't sit still.” He ran a hand through his hair. “I *don't* sit still. There are so many issues I need to deal with. A day off sounded like a great idea, but it just doesn't work – *I don't* work.”

“You work perfectly fine,” Loki interjected smoothly. He squeezed Tony's shoulder. “Your mind is constantly moving; it makes sense that you cannot relax.” Loki smirked. “I was like you, when I was young.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Oh, that's right, remind me of the centuries wide age gap why don't you.”

Loki chuckled. “I merely mean, I understand your inability to stay motionless. I took many years longer than mages my age to master the art of meditation. I found it so difficult to simply *stop*.”

“Yeah,” Tony muttered, “that's me alright.”

“And unlike me, you have no reason to master it.” Loki shifted a little closer. “However, I am willing to offer a means of relaxing you.”

Tony blinked. It took a moment for him to realise what Loki was proposing and then his eyebrows skyrocketed. Sure, Loki had been flirty this morning, and more affectionate than usual, but this was the first time he'd instigated a sexual encounter. Tony wasn't *complaining*, mind you, but he was still getting used to it.

Luckily, he was quick to process and accept. He placed his hands-on Loki's hips and smiled. “I think I'd have better luck in the lab if I wasn't so tense, yup.”

Loki let out a soft huff of laughter before bending down and capturing Tony's lips. Tony sighed into the touch and leaned closer to Loki. The kiss was more sensual than sexual, and when they pulled back, Loki trailed his mouth over Tony's jaw.

Tony relaxed further, he also promised, “When we get to Malibu. I promise I’ll spend all day with you.”

Loki smiled against his skin. “You already spend most days with me.”

“Yeah, but-”

“I consider the time we spend in the lab just as precious as time we spend eating a meal, watching a movie or sleeping in bed. Your creations are a part of you, much as my seidr is a part of me. I would not consider a vacation enjoyable if we ignored such parts of ourselves.”

Tony closed his eyes and gripped Loki’s hips even tighter. He knew Loki was telling the truth, he *knew* Loki would never lie about that but...

“Do you mean that?” he asked, his voice hopeful and vulnerable; desperate to have someone *understand*.

“Yes,” Loki answered, without hesitation.

He followed it up with a kiss to Tony’s jaw. Tony arched into the touch and wrapped his arms firmly around Loki’s waist. It drew them even closer and allowed Tony a sense of possessiveness. He didn’t ever want them to pull apart.

Tony knew he should say something; express his gratitude and tell Loki how much it meant to him – but Tony was terrible at emotions, and his throat felt thick with them. His heart was racing and he just wanted to *never let go*.

And when he didn’t know what to do, he settled for an easier truth.

“I feel a very strong need to blow you right now.”

The statement startled a laugh from Loki.

“Well,” he said, sounding amused. “I will hardly complain about that.”

It was all the incentive Tony needed. He unwound his arms before sliding down to his knees, his hands trailing down Loki’s thighs as he moved. Loki’s breath hitched and he looked down at Tony with desire.

“Anthony...” he swallowed. “What of Banner?”

“FRIDAY,” Tony said, never looking away from Loki’s gaze. “Re-route Banner to the lab. Send him the long way. Hallways currently off-limits.”

There were a few seconds silence before she said, “He has been informed and will be out of hearing distance in six seconds.”

“You can keep silent that long, right?” Tony asked even as his hand came to cup the front of Loki’s pants.

Loki's eyes fell closed and he bit his lip. He didn't make a sound. A devious smirk started to curl Tony's lips; he'd make sure to change that.

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When Tony stepped into the lab it was with a smile on his face and a spring in his step. Bruce was already there and he looked amused.

"Brucie!" Tony enthused. "What are you doing here? I thought it was a day off!"

"It is," Bruce answered. "And I'm doing something I enjoy."

Tony's smile turned softer. It was the same sentiment Loki had offered, even if not in as many words as the mage. Tony came closer to Bruce and bumped their shoulders together.

"Where's Loki?" Bruce asked. "I thought he'd come down with you."

Tony sobered a little. "He's working on the spell to get my weapons back."

He felt Bruce tense beside him. Tony flicked his eyes to the other man. Bruce was frowning at the bench in front of them; he had never been completely accepting of the idea behind Loki's spell.

"Bruce," Tony said, his voice soft. "I don't want them to have my weapons."

"I know," Bruce replied. He also sighed and brought up a hand to remove his glasses. "What they did was terrible, Tony. I don't like the idea because I don't want anyone to get hurt, but I also trust that you and Loki will make sure that people stay safe."

"We will," Tony promised. "*They* will."

Bruce nodded and offered a small smile. The conversation could be dropped, they could turn to more enjoyable things like being Science Bros in the lab but... there was something that couldn't be left unsaid.

"Look, Bruce..." Tony trailed off and awkwardly rubbed the back of his neck. "If we do this, SHIELD is going to show up here like an ugly, angry penny."

Bruce frowned, looking wary. "And you're worried they'll know I'm here?"

"I'm worried about what will happen if they work it out." Tony hated bringing this up, Bruce had only just agreed to stay, but he had to know how they'd tackle this. "I don't want you to be found by people you're avoiding."

Bruce caught on in an instant. "Natasha."

"I know you had that thing."

Tony made an awkward gesture with his hand. He'd never understood it. He'd thought it came out of left field, personally. Rogers thought it was obvious. Tony had been in the

process of trying not to lose Pepper at the time and hadn't stuck his nose into the emotional mess between his team. He was never good at feelings anyway.

Bruce sighed and walked over to the nearest chair. He sat down heavily and looked at his glasses. Tony tried not to shift on his feet.

"Natasha and I... we were more of an idea than anything that could work. I think we both wanted to believe there was someone we could connect with and hold onto. You had Pepper. Clint had his family. Our friends had someone, and we wanted it too."

Tony frowned. "So, you... don't want to get with her?"

"No, Tony," Bruce said. "I worked that out while I was gone." He lifted his head. "She suggested we run away, during Ultron. I thought I was protecting her when I refused, but now... well, I think I already knew it was a bad idea."

"Oh," Tony said, not sure what to do. He ended up placing a hand on Bruce's shoulder and squeezing.

Bruce offered him a pained smile. "So, you don't have to worry about me leaving with her, Tony."

Tony winced, feeling sheepish. "That obvious I don't want you to go?"

"Just a little," Bruce said, sounding wry. Yet, his amusement faded and he turned serious. "I made my choice, Tony. I've chosen you, and Rhodey and Loki. I don't want to fight, I don't want to see anyone from SHIELD, but... if Thanos comes, or if something happens in the meantime—if you need someone else at your side, I'll be there."

Tony swallowed, feeling a little emotional.

"Thanks, Bruce."

The other man smiled before he turned the chair and faced a screen. "So, what are you working on, Tony?"

Tony cleared his throat. "I was thinking of making a nanotech suit. Loki also plans to enhance my armour with magic. Go big or go home, right?"

"I thought the point of nanotech was to be small," Bruce said, amusement in his voice.

Tony laughed. "Well, okay, *technically*, but maybe what I'm really building is something that's bigger on the inside. Something only a *Doctor* can appreciate."

Bruce rolled his eyes. "That was bad, even for you."

"Actually, it was brilliant," Tony insisted while pulling open a draw. He grinned when he alighted on a silver packet. He held them out. "Blueberry?"

Bruce took one with a smile.

“What about you?” Tony asked. “What will you be Science-ing?”

“I’m going to try to look for Animal Whisperer,” he answered. “Nothing has drawn her out and I don’t like it.”

Tony nodded. “Good. Let me know if you need anything.”

“Same to you,” Bruce replied.

They shared a smile before Bruce headed to one side of the lab and Tony went to the other. They always had been able to work seamlessly side by side. They rarely worked on the same projects if it wasn’t related to saving the world, their fields were just too different. It didn’t mean they couldn’t enjoy the comfort and company of having another person around.

It was even *nicer* when he had Loki there too. The mage would be right beside him and in the middle of his project. Tony had never found someone who understood him so well and worked with him so easily. He wished he could have Bruce at his left and Loki at his right – but the spell was complex and needed silence and solitude.

Tony hoped it wouldn’t take too long. He was already missing the mage.

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Tony didn’t expect to get distracted by his suit. His mind had lingered on Loki for a half hour before he’d finally lost himself in creating. He was eventually pulled from his inventing by a combination of FRIDAY calling his name and Bruce touching his shoulder.

He looked up and blinked his eyes to clear the code and circuitry from his mind.

“Huh?” he asked.

“Mr Liesmith wishes to advise you he is finished, Boss,” FRIDAY said promptly.

Tony frowned, remembering what Loki was doing. “Finished as in done for the day or...?”

“Finished, Boss,” FRIDAY insisted. “He says he will be ready to begin once you-”

She fell silent as Tony dropped everything in his hands and jumped from his seat. Bruce was only a few steps behind. The elevator opened long before he reached it and Tony waited impatiently for the doors to shut and FRIDAY to take them to Loki’s magic floor.

Bruce didn’t say a word and it left Tony’s tension to build to a point of overload. He rushed out of the doors the moment he was able and made a beeline for the mage who stood in the centre of the large room. His smirk was full of triumph.

“You did it,” Tony said, coming to a stop just before the mage. “I thought you said it would take longer?”

“I did,” Loki agreed. “But I have been perfecting the spell whenever I can and...” a hint of embarrassment touched his voice, “my seidr found your weapons quicker than I anticipated.”

Tony ran the words over in his mind, and combined with everything he knew about magic and Loki, he took a guess.

“Your magic likes me and the items were mine. Could it sense them better?”

“Yes,” Loki admitted. “I imagine my wish to do this for you also... accelerated the process.”

Magic was a force of willpower, Tony knew. It was also helped by a person’s intention. Loki wanted to do this, and so his magic was making it easier. The thought made Tony smile and he stepped close. His goal was obvious and Loki relaxed as he leant down to share a soft kiss.

Tony hated having to pull apart, but he wanted to see the spell in action. He wanted his weapons *back*.

Breaking the kiss, he stepped away, but didn’t stop smiling at Loki. “Ready when you are, Lokes.”

Loki shifted from softness to all business. “You will both stand with your backs to the wall and not speak until I say you are able. Understood?”

Tony nodded and got into position. Bruce was already waiting, watching everything with cautious interest. Tony was nothing but excited.

They stood shoulder to shoulder as Loki remained in the centre. He closed his eyes and raised his hands. He murmured strange words under his breath that Tony couldn’t quite catch, and the few words he did hear sounded like no language he’d ever heard. Loki started to glow green as he chanted; it started around his hands but soon spread over his body. It made it hard to look at him and Tony had to squint against the light.

Yet, as much as Tony wanted to watch Loki, he was distracted by the first heavy *thud*. It wasn’t a weapon that fell, no, it was a weapon *cache*. A metal trunk filled with items that Tony knew would say *Stark Industries* on the side.

They fell with more consistency after the first one; item after item. Some were in caches, others filled weapons racks. A few dropped as single items, others came complete with a holster. Tony sucked in a sharp breath when a fucking *missile* landed in the centre of the room and Bruce did the same. Tony recognised weapons from a decade ago. Loki was clearing out *everything*.

It wasn’t just physical weapons either, no, blueprints and thumb drives were clattering to the ground; even a few scrapes of metal. The spell was bringing it all.

A pistol almost landed on his foot. The ground was becoming layers deep in weapons. It was as if they’d walked into a war bunker.

When the spell finished, Tony had more weapons than he’d ever expected – and yet, not as many as he imagined was out in the world. But, before he could ask, he saw Loki sway on his feet. He rushed forward, not realising Bruce had done the same until they were both gripping Loki’s arm.



“Loki?” Tony asked, concern in his voice.

“Apologies,” Loki murmured, yet his voice sounded heavy and tired. “I did not anticipate so many.” He pulled in a shaky breath and his hands flickered green once more. “I will finish the last. I-”

“No,” Tony immediately interjected.

“Certainly not,” Bruce argued at the same time.

They glanced at each other, but Tony was quick to focus back on Loki. “You need to rest, Loki.”

Loki shook his head. “I can complete it.”

“Yes, you can,” Tony insisted. “After you’ve rested and eaten. Hell, Loki,” Tony glanced around the room. “I’m not sure we’ll fit anymore in here anyway.” Loki was still scowling and Tony squeezed his arm. He offered a smile that showed all his gratitude. “Loki, this is more than I could have ever hoped for. You do *not* have to push yourself further today.”

Loki remained petulant. “I *will* get the rest.”

“Yes, you will,” Tony agreed. “And I’ll be more ecstatic than you can believe. But, right now, this is amazing.” He leant in and kissed the other man’s cheek. “Thank you.”

Loki sighed, but he also leant a little more against Tony. He knew that was Loki’s acceptance. It allowed Tony to close his eyes and simply indulge in the wave of giddiness that rushed over him.

“FRIDAY,” Bruce said into the quiet. “If you could please order enough food for three?”

“Of course, Dr Banner,” she replied promptly.

Tony opened his eyes and flashed Bruce a smile. “Good plan.”

Yet, even as he said it, his eyes lingered on the items around him. He so desperately wanted to dive into them and see what was there. The blueprints and USBs in particular. God, *what* had everyone had access to?

“Go,” Loki said, pulling Tony from his thoughts. He didn’t realise his hand was twitching until Loki covered it. The other man smiled. “I will not collapse and the food will take time to arrive. Go see what has been brought.”

Tony hesitated. He didn’t want Loki out of his sight, but he wanted Loki to recover from the spell too.

Bruce, bless him, realised everything that was going on and suggested, “I’ll get a chair for Loki and make a pot of tea.”

He flashed Bruce a smile but the other man was already letting Loki go and stepping out of the room. It allowed Tony to focus back on Loki. The mage looked tired and drained, and even though he hadn't grabbed every item across the entire *world*, he looked happy and satisfied.

"I still can't get my head around what you've done," Tony whispered. "It's something I never thought I'd be able to do. It's the best thing anyone has ever done for me. It's just... it's amazing. You're amazing; you and your seidr." Tony cupped Loki's cheek and stroked it with his thumb. "Sometimes, I think I'm going to wake up and find out I dreamed you up. You can't be real."

Loki chuckled; his eyes soft. "I assure you I'm real, and hardly as wonderful as you imagine me to be."

"You are-"

Loki stopped his protest with fingers on Tony's lips.

"But, I appreciate the sentiment," Loki said. "And I'm glad to see you happy."

He removed his fingers and bent down, lightly brushing their mouths together.

"A drain to my seidr is a small price to pay," he continued softly, "when it lightens the burden you bear."

Tony closed his eyes, feeling emotion tighten his chest. He wrapped his arms around Loki's neck, needing to hold the other man closer. He kissed him again, but it didn't deepen. Tony tried to pour as much of what he felt into it as possible.

Loki had done the incredible and stolen back his weapons. Tony didn't know how he could ever repay Loki – and yet, Tony also knew with soft and wonderful awe, that Loki never expected him to.

It made him adore Loki even more.

How had he ever lived without Loki? Who the hell knew - but it was irrelevant now. Tony had no plans to experience that kind of life again. Tony had known it for a long time, but this had only cemented it further.

Lover or friend, it didn't matter. One way or another, he was never letting Loki go.

## Chapter End Notes

Annnnd finally! Tony gets some of his weapons back. I know a few of you have been waiting for this XD

## Chapter 55

Bruce reappeared with a chair and Tony cleared a space free of weapons. Loki rolled his eyes as Tony insisted on helping him take a seat. Despite his grumbling, Loki's expression remained gentle. Bruce left again but reappeared a minute later with a mug of hot tea for Loki. He took it with a soft thank you, and once assured Loki was settled, Tony turned to the mountain of weapons.

It was not unlike diving into a treasure trove – if it was a treasure trove of his biggest mistakes and regrets.

The feeling could have overwhelmed him, but it didn't, because these weapons weren't in the hands of enemies and criminals anymore. They were *here* and that meant he would be able to destroy them.

Every weapon would be broken down, repurposed or blown up somewhere safe. *No one* would be able to use them without Tony's permission – and it was only possible because of Loki.

He kept wanting to touch the mage, to kiss him, hug him, and all around *thank* him. Most of the time, he gave into the urge. He would place an item in the designated 'destruction' or 'refabricating' pile, but on his way past, Tony would drop a kiss to Loki's cheek. Sometimes, he'd wrap his arms around the mage in a tight hug. Loki smiled every time. He also seemed to look a little less exhausted whenever Tony pulled away.

It reminded him of when they were on the couch. Maybe it wasn't just magic on the astral plane which recovered faster with a little bit of affection and touch? It only made Tony more inclined to keep hugging him.

When Loki finished his tea, he stood up despite Tony and Bruce's protests. He assured them he was fine and began sifting through all electronic and paper documents. Tony grimaced to find schematics for old weapons. There was nothing from after the Jericho, at least. They were all copies gained during the height of Obadiah's betrayal rather than anything new. He still hated knowing they had been out there for people to utilise.

Getting nowhere fast with the weapons (honestly, they could take *weeks* to sort through) they grabbed all the electronics and carried them down to the lab. Tony was caught in an odd mix of dread and intrigue as he sat in front of his computers. What was on them?

The first drive they tried was more old schematics and Tony took great pleasure in pulling it out, getting a hammer and smashing the USB. It was made all the more satisfying when Loki explained that he'd used the USBs as carriers. His spell had located the information wherever it might be and plucked them from the datastream. He'd done the magical equivalent of wiping the hard drive.

Tony had cupped his cheeks and kissed him until Bruce politely cleared his throat. Loki's cheeks were a little pink, but he only looked pleased with himself.

The second thumb drive was much of the same, but the third... that was where things took a change.

“This one’s from SHIELD,” Tony murmured.

Bruce and Loki tensed and stepped closer. Tony kept opening and scrolling through the documents. His frown deepened with every document he found.

“Does your spell pick and choose the information it grabs?” Tony asked.

“How do you mean?”

“Does it work like a search engine: showing the best matches first and then locating more information the longer it’s there? Are you just scooping up the top layer?”

“No,” Loki disagreed. “It looks for anything that bears your name and is your property and retrieves it.” He frowned. “Perhaps towards the end of the spell, while I was drained, it would not have taken *all* that existed, but I made certain to gain digital documentation as a priority. The spell would not have failed to find those.” Loki hesitated, looking uncertain. “I wanted to minimise the chance of memorization. I apologise if you wished for the physical weapons first or-”

“No, Loki, you didn’t do anything wrong,” Tony insisted. He pulled his gaze from the documents to hold Loki’s uncertain eyes. “Information was the right choice to get first. I would have done the same thing.” He swallowed and turned back to the screen. “But, that’s what doesn’t make sense.”

“What is it?” Bruce asked, peering over his shoulder and skimming the documents.

“This is the information Romanoff’s accessed only... it *isn’t* what she accessed.”

“What do you mean?”

Tony chewed his bottom lip. “I had FRIDAY dig through the logs after everything happened. I worked out what she got into. I wanted to know the extent of what I was dealing with - but if Loki said he got everything, then that means she didn’t pass it all on.”

“Was it information she would not find relevant?” Loki questioned.

“No,” Tony replied, shaking his head. “There was stuff she could have used.”

“You believe she kept the information from SHIELD?”

“I think she’s either got a thumb drive of her own waiting to be cashed in or...”

“Or she didn’t extract everything,” Bruce whispered. “She only took what she was ordered.”

“I find it hard to believe a spy such as Romanoff would restrain herself out of kindness,” Loki said sceptically.

“So do I,” Tony admitted. He flicked his eyes to Bruce. Despite his previous remarks about being over Natasha, he still looked hopeful. “I’m sorry, Bruce, but if she didn’t give something to SHIELD, she has another motive. Maybe she wanted a bargaining chip to hold over me, or a way to show she still has my interests at heart-”

“But, she didn’t know you’d find out about this,” Bruce insisted.

“I hack SHIELD on a regular basis, Bruce,” Tony argued. “Maybe she wanted a failsafe in case I ever got far enough inside to notice the mission information.”

Bruce fell quiet but he remained unhappy. Tony turned back to the screen while Loki’s hand came down on his shoulder, squeezing lightly. Tony didn’t know what to make of this, but he didn’t like or trust it.

“We know of it now,” Loki said, his voice cutting through the tense silence. “We will watch her closely and be prepared to counter any move she makes.” He squeezed Tony’s shoulder again. “But, at the moment, we have other devices to peruse.”

Tony nodded, feeling grateful for the change of focus. His gaze still lingered on the documents, but he forced himself to look away.

“FRIDAY, catalogue all information and make a list of everything she accessed. I want to know how much she left out and when she handed it to SHIELD.”

“On it, Boss.”

Tony grabbed the next USB, but hesitated. What else would he find on here? How many secrets would be laid bare for SHIELD, HYDRA or someone else to look over? The thought of putting another one in suddenly turned his stomach.

His hand itched to pick up the hammer and just start smashing.

Loki must have caught the look on his face as he squeezed Tony’s hand.

“Perhaps reading is not what you require at this moment. Perhaps, you would rather a more physical act?”

If he were honest, Tony wasn’t sure *what* he wanted to do. When he’d first become Iron Man, he’d been angry and he’d fired his repulsors at everything in sight. Maybe that was what he needed? A cleanse by fire.

“Yeah,” Tony finally answered.

He dropped the USB and stood up. Loki’s hand was forced to shift from his shoulder, but it came down to his lower back. Tony stayed close as he moved towards the elevators. He did pause just inside the doors and looked back at Bruce. He offered a smile, but he knew it wasn’t one of his best.

“Want to come melt firearms and blow up explosives?”

“I don’t think detonating explosives in your tower is a wise decision,” Bruce answered wryly.

It almost made him laugh.

“Maybe not. But when has that stopped me?” Bruce rolled his eyes, and Tony relaxed a little more. “Okay, so we just make a pile for the old Stark Industries weapons ranges. We can watch from a bunker.”

“You know,” Bruce said. “I’ve never understood the fascination people have with watching explosions.” Tony felt a sting of disappointment, but it was minimised by Bruce stepping forward. “But, if you want someone to help you sort them, I’m happy to lend a hand.”

Tony stepped to the side to allow Bruce to join them in the elevator, feeling better with two friends at his side. He did end up closer to Loki, he was almost leaning against the mage’s side.

“While I will happily help you destroy them,” Loki said quietly. “I will enjoy seeing what else your mind has created.”

Tony didn’t know how to feel about that. He didn’t like knowing all the damage his weapons had done – but they were still his creations. They were still the product of hours of work and breakthroughs. He was proud of them, even when he tried to ignore their existence.

He knew Loki understood that. Although Tony would never say it, he appreciated Loki's acknowledgement.

The rest of the elevator ride was silent and when they returned to the magic room, Tony took a moment to admire and absorb everything Loki’s spell had already done.

Where would they start?

Stepping into the room, Tony ran his eyes over the mess of weapons. He really wanted to blow it all to kingdom come - but it was too valuable and dangerous to destroy outright. They had a war to fight; a battle for the universe to wage. Tony couldn’t afford to squander everything he’d recovered.

“Right,” Tony said. “The explosives and missiles I’m going to need to either decommission or send to the bomb range. So, we’ll start with the guns. I might be able to grab a few spare parts, but I’d like to get them out of the way. We’re going to need working room.” He turned to the other two. “Bruce, you start on the left, I’ll work from the right. Loki, you sit in the chair.”

Loki blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“You’re still recovering your magic.” Tony pointed forcefully at said chair. “You get to watch.”

“I am hardly an invalid incapable of sorting firearms,” Loki said, sounding offended.

He could see an argument and Loki digging in his heels. He quickly tried to circumvent it.

“I know that, babe,” Tony said, stepping close and clasping Loki’s hands. The mage frowned, not looking swayed. “But, I want you at full power when the backlash for this hits.”

Loki’s stony expression didn’t change, but Tony could sense that his point was being made. He kept going to hammer it home.

“Right now, I’m trying to be logical. I’m trying not to give into the urge to turn it all into scrap metal.” Tony squeezed Loki’s hands. “So, be logical too? Let yourself recover, please?”

Loki crumpled. He didn’t look happy about it, but he grumbled, “Very well, but I will not sit by uselessly. I will help FRIDAY sort through the documents. I will also arrange a time for us to destroy what you do not need.”

“Okay,” Tony said, feeling relieved. “Thanks.”

Loki was still frowning, but he also squeezed Tony’s hands. He let him go after a few moments before taking a seat on the chair. A hologram of FRIDAY’s progress soon appeared in the air and Loki gave it his attention.

Tony was relieved Loki hadn’t fought him. They could both be stubborn, especially when it came to ignoring their own bodies and health for the sake of their pride. They were starting to get better at it, at least.

Turning back to the weapons, Tony surveyed the mountain of munitions in front of him. The first thing he needed to do was disarm them. He took a seat on the floor beside a pile of firearms and started the laborious process of checking for ammo and breaking them down.

Bruce, not an engineer or an expert on weapons, started bringing the guns to him in piles. He also disappeared to another floor and found boxes. Tony started making a pile of ‘keep’ and ‘destroy’. Bruce started grabbing the items from the piles Tony made earlier, keeping them all together.

They’d only been at it for fifteen minutes when FRIDAY announced, “Boss. A SHIELD jet is approaching the tower.”

Tony didn’t stop breaking down the gun in his hands. “That took longer than I thought. Was Fury taking a nap?”

FRIDAY didn’t respond to his rhetorical question. “Their ETA is ten minutes, Boss.”

Tony closed his eyes, feeling tired and resigned. He knew it was coming, but did it really have to be so soon?

“Anthony?” Loki questioned.

Tony looked over his shoulder. Loki had stood from his chair and shifted his clothes into his battle armour. Tony supposed that meant he couldn’t just have FRIDAY power up the tower defences and shoot at them until they went away.

Maybe he'd get some satisfaction from their anger? Maybe it would make him feel something other than anxiety and uncertainty. These were *his* weapons and they'd had no right to take them in the first place.

The pile in front of him might be overwhelming, and the blood on his hands felt thicker than ever – but they were changing that. This was one more chance at redemption.

Pushing up from the floor, Tony put down the latest gun and headed for the door. “FRIDAY, lock down the room when we leave. No one in or out without my authorisation.”

“Yes, Boss.”

“Send up the suit. I want it nearby in case things turns ugly.”

“Yes, Boss.”

“Tony,” Bruce said, his voice worried. “It won't turn into a fight, will it?”

Tony shrugged, but the motion was jerky. “I wouldn't put it past them. The Avengers might hold back, but Fury will happily shoot me if I stand in his way.”

“He can *try*,” Loki hissed, his eyes flaring with the green of his seidr.

Tony flashed the mage a tight smile before turning back to Bruce. He tried to assure the scientist. “I mostly expect a pointless pissing contest where they demand I give the weapons back, and I flatly refuse.”

Bruce continued to frown. “They'd fly all the way here just for that?”

“They want to confirm we did it,” Tony answered. “Once they've done that, they'll be trying to find a way to steal them back. This is reconnaissance and a chance to threaten and yell.”

“A pitiful act we will only laugh to witness,” Loki insisted, his eyes still dark. “They dared to become your enemy and now they face one of the many consequences for their foolishness.”

Tony's expression softened as he looked at the mage. When Loki was close enough, he placed a hand on Loki's arm and gently squeezed. Tony knew he should be feeling glee, maybe even satisfaction, but somehow, he just felt *tired*. There were thousands of weapons in his tower, and all it did was remind him of past mistakes.

SHIELD and the Avengers were treating him like a misbehaving child and he really didn't have time for them. He wanted peace and quiet – a day off, and a chance to right the wrongs he'd put into motion decades ago.

Maybe his actions had put this in motion, but SHIELD had betrayed him first. They had no right to keep showing up at his tower like they owned it.

This was his home. His weapons. *His* choices.



“If SHIELD want to push me,” Tony said quietly. “I’ll push them harder than they ever expected. I’ve been nice so far, but I’m not taking their crap anymore. I’m done with it.” He glanced at Loki. “You said it yourself: they’re useful but they’re not game changers. I’m not having them show up here unannounced again.”

“Then let us make sure they know it,” Loki said, his voice low and gleeful.

Tony turned back to Bruce who was cleaning his glasses. Yet, unlike the argument Tony expected, Bruce remained wary but determined.

“I don’t agree with all of your choices, Tony, but I do believe you have a right to retrieve what belongs to you. If SHIELD wants to show up here, they have to know you won’t be happy with them.”

Tony smiled. “That almost sounded like approval.”

Bruce smiled back. “I wouldn’t go that far.”

“Boss,” FRIDAY interrupted before he could respond. “Iron Man armour is ready. ETA to SHIELD arrival is seven minutes.”

Tony gritted his teeth before turning on his heel. Loki was right behind him, but Bruce was slower. It didn’t surprise him when Bruce didn’t enter the elevator. He didn’t want to be seen, and Tony wouldn’t make him.

Bruce’s gaze was nervous and concerned as he said, “Good luck.”

The doors shut before Tony could reply. Tony didn’t realise his fists were clenched until Loki’s hand covered his own. He squeezed and stroked it until Tony relaxed. He then linked their fingers.

“Do not give them the satisfaction of your anger,” Loki said softly. “Show them your triumph, your arrogance and your glory. Remind them of what they have lost and laud the power at your disposal.”

Tony’s lips twitched and he glanced at the mage. “You mean, be a smartass and an asshole?”

“Yes,” Loki agreed, smirking. “It should come naturally to you.”

It made Tony snort, and a genuine grin briefly touched his lips, but all too soon it was stolen as they arrived at the penthouse. SHIELD would be here soon, and with them, a brand new useless, circular argument would begin.

Sometimes, it didn’t pay to be a hero.

# Chapter 56

## Chapter Notes

The confrontation you've been waiting for!  
Hope you like it :)

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

The first thing Tony did was go to the bar and start pouring two glasses.

“I see this is a preferred Iron Man battle tactic.”

Tony frowned and glanced at Loki; the other man nodded at the bar. “A drink.”

It took a moment but then he snorted, understanding the reference.

“It’s always nice to have a drink when you’re threatening someone.” Tony held out a glass and winked. “But I only offer the most impressive people to join me in it.”

“Oh?” Loki asked, taking the drink. “Should I feel pleased to have received an offer before becoming your ally?”

“You should,” Tony replied, coming around the bar to join him. “I knew from the start you’d be a worthy opponent. Now, I’m just glad to have you by my side.” He brushed their arms together as they walked. “It’s always good to start a confrontation, knowing you have the most powerful people beside you.”

Loki inclined his head in agreement, yet, the humour had fled his gaze.

“And power, Anthony, you do not lack.” His eyes were bright and they bored into Tony’s. “I speak not just of myself but of your friends on this realm and the new associates on others. I have said before that SHIELD are meaningless ants with no concept of the universe and those who inhabit it. *You*, Anthony, are becoming known amongst the Nine Realms as a mortal to *respect*. What SHIELD think of you, what they *say* to you means nothing. You are the one to whom they should bow and plead, not the other way around.”

Tony swallowed, feeling a sudden and very visceral need to either cover the mage’s lips with his own, or hide his face in Loki’s chest until he stopped talking.

He settled for saying, his voice a little rough, “You sure know how to give a pep talk, don’t you?”

Loki smiled. “I know how to praise those who deserve it.”

Reaching the couch, Loki took a seat and gestured for Tony to join him. He moved without hesitation to press up against the other man. Their thighs touched and Loki brought his arm around Tony's shoulders. Tony closed his eyes and leant into the comforting weight and warmth of Loki. Hell, even Loki's *scent* was becoming comforting. Just by being here, Loki made him feel better.

It was little wonder that Loki broke the silence to say, "We can stop them from arriving, if you wish. I can place a shield around the tower to keep them from entering."

"A shield to stop SHIELD?" Tony quipped, but Loki didn't respond.

He could feel the mage's eyes on him, waiting for a serious answer. Tony sighed.

"Thanks, but we can't do that. This has to be dealt with or it will only get worse." Tilting his head back, Tony opened his eyes and caught Loki's gaze. "It's funny, I really thought I'd be excited for this. When you told me that you could get my weapons back, I knew they'd show up. I planned to gleefully rub their noses in the knowledge they were outmanoeuvred. I'd have my weapons back, and there wouldn't be a damn thing they could do about it. I thought I'd feel great." Tony sighed again and looked out the window, seeing a speck in the distance and knowing what it meant. "So, why do I feel drained, Loki?"

Loki was silent, a pensive frown marring his lips.

"Perhaps," he answered, "you realise they are not the true problem. You are angry at them and you are grateful retribution has been gained, but it is the abundance of weapons outside of SHIELD that depresses you. They are one parasite of many. Their betrayal hurt you, but now you have rectified the theft. They do not matter."

Tony looked back at his drink, swirling the liquid morosely. "Never thought I'd become the apathetic type."

"You have not become so," Loki insisted. "Rather, you know what they will attempt to do. You are tired of their pathetic manipulations and the arrogant presumption they may force themselves on your tower." Loki squeezed his shoulder. "You wished for time to decommission your weapons, time even, to process what is now possible. They are ruining that."

Tony clenched his fingers around the glass, feeling the first surge of anger flood through him. Loki was right. He wasn't less frustrated or angry; he was just *sick* of SHIELD. He wanted them out of his life.

Tossing back his drink, Tony shifted to better see the approaching quinjet.

"You know something, Loki. I think this is going to be a final warning."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. We're letting them inside this time, but after this, they need to be invited." Tony dragged his eyes to Loki. "That shield, how serious about it were you?"

“Perfectly.”

“How long until you can put it in place?”

Loki smirked. “It is already part of my defences; I merely need to activate it and tell it who to deny.”

Tony grinned. “Have I mentioned how amazing you are? No, seriously. I need to mention this daily. I also need to get you into the lab and study this shield so that I can make another one using the arc reactor.”

“Ah,” Loki’s eyes were bright with intrigue. “So I need not expend my seidr maintaining it.”

“Exactly. Two layers are better than one, and one layer is better than none if you’re recovering from something.”

Loki nodded. “Asgard maintains similar energy shields in their prisons. It would not be difficult to repurpose them for the tower.”

“Love the way you think, Lokes,” Tony said. “We can-”

“Boss,” FRIDAY interrupted, sounding apologetic. “The quinjet will arrive in two minutes.”

Tony’s excitement fled and he scowled. “Spoilspot.”

Loki squeezed his shoulder again. “We have nowhere to be today. We can spend the afternoon on your weapons and the evening on our shields.”

“Yeah,” Tony agreed, rolling his shoulders and trying to ease his tension. “Detention first then the rest of the day off.”

“Detention?” Loki asked, sounding confused.

“Nothing. Don’t worry.” Tony shifted, moving to stand. “I want another drink. You want one?”

He didn’t get to leave the cushions as Loki held him in place. A small flare of magic was expelled from his fingers and Tony’s glass filled again. Tony shot the mage a glare.

“I thought you were supposed to be resting?”

Loki shrugged. “I have enough seidr for imperative tasks.”

“And that’s imperative, huh?” Tony asked sceptically.

Yet, any response was lost when the quinjet reached the tower and commenced landing. Watching it, Tony had a very brief fantasy of Loki magically flicking the jet off the building to become a black smear on the sidewalk. Unfortunately, he needed to behave.

When the door opened, Tony knew who he might expect, yet his eyebrows rose when Fury stalked out at the head of the group. He was followed by Romanoff, Barton and Rogers.

“Well, aren’t we special,” Tony murmured. “Fury’s come out of the shadows.”

“I believe he is carrying one less weapon,” Loki remarked.

“Remind me to find and throw it under a bus.”

Loki chuckled softly. The sound helped ease some of Tony's tension. It also allowed him to roll back his shoulders, plaster on an uncaring, unimpressed expression and tell FRIDAY, “Make them say please, then you can let them in.”

Tony was rewarded by seeing Fury stop, curse a few times and glare at the door. He didn’t say the word himself, leaving Romanoff to do the honours. When the door was opened, they stalked inside. Romanoff’s face was as blank as always, Barton looked angry, Rogers was wary and Fury looked completely livid.

“Just what the fuck are you doing, Stark?”

“Sitting down to a drink with my lover?” Tony answered, hardly about to let such an open-ended question go.

“You and your leashed wizard just stole SHIELD property.”

Tony felt Loki imperceptibly tense at the insult and Tony leant a little more against him. He fired back at Fury.

“What’s the matter, Nick? Did someone steal something that didn’t belong to them?” He raised his eyebrows. “Isn’t that a little pot calling the kettle black?”

“Do you think people are going to fall for your bullshit, Stark?” Fury snarled. “Do you think people aren’t going to work out who’s behind it when weapons start going missing?”

“Everyone wants weapons. Who’s to say it’s me?”

“They were all Stark Industries weapons,” Romanoff stated.

Tony gave a deliberately confused look. “Really? Funny. Stark Industries shut down its weapons manufacturing a long time ago. Why would anybody want such old weapons?”

“Don’t try your innocent act here, Stark,” Fury snarled. “We all know you’re petty enough to steal weapons out of the hands of anyone who happens to hold them.”

Tony gritted his teeth. He knew Fury was trying to goad him into incriminating himself. Fury would know the spell hadn’t stolen from men and women in combat situations. They’d made sure of it - yet, Tony couldn’t say anything without risking his position.

Luckily, he didn’t have to.

“That’s not true,” Rogers said, a frown furrowing his brow. He received a harsh glare from Fury, but he didn’t back down. “Field agents didn’t get their weapons removed.”

“That still leaves everyone on base,” Barton cut in, still scowling at Loki and Tony. “That leaves every goddamn base with a hole in their defences because they’re suddenly out of weapons and ammunition.”

“I find it hard to believe SHIELD would construct its entire defence system out of Stark Industries weapons. That seems like a fatal design flaw, I mean, it’s not like you can *buy* new weapons when you run out.” Tony gave them a cold smile. “It’s not like you have schematics on file to build your own. Because that would be *stealing*.”

Fury still looked angry, but he was trying to calm down.

“People do what they have to do to in order to protect themselves and their people.” He held Tony’s eyes. “There are good people at risk. This is no time for arrogance.”

“I doubt the person who stole from you was merely being *arrogant*,” Loki cut in, his voice cold. “You have made enemies, Director. You betray as often as you assist. I have little doubt, this... *thief* is merely regaining what they are due.”

“And the people who will die from that decision?” Fury spat.

“If you are so useless a tactician as to now be unable to arm your own people,” Loki countered, “then their deaths must rest on your head alone, Director.”

Fury was gnashing his teeth, so Tony decided to further twist the point home.

“And, if you came to me to ask for help or for some of that funding I withdrew, you picked a really bad opening gambit. Insult and accuse your potential benefactor?” Tony shook his head and tsked. “Not your best move.”

“I could have a hundred agents here, tearing this tower apart.”

Fury leant forward, obviously attempting to be intimidating. It wasn’t working. “What will happen when they find their weapons hidden here, Stark? How are you going to explain *that* to the public? Their new ‘*power couple*’ revealed as nothing but conniving thieves.”

Tony’s smile was sharp. “We both know you won’t do that. You know I won’t hold back in hurting the Avengers’ reputation if you do.”

Tony matched Fury by leaning closer, his glass held loosely between his thighs. There was a distinctive height difference with Tony sitting and Fury standing, and with someone else, it might have put Fury in a better position – but that wasn’t the case here.

Tony was at ease on the couch, Loki’s hand moving to rest on his lower back in support and protection. Fury was standing in Tony’s home with FRIDAY ready to draw a weapon at the first hint of a threat. Romanoff and Barton were on edge and ready to leap to Fury’s defence – while Captain America stood awkwardly, not seeming to know what to do.

Tony was only vaguely aware of them; his focus was on Fury's good eye and his pathetic attempt at intimidation.

"Push me," Tony warned, "and I'll push back."

Tony had dealt with worse PR than throwing SHIELD from his tower and magically locking them out. Hell, the public was more inclined to trust *his* word than a shady government agency. Fury had no power here, but he was trying to force himself into the upper hand. He knew he was screwed, but instead of regrouping in the shadows, he was showing up at Stark Tower and trying to force Tony to behave. He was throwing a temper tantrum because nothing had gone according to plan.

Pathetic, really.

Leaning back into Loki's touch, Tony took a sip from his drink and eyed the intruders in his house.

Loki had been right all along: they were insignificant, and their opinions of him didn't matter. He didn't need them, he didn't *want* them – and thanks to Loki, he didn't have to worry about them using his weapons anymore. His guns, schematics and *missiles* were all out of enemy hands, and he'd make sure they stayed that way.

It was remarkably freeing.

"So," Tony said, into the silence that had fallen. "Are we done now? I'd like some alone time with my boyfriend."

"Alone," Fury echoed, and Tony forced himself not to tense at the look in the director's eye. "I'm surprised you'd want to be left so readily, Stark. What was it? '*Doesn't play well with others*'. All you've got left is a bag of cats mage who's using you for good publicity."

"*You* are one to talk," Loki hissed.

His voice was cold enough to freeze, in fact, Tony felt the temperature drop a few degrees.

"You have used him from the moment he crafted his armour," Loki spat. "*I* have formed an alliance with him. *I* know his true worth."

"Does he?" Fury pressed, his attention staying rooted on Tony. "Or is he one more liar, telling you what you want to hear? He's pushing you away from any ally Earth could give you. How long until even Rhodes isn't at your defence? You've got no one left in this tower but a robot and an alien. You're all alone with *him*. You think we're the enemy? Take a look around, you've been seduced by the biggest liar of them all."

Tony scoffed. "And this is supposed to elicit my trust? Insulting my lover as well as my intelligence?"

"Loki has the better deal," Romanoff spoke up for the first time. "You're a convenient bed warmer." She looked Loki up and down, her eyes blank. "I'm familiar with the methodology."

“You would be, wouldn’t you?” Tony snapped.

He also finally gave into the urge to lay a hand on Loki’s knee. He could feel how tense Loki was; he was ready to snap and was barely holding onto his anger. Tony wanted to make sure Loki knew that he *didn’t* believe the bullshit they were spouting.

“He just made you steal weapons,” Barton chimed in. “What else is he going to make you do?”

Tony barely refrained from scoffing. The mind control gambit, really? They’d already proven the truth of that. Loki wasn’t working of his own freewill when he invaded. He was as much a puppet as Clint. He certainly wouldn’t use those tactics on Tony.

Did they really think he and Loki didn’t know each other better than that? How fucking stupid were they?

Rogers was looking between everyone nervously. He was the one to say, his tone careful and measured, “I think everyone needs to calm down.”

“Oh, I think they should continue,” Loki said, his voice the darkest Tony had heard in a while. “They have only insulted *me* and my *lover*, in our *home*.”

Tony looked away from Fury to find Loki’s eyes full of barely contained rage. His body was coiled with tension. It was likely due to the drain on his reserves that Loki’s magic wasn’t crackling around him in threat.

Loki looked ready to murder them, and Tony wouldn’t be holding him back. Right now, he’d be happy to watch Loki defenestrate them onto the sidewalk.

The tension in the air was thick. Tony was just waiting for the wrong word and the first thrown fist. He was a second away from calling for a suit – when a new and unexpected voice spoke.

“I think they should leave.”

Tony hadn’t heard Bruce approach or the elevators open, but he jerked his head to the side, finding the man standing with his arms crossed. The shock from the Avengers and Fury was palatable.

“Bruce,” Natasha whispered, her eyes were wide with genuine hurt and surprise.

Bruce didn’t look at her long, his gaze flicking away awkwardly – yet, he also stiffened his spine and walked forward. He didn’t stop until he reached the couch where he took a seat, right at Tony’s side.

“Tony and Loki aren’t alone,” Bruce said firmly. “They have friends.”

Barton and Rogers continued to look thrown by the other man’s sudden appearance, but Fury was already collecting his bearings.



“Are you sure that’s a statement you want to make, Dr Banner?” Fury’s voice had turned gentle and imploring. His eyes flicked to Natasha in a gesture that left subtlety behind. “Sometimes people make the wrong friends.”

“Yes,” Bruce said, unswayed. “I’ve seen the evidence to prove that.”

Rogers flinched, Barton’s eye twitched, and Romanoff actually looked away. It was the most guilt that Tony had seen any of them display. Fury, of course, didn’t blink.

“A choice had to be made, Banner. You’ve made your share of decisions for the greater good.”

“I didn’t betray my friends to do it,” Banner answered. “You all made a choice; I made mine weeks ago.”

“You’ve been at the tower for weeks,” Romanoff said, her voice full of pained realisation. “Why didn’t you contact us?”

Despite her words, it was obvious what she meant: *why didn’t you contact me?*

Bruce still couldn’t look at her, but his words made her flinch. “Maybe, I didn’t want to.”

“Bruce,” her voice was low and pained.

He’d never heard Romanoff sound so hurt. Tony flicked his gaze to Loki who looked both perplexed and intrigued. Bruce on the other hand, was clenching his fist and staring at his pants.

Things had been tense and hostile before, but Bruce and Natasha’s *thing* had given the room an awkwardness that Tony didn’t know how to handle. Rogers looked equally discomforted and wrong-footed. Barton was watching Romanoff with a protective gaze.

Barton and Romanoff had always been something separate from the Avengers, a fact made even more pronounced by the revelation of Barton’s family. Barton would go to any lengths to look after Romanoff, just as she would go to any lengths for him.

Funny, how that self-sacrifice and consideration had never been extended to Tony. Hell, Barton would offer it to the Maximoffs, but not him. Romanoff would offer it to Bruce, but *not him*.

He was always the odd man out, wasn’t he? At least, when it came to soldiers and spies. (Rhodey, being the exception.)

It was why he was better off with scientists and mages.

And, it was also why, Tony had Bruce’s back.

“You heard Bruce; he thinks you should leave.” Yet, Tony did shift a little closer to Bruce and lower his voice, “Unless, you want a quick chat.”

Bruce glanced at him. Tony raised his eyebrows, knowing Bruce would understand. This was his chance to clear the air with Romanoff without having to leave the safety of the tower. Tony could see the debate going on behind his eyes, but they both knew he couldn't run from her forever.

He gave a small nod and stood from the couch, he walked around it before saying, "Nat."

She was already walking towards him.

They didn't leave the penthouse but they went towards the door she'd entered through, getting as much of a private conversation as was possible. It still left Tony and Loki dealing with the rest of the group.

"You know," Tony said, "if you wanted to go wait in the quinjet for Romanoff to finish—"

"*We're* not finished, Stark," Fury interrupted.

"Oh, we are," Tony said. "You're getting nowhere. You're just annoying me and angering my boyfriend. Soon enough, he's going to send you to another dimension and I'm not even going to help you get back."

"Do you really want to make an enemy out of us, Stark?" Fury demanded. "Do you want to attack us and risk everything you're trying to build with the public?"

"Um, firstly, I don't need you. *Secondly*, the public loves us and they hate you. Thirdly, you're making it really easy to decide that a little backlash would be worth it."

"And what about our contract?" Fury demanded, a gleam in his eyes, showing that he thought he was laying down a winning hand. "You can't break that, Stark."

"Considering the amount of stipulations that *you* have broken," Loki said. "I do not believe you should cast stones."

Fury's face was carefully blank. "What stipulations have we broken?"

Loki chuckled. "A half dozen, and you know them all. You sought to push the boundaries, or outright ignore them. Did you really believe it would be a contract where I took you at your *word*?" Loki shook his head and glanced at Tony. "I thought SHIELD agents were supposed to possess intelligence?"

"I'm still not sure how that rumour got started," Tony replied.

"Are you done?" Fury interjected with gritted teeth, not giving Loki a chance to reply.

"I am if you are." Tony pointed at the door. "How about you take it and get out?"

"*We're* not finished," Fury hissed. "You stole SHIELD weapons."

"I stole *nothing*," Tony said. Finally rising to his feet and glaring at Fury. "If someone took your weapons, that's a breech in your shitty security that you'll have to deal with."

“Stark-”

“No,” Tony said, his voice unyielding. “I’m done with this shit. Stop invading my tower and focus on buying new guns to protect your agents. Go talk to the President or the World Security Council for funding, go ask for pennies on the street, I don’t care. Get the hell out of my tower. This is the last time I let you in without an invitation or an appointment.”

“The world is at stake, Stark-”

“And if I were you, I’d stop pissing off potential allies,” Tony growled. “Step foot on my property again, and I’ll be filing charges for trespassing and harassment.”

“You’re angering the wrong person, Stark,” Fury warned.

Tony almost laughed. “No, *you’re* angering the wrong person. I have more money than a small country, more power than most governments. I have interstellar alliances, and the favour of the public. I am Iron Man, and I am Tony fucking Stark.”

Tony didn’t even have to say a word for his girl FRIDAY to drop weapons from the roof and point them at Fury.

“Now,” Tony said, “get the hell out of my house.”

Fury was grinding his teeth, but he did stay long enough to hiss, “You’ll regret this, Stark.”

He then turned on his heel and stalked away. Barton glared at them, but followed after his puppet master like any good boy on strings. Surprisingly, Rogers remained.

“Did you not hear-”

“I did,” Rogers answered. “I just...” Rogers sighed and glanced away. “I’m sorry, it had to turn out like this.”

Tony wasn’t moved. “*I didn’t* make it turn out like this.”

“I know,” Rogers agreed, looking back at Tony. His eyes were apologetic and sad. “But, even though I’d change it if I could, I’m glad you’ve found something better than you had with us.”

Rogers gave a small smile and nodded at both Tony and Loki before turning and leaving. Tony looked after him with confusion. He felt thrown for a loop and he didn’t like it.

“That was weird,” Tony pointed out.

“Or perhaps Rogers has come to realise the hole you have left?” Loki suggested. “The Midgardian phrase ‘*one does not know what they have until it is gone*’ may apply.”

“That doesn’t really account for him being happy for me.”

Loki shrugged. “Guilt makes one do strange things.”

Tony couldn't deny that. It also made him look at Bruce and Romanoff. They were still talking in harsh whispers. Rogers had come to stand just outside the tower door on the landing pad, waiting for her. Barton and Fury were already inside the quinjet.

"FRIDAY?" Tony asked quietly. "Give me a flashing light, red for yes, green for no. We got any bugs or infiltration devices?"

He was pleased to see a small green flash. He'd still have Loki give the tower a magical sweep, but that was good enough for now.

Swirling the drink in his glass, Tony continued to watch Bruce and Romanoff.

"Wonder what they're saying."

"I'm sure Banner will inform us, if it is relevant."

"Awh," Tony turned to Loki. "Banner again? You called him Bruce earlier."

"I didn't realise what I called him was of such important," Loki remarked with amusement.

"I like my friends to get along," Tony insisted. "First names help."

Loki rolled his eyes, but didn't argue. Maybe he had nothing to say, or maybe his attention was drawn back to the other two people in the tower. Tony didn't know what Bruce had said, but it made Romanoff flinch back. Her gaze was hurt, but she didn't respond to what he said, choosing to turn on her heel and leave without a backwards glance. Bruce watched her go with slumped shoulders, but he didn't try to stop her.

Rogers followed her and once they were inside the quinjet it took off, returning the way it had come. Good riddance as far as Tony was concerned. It finally left them alone – but, it also left Tony wondering; what had Bruce said to Romanoff? He looked deflated and like he was in sore need of a drink.

"Bruce?" Tony called, keeping his tone gentle but stepping away from the couch and closer to the scientist. "Do you want me to make you some tea?"

"Actually," he said, taking off his glasses to rub his face, "I'd prefer something stronger."

Tony stilled, feeling unsure. Bruce didn't actually *drink*.

"Coffee?" he suggested tentatively.

Instead of responding verbally, Bruce put his glasses back on and walked towards Tony. His eyes were on his scotch glass and when he reached out, Tony relinquished it without a fight. Bruce tipped it back, swallowing without a cough or a wince.

His scotch was *good* after all, and very easy to drink straight. It just... wasn't something he was used to Bruce doing.

He tentatively placed a hand on the other man's shoulder. "Are you okay?"

“Not really,” Bruce answered, handing back the empty glass.

“You didn’t have to come out here for us,” Tony told him gently. “I appreciate it. You don’t know how much I liked having you here but, if it would have been better-”

“I had to face her,” Bruce interrupted, not looking at Tony. “And I wouldn’t stand back and let them accuse you of having no friends. I never liked working for SHIELD, Tony, and I don’t like what the Avengers did. I don’t want to be in the public eye but... I was glad I made my stance. It’s just,” he sighed. “It was hard.”

“Yeah,” Tony replied, understanding that. “It was hard with Pepper too.”

Bruce raised his eyes. His gaze was pained. “She still felt something for me. Nat... she doesn’t normally... I was different and I... I hurt her, and I hate it, Tony. I hate that I hurt her.”

“You can’t help how you feel.” Tony pointed out. “It’s not your fault you don’t like her back.”

“It doesn’t make it hurt any less,” Bruce muttered.

Tony squeezed his shoulder, trying to offer comfort, despite not knowing what to say. He felt awkward and wished he knew what to do. Emotional situations were not his forte. Tony almost wanted to ask Loki for advice, but he wasn’t sure the mage would fare much better.

“She was looking for me,” Bruce announced, suddenly.

Tony frowned. “Well, yeah, of course she would be. We all were. We-”

“No,” Bruce interrupted. “She was looking for *me*, that’s why she dug into your server.”

Tony sucked in a sharp breath. He also heard Loki stand and come closer. Their shoulders brushed as he stopped beside Tony.

“She had orders,” Bruce continued, “but she thought you might know where I was hiding and wanted to find out.”

Tony felt a fresh sting of betrayal not just for himself, but for Bruce as well.

“She shouldn’t have done that,” Tony said, anger kindling on Bruce’s behalf. “You didn’t want to be found.”

“I know,” Bruce said. “We argued about that.” He removed his glasses again. “We argued about a lot of things.”

“Is that why she did not pass on all the information she had gathered?” Loki questioned; his voice surprisingly gentle. “Because it was not part of her mission objectives, but a personal endeavour?”

“Not exactly,” Bruce admitted. “I think... to some degree, she didn’t agree with what SHIELD wanted.”

Tony scoffed. “Well, she has a shit way of showing it.”

Frankly, Tony wasn’t buying it. If Bruce wanted to see some good in her, well, that was his choice. Tony knew better. Romanoff had taken the opportunity to grab whatever she could. Romanoff was a spy, and she knew that information was currency and power. She might have held back due to some sense of loyalty towards Tony, but he wasn’t holding his breath. It was a bargaining chip. Romanoff wanted to hold something over Tony, and although Loki might have taken the physical copies, the ones in her memory remained.

When he glanced at Loki, he got a feeling the mage agreed with him, but he wasn’t about to argue the case with Bruce. He’d just faced the girl he’d almost dated and subsequently rejected; he deserved a bit of leeway.

“Do you want to go to the lab?” Tony asked. “Watch a movie? Hang out with your buddies and eat icecream?”

It had the desired effect of making Bruce crack a small smile. “Thanks, Tony, but I’d rather have some time to think.”

“Hey, that’s fine,” Tony insisted. He squeezed Bruce’s arm again before letting go. “Take whatever time you need, but come back up to have dinner with us?”

Bruce nodded. “Dinner sounds good. Thanks.”

“Don’t thank me,” Tony insisted. “You’re the one who had our backs. We should be thanking you.”

Bruce shook his head, but he still had a faint smile as he turned away and headed for the elevator. They were silent as they watched him leave, but once he was gone, Loki remarked, “You are sceptical of Romanoff too.”

“Her loyalty is to Fury and Barton, not me,” Tony said. “She’ll hold onto what she has and trade on it, if she has to.”

“And what of Banner?” Loki asked. “Do you think she will be spiteful towards him now?”

“Hard to say,” Tony answered. “But I’m going to be watching out for it.” He frowned and looked back at Loki. “And you’re supposed to call him *Bruce*.”

Loki ignored Tony and asked instead, “How do you feel?”

Tony raised his eyebrows. “About what in particular? Fury being a giant dick? Rogers being weirdly compassionate? Romanoff preparing to bite us when we least expect it?”

“All of it and more,” Loki replied. He ran his hand up Tony’s arm, over his shoulder before lightly squeezing the back of his neck. Tony’s eyes fell closed. “This has not been an easy day for you.”

“I’m used to it,” Tony murmured, even while leaning back into the comforting weight of Loki’s hand.

“Still,” Loki insisted. “You should not have to be.”

Tony’s lips twitched. “Perks of being Tony Stark; everyone wants a piece of me, and not always in a good way.”

Loki huffed a sound that was both amused and exasperated, yet, a moment later Tony felt lips brush his temple in a soft kiss. Tony let out a sigh and raised a hand to curl around Loki’s wrist.

This felt good; soft, easy, comforting and *safe*.

But, as nice as it felt, they had too much to do. Tony gave himself a few seconds more before he made himself step away from Loki and open his eyes.

The mage was frowning, obviously displeased by the distance between them.

“We need to sweep the tower for SHIELD surveillance, and clear up the lower floors.” Tony ran a hand through his hair. “We’ve already been delayed enough.”

“Very well,” Loki agreed, but he also stepped closer. “But first, there is something I believe you need.”

Tony frowned, not comprehending what he meant.

The last thing he expected was for Loki to open his arms and tug him into a warm embrace. Tony sucked in a breath before melting into Loki. He closed his eyes and wrapped his arms around the other man.

Loki was warm and his scent was becoming as familiar and welcoming as the workshop. His worries seemed to fade away as the mage hugged him.

Loki was right; he did need this.

## Chapter End Notes

Yeaah so, don't expect comment replies for a while. Busy, busy over here. ^^"  
But, Merry Christmas to all who celebrate it! I should have a small Christmas ficlet up soon :)  
Happy Holidays!

# Chapter 57

## Chapter Notes

This is another short, alternative POV chapter, so I'll try and update the next chapter sooner :)

I hope you like!

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

Clint was good at his job. He *liked* his job. He respected Fury and would do a lot for SHIELD. It meant he would turn his back on Stark if he needed to. Clint had thought the gamble would pay off; Nat had been confident too – they all had. But they'd made a fatal mistake; they'd underestimated Tony Stark.

It was easier to be angry and blame Stark for not understanding – it was easier than admitting that he felt guilty. He'd always liked Tony; he was funny and more than the arrogant, self-centred image he projected.

They could have been friends, but Clint had a family, he couldn't make the mistake of trusting the wrong person. He had Nat, and that was the only friend he needed.

And, right now, his friend was in pain.

Clint always felt uncomfortable going up against Stark after everything that had happened. His discomfort this time, had been replaced by anger and a hint of fear. What Stark had done was... bad. It bordered on villainy and considering who he was now partnered with? It didn't sound good to Clint.

Stark had stolen from good men and women without giving a damn about whether they had spare guns, or who might decide to target them while they were unarmed. He hadn't looked past his own selfish desire to reclaim his weapons. Loki was only feeding into his more erratic and egoistical behaviour.

It wasn't a good mix, and Clint could tell Fury was equally horrified at what Loki and Tony could get up to if they tried hard enough. It was a disaster they could have never anticipated. No one expected Tony and Loki to forge a partnership, let alone a relationship.

Clint was *angry* at Stark, but he was also using that as a front, because, deep down he knew he'd hurt Stark. It terrified him, because if the inventor finally flipped to the side of the villains, Stark knew where Clint's family lived.

It was why Nat had held onto the information she had; if Stark had a shred of empathy left, Nat would bargain his family's safety. So far, Stark hadn't involved them in the conflict. He'd



seemed more inclined to protect Earth than turn against it. Clint hoped that would last, because so far? SHIELD wasn't making any headway at getting Stark either back on side, or less inclined to blow them up.

Fury was pacing the quinjet like a caged tiger. Steve was standing in the back, frowning pensively at the floor. He was starting to second guess things and that was another problem they didn't need. Clint would have to talk to him, try to win him back under SHIELD's wings. The last thing they needed was him defecting.

It was a complete shitshow, and SHIELD was weakening with every second – and yet, that wasn't what Clint cared about right now.

He cared about Nat, who was sitting beside him as he flew the quinjet back. Her face was impassive, and she was silent. No one else would notice a difference, but Clint could see the way she was barely holding onto her composure.

Clint wanted to say something, but didn't dare until they were alone. She would never let her guard down where someone else could see. Only he was allowed to see her at her worst.

The flight back was one of the longest he'd sat through. When they landed, Fury left with a dramatic flair of his cloak. He didn't say a word or bark an order. He would seek out Hill and they would make a new plan for how to tackle Stark.

Clint didn't move from his seat and Nat didn't either. She knew he wouldn't let her escape that easily, and the quinjet was one of the most private places on the SHIELD base.

Steve lingered. His body language was awkward but his eyes were concerned. Clint knew he meant well, but he was often misguided and hindered more than he helped.

He flashed the other man a smile. "Say hi to Barnes. I'll be by in a bit with the new playlist I promised him. If you see Pietro, tell him I'll be late for our spar."

Steve frowned, glancing between them and trying to catch Nat's eye, but when she continued to avoid him, he sighed and nodded.

"Okay." He hesitated for a moment before stepping forward. He lightly touched her shoulder, and it was a testament to how much she liked Steve that she didn't try to break his fingers. "Sorry, Nat."

She didn't react and he left the quinjet. They were alone, and Clint waited for her to speak. It took a few minutes, and by that time, Clint had tilted back his head and was staring at the roof of the jet.

"I'm not who he wants anymore."

Outwardly, Clint lifted his head to look at her, but otherwise didn't react. Mentally, he was already drawing back his bow to shoot Bruce Banner in the crotch with an exploding arrow.

"Stark help with that?" Clint asked.

“No,” Nat said.

He could tell how much it cost her to admit that. Bruce hadn't been influenced or manipulated from her side. While he was gone, he'd simply worked out she wasn't for him. It happened every day, but it shouldn't be happening to Nat. She'd been through so much shit, and she deserved someone to love and cherish her.

Clint's heart ached for his friend. He wanted to reach out and take her hand or pull her into a hug, but he knew to offer affection would make her withdraw. He shifted his leg instead, just enough for their knees to brush.

Nat's jaw trembled, but only for a split-second. She stared unseeingly out of the quinjet and didn't say another word. Clint remained silent and at her side; giving her all the time she needed to compose herself.

Clint knew he couldn't blame Stark for this, but a part of him couldn't help it. Would Bruce have dismissed her outright if he heard the story from their side rather than Stark's? Would they have worked out if they'd had more time together?

They'd never know.

It only made him angrier.

*Fuck Stark, he thought. Fuck him and his bag of cats boyfriend.*

They didn't need Stark. They could do this on their own. Maybe, Stark would stay a hero and keep the planet safe, or maybe he'd turn into a bigger enemy than anything they'd ever faced – but Clint didn't care.

He wouldn't go crawling back to that tower again. Stark had made his choice and as far as Clint was concerned, it was one he couldn't come back from. Bruce Banner had done the same.

They might have appropriated Stark's weapons, but he'd stolen their means of defending themselves. Banner might have fallen out of love, but he'd hurt Nat in the process.

Clint was a simple man with simple instincts. He followed his heart, and his gut, and both of them were saying that the Maximoffs were right.

Tony Stark wasn't worth their time, and now neither was Bruce Banner.

## Chapter End Notes

I always like giving an alternative perspective to add additional depth. But, as I said, because it's a short one, I'll try to update again soon :) ♥

# Chapter 58

## Chapter Notes

Firstly, omg I just want to thank everyone not only for reading this story but leaving kudos!!!! Sharpen Your Teeth has just reached 10,000 kudos!!! I never imagined it would get so high or so far, wow! ♥ \_\_\_ ♥

Thank you all for your continued enthusiasm and persistent reading. It means so much!

I hope you enjoy this early chapter in celebration :) ♥

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

When their hug ended, Tony regretted having to leave Loki's arms, but there was too much to do, and it quickly distracted him.

They conducted a sweep of the tower, made double sure that the weapons were secure and that nothing new had been leaked. Yet, when Tony stood in the room, the monumental nature of the task didn't fill him with determination, but dread.

His skin itched and his mind was abuzz with *how many more* might be out there. He could feel himself getting overwhelmed.

Loki's hands were a firm, grounding weight when they landed on his shoulders. Tony jerked and looked at the other man. Loki's eyes were narrowed.

"I think you are in need of a distraction."

Tony wasn't sure what he was expecting, but when the room melted away, he didn't anticipate they'd end up in the training room.

"Have FRIDAY bring us your armour." Loki removed his hands and stepped backwards. "You will need it for what I have planned."

It took Tony a moment. "You want to *fight*?"

"I believe a spar would be beneficial."

Tony frowned. "You're supposed to be resting."

"I'm recovered enough."

"Loki-

“Do you wish to avoid the embarrassment of losing?” Loki asked. “There is no harm in admitting I am far superior.”

Tony’s eye twitched and he pointed at Loki accusingly. “They are underhanded tactics, Loki.”

Loki smirked and taunted, “Then perhaps you should prove me wrong.”

Tony was tempted. The thought of letting of steam in a friendly fight sounded so *good*, but...

“Are you sure?” he asked.

His concern was obvious and it made Loki soften. He stepped closer and cupped Tony’s neck. The affection was unfamiliar, but Tony just leant into it.

“I will be fine and will limit the use of my seidr.”

Tony hesitated for only another moment before, “FRIDAY, send a suit.”

“Yes, Boss.”

Loki smiled and started to pull back but Tony clutched his wrist and kept him there. Loki frowned for a moment but when Tony tilted up his head, Loki smiled and bent down. The kiss warmed Tony all the way through and even though he knew the fight would help, Tony almost wanted to suggest they do something more pleasurable – but, they were still working their way towards that.

It was with disappointment that they pulled apart.

They lingered close, their foreheads brushing. Tony relaxed a little more and found words slipping free.

“Have I mentioned how glad I am to have you here?”

“I will not complain about hearing it again,” Loki admitted. The smile was obvious in his voice.

“Then I’ll tell you again,” Tony said. “I’m glad you’re here. I’m glad we’re *together*. I don’t... I don’t know how I would have done this without you.”

“You would have,” Loki said firmly, leaving no room for doubt. “You are an incredible man and-”

“And everything is better with you,” Tony interrupted. He pulled back if only to better hold Loki’s eyes. “Maybe, I would have been fine on my own, but I’m glad I never needed to find out.”

Loki smiled, the expression revealing his dimples and lightening his eyes. Tony only got a moment to admire it before Loki was kissing him again. He cupped Tony’s cheeks and held him in an embrace that made him feel cherished. Tony shivered, but it was from pure delight.

When their kiss ended this time, Tony didn't open his eyes for a long time, simply enjoying the feel of Loki's so close to him. Loki kissed his cheek and he leant into the touch. He felt Loki's smile before he pulled back.

Tony opened his eyes and made a noise of complaint. Loki looked amused. "We cannot fight entwined."

"I'd be quite happy not fighting and *staying* entwined, thank you."

Loki looked pleased by the words, but he still insisted, "The spar will do you good."

Tony pouted, but it was more for show. "Do I at least get more cuddles tonight?"

Loki laughed even while his eyes danced with happiness. "I will not say no to that, Anthony."

"Well then, I guess I have a battle to win if I want to be the big spoon."

Loki snorted, but it was drowned out slightly by the door opening and his suit entering the room, piloted by FRIDAY. Grinning, Tony stepped up to it and let the armour close around everything but his face. Loki conjured a staff and they took a moment to size each other up.

"How do we call it?" he asked.

"When I pin you to the ground, I will be declared the winner," Loki replied.

"Arrogant and cocky," Tony said. "I like that in a man." He looked Loki up and down. "Too bad it'll be *me* who ends up on top."

Loki smirked. "Shall we test that?"

Tony barely got a chance to pull down the visor before Loki was shooting a magic blast at him and he was twisting out of the way.

"I thought you said you'd lay off the seidr?" Tony shouted.

"My own seidr, yes," Loki answered, amusement in his voice, "but there is more than enough stored in this staff to defeat you."

Tony laughed and spun back around and shot his repulsor at the mage. "I hope those words taste nice when you eat them in bed tonight."

Loki laughed again, but otherwise didn't reply. They might enjoy their banter, but they were going to enjoy the battle more. There was nothing more thrilling than going up against someone who was just as smart and unpredictable as you were.

There was nothing like a little competition to distract the mind and invigorate the body.

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The battle was short but brutal, lasting no more than twenty minutes, and even though Loki had the upper hand it was Tony who managed to get Loki pinned beneath the suit. Loki did

his best to struggle free, but in the end, he was trapped. He had a mulish pout on his lips when Tony removed the faceplate to offer a smug smirk.

“Guess that means, I won.”

Loki still looked unhappy, and Tony couldn't resist bending down to kiss the frown from his lips. Loki startled before relaxing. His arms pulled against Tony's hands and he released them, letting Loki loop them around his shoulders. It was only when he felt a leg around his waist that he realised what was about to happen.

Loki used the distraction and the freedom of his limbs to flip Tony onto his back and straddle his hips. The kiss broke and Tony looked up at him in bemusement. Loki had the staff back in his hand and was pointing it at Tony.

Loki smirked down at him. “The victor is not declared until the pinned man forfeits.”

Tony couldn't help his fond smile. “Trust you to make a loophole you can slip through.”

Loki only looked proud at the fact, and Tony found that he didn't want to fight it.

“Alright,” he agreed, letting Loki have his victory. “You win. You can be the big spoon.”

Loki lowered his staff, looking endearingly proud and triumphant. He was also straddling Tony and had wound up *on top* and after the kiss they'd just shared, it didn't take long for Tony's mind to wander and his eyes to follow suit. He wouldn't mind Loki straddling him when he *wasn't* in the armour. He licked his lips and it didn't take Loki long to notice the change in mood.

“Anthony?” he asked.

Tony dragged his eyes back up to Loki's, seeing the way they had darkened.

“I think I mentioned the victor being on top?” Tony said.

Loki's lips parted. “You did.”

“The victor also gets the spoils, right?”

“Mm,” Loki agreed, his eyes sliding over Tony's armour as if mentally addressing him.

Tony's body was flushed and his heart was racing for a new reason. “Going to take your prize then?”

Desire was obvious in Loki's expression and yet despite him starting to lean down as if to kiss him, he paused and something flittered across his face that Tony couldn't catch. It made him hesitate and look momentarily uncomfortable. He shook it off quickly and moved to continue but Tony reached up and caught his shoulder.

“Hey,” he said. “What's wrong?”

“Nothing.” Loki smirked. “I’m about to claim my prize, after all.”

Tony didn’t buy it. He narrowed his eyes and insisted, “Loki.”

It took a few seconds but Loki’s smirk faded and he let out a soft sigh. “I was merely... considering my options.”

Tony raised his eyebrows. “Oh? I thought that would be a good thing.”

Loki huffed out a laugh. “Oh, it was.” His smile was wane. “I merely needed to dismiss an option.”

“Dismiss?” Tony asked. “Got to admit, very few things I wouldn’t do in bed. I mean, your magic for starters-”

“It was not a concern for what you *won’t* do but rather a... want for something *new*.”

It took Tony a moment, and when he did, he let out a soft sound of understanding. “You wanted to-”

“Such a simple act,” Loki muttered, not holding Tony’s gaze. “Hardly more intimate than what we have already shared. Something we have both done *countless* times, but...”

“It means something more when it’s the first time with someone you care about,” Tony acknowledged softly.

It had been the main source of their hesitation from the start. Loki wasn’t ready to take something that he wasn’t sure Tony wanted. He also cared for Tony and hadn’t wanted to rush and ruin something.

Retracting his gauntlet, Tony raised his hand to cup Loki’s cheek. Loki’s eyes raised, watching him warily.

“You do know it’s something I want too, right?” He grinned. “That I’ve been thinking about it as well? That I *want* to share that with you and that this *is* a relationship?”

Loki swallowed thickly. “I am... beginning to realise that.”

“Well, I better work harder to make sure you’re *certain* of it,” Tony insisted. He also waggled his eyebrows, hoping to break the mood. “Or I could just show you how *hard* I am for it.”

Loki snorted and rolled his eyes. He pushed away from Tony, but a smile was curling his lips. He also held out a hand for Tony to take.

He took it without hesitation and was pulled to his feet. Loki didn’t let go of his hand and Tony stayed close, waiting.

Loki seemed to struggle but only for a moment before he admitted, “While I do want it, Anthony. I do not want it to be because of a bet, or a game I want something... intimate.”

*Special*, Tony thought, even if the words didn't leave Loki's lips.

Tony knew his smile was painfully soft and he shifted to press a soft kiss to Loki's lips.

"Then that's what we'll have," Tony said when he pulled back. "It's on the table, but we'll wait until the right time."

He felt the tension fall from Loki's shoulders and he nodded.

And, even though their conversation had derailed the mood and they probably wouldn't be sharing an orgasm anytime soon, Tony didn't feel like complaining. They'd cleared the air and taken a step further in their relationship. That was a much better outcome as far as Tony was concerned.

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After a shower and a quick change of clothes, they returned to the weapons room and Tony began the slow process of dismantling and destroying what he could. Loki helped when he was able, but he otherwise sat in a chair reading, resting and planning the shield for the tower.

There was a lot to go through, and some of it he was planning to melt down and reuse for a better purpose. Tony worked silently, but despite being on the opposite side of the room to Loki, he didn't feel alone. It was helped by the way he could feel Loki's magic.

He hadn't mentioned it to the mage, not when he realised Loki was unaware of it. Loki's magic was, as far as he could tell, offering and receiving comfort as it wrapped around him and hummed. Tony liked the feeling, and he didn't want Loki to stop.

The feel of Loki's seidr and the satisfaction of each weapon pulled apart made the time fly.

He didn't notice how long he'd been working until Loki placed a hand on his shoulder. He blinked to focus and turned to face Loki.

"It is almost time for dinner," he explained. "Bruce has ordered pizza and it will arrive within ten minutes."

"Oh," he said. "Right. How long has it been?"

"Four hours," Loki said.

Tony frowned. "Really? It didn't feel that long."

"That is no surprise." Loki looked around the room and the items at Tony's feet. "There is much here to hold your attention."

Tony knew he was speaking about the weapons, and while it was true that he was focused and feeling satisfied with every weapon he pulled apart – but, he knew it could have been overwhelming or brought back bad memories if it wasn't for one thing.

"There is." Tony said, keeping his voice soft. "And I owe a lot of it to your seidr."



Loki looked back at him with amusement. "It merely brought them here-"

"No," Tony shook his head. "Can't you feel it?"

Loki frowned and his eyes clouded as he searched inwards. When he realised, Loki jerked and his eyes snapped back to Tony.

"My seidr-"

"Has been looking after me," Tony said with a smile. "I can feel it's intention. It just wants to make sure I'm okay. It's also making sure *you're* okay. It's a feedback loop, isn't it?"

Loki gave a small jerk of his head. "My seidr acknowledges you as my partner. It will use the connection to encourage happiness and comfort." He swallowed. "It will also become protective if you are ever in danger."

Tony grinned. "Doesn't sound like a bad thing, Lokes."

He felt Loki's magic hum a little louder, as if pleased by the outcome. Loki softened as well and he brought his hand to Tony's cheek, stroking it gently.

"You are a wonder, Anthony."

Tony leant into the touch. "No more than you."

Loki bent down and Tony met him halfway, enjoying a soft kiss. When Loki's seidr sparked along his skin in response, Tony let out a soft gasp and jerked back. Loki looked embarrassed. "Ah, my apologies-"

"Is your magic feeling kinky, Loki?" Tony asked, amusement in his voice even as he shivered.

The intensity and *nature* of the magic was changing. His body felt flushed and his skin was tingling in a really nice way.

When Loki tugged his magic away, Tony let out a small noise of disappointment and leant towards Loki, wanting it back. "That wasn't-"

"A complaint," Loki interrupted. "I know. But we have to attend dinner where we will discuss matters of importance with Bruce. We can't be distracted." Loki's eyes fell away and he admitted, "I also do not wish to be swept away by my seidr yet."

He remembered their earlier conversation and it made sense: Loki still wanted their first time together to be special. He didn't want it to be dominated by magic-play. It was kind of... romantic. Loki really wanted it to be something they'd remember and look back on fondly.

Tony had never had that, not even with Pepper. It had been a good night, but it was about Tony making it good for her. It was also fuelled by adrenaline. They'd fallen into bed without thought, thinking it was for the best. It had turned into a disaster.

Loki wanted them to go into it clear-headed with the certainty it was what they wanted. Loki wanted them to *last*, and to be ready for the change to their relationship. It made Tony want it too, not only to please Loki, but because he'd never had something so special.

It was a cliché, but he was starting to want rose petals and champagne and low lighting as they took their time.

Maybe, he'd ask FRIDAY about ordering those rose petals.

"Then, we'll hold off," Tony said, taking Loki's hand and squeezing it.

Loki looked wary; probably worried that he was displeasing Tony by withholding sex or some other nonsense. Tony might have a reputation, but he didn't want anything his partner wasn't happy with; in fact, giving his partner what they wanted was practically an aphrodisiac to him.

Tony brought Loki's hand to his lips, kissing his palm.

"I'm going to look forward to having sex with you and your seidr," Tony told him. "But not as much as I'm going to look forward to our first night together; just us, some low lighting, and a slow exploration."

Loki let out a soft noise, his eyes darkening. Tony was *so* tempted to trail his lips to Loki's fingers and pull one into his mouth – but, this wasn't about sex, so he resisted. He kissed Loki's palm again before lowering his hand.

"I meant what I said; when we're ready. Waiting isn't the hardship people make it out to be, not when it means I'm making you happy."

"I want *you* to be happy as well," Loki insisted.

"And I will be," Tony said. "Hell, I *am* happy; whenever I'm with you, no matter what we're doing."

It took Loki half a second to react, and when he did, he cupped Tony's cheeks and kissed him with affection, longing and gratitude. Tony groaned and looped his arms around Loki's neck, keeping him close and kissing back. The kiss was fierce at first but it eventually gentled until it was gentle brushes of their lips.

"Keep talking like that," Loki murmured. "And it will be sooner than you think."

Tony laughed, and pressed his smile against Loki's lips. "Whenever you want, babe."

Loki grinned and kissed him again. "Soon." He kissed him again. "My little vege-"

Tony shoved Loki, and the mage moved with it, already laughing. His eyes were bright and full of affection, so even though Tony scowled at him, it wasn't long until he was laughing too.

## Chapter End Notes

Just some fluffy feels and relationship building. I hope you liked it! :D ♥

p.s. I've hurt my wrist, so comment replies might be delayed. Typing is... not fun at the moment ^^"

# Chapter 59

## Chapter Notes

Hope you enjoy the latest chapter :)

Dinner was awkward at first. Bruce was pensive and any jokes Tony made fell flat. Loki seemed uncertain of what to say, and in the end, it was FRIDAY who gave them something to talk about.

She politely asked if Loki was aware of his growing popularity among the LGBT community, and before he could ask, a string of memes and art that was flooding the internet appeared before them. Loki was an *icon* and his mystified expression was enough to break the ice. FRIDAY was careful to only show positive (and humorous) posts and pictures, but it gave them something to talk about.

Tony was especially amused by the “*I would kneel for him*” comments from a few members of the gay community. He teased Loki that he’d have to beat gay men off with a stick to keep Loki, to which Loki flushed but assured Tony he wouldn’t be going anywhere.

When their conversation eventually petered out, Bruce wished them goodnight and headed to his room. Tony was tempted to go back down to the magic floor, but despite trying to hide it, Tony could see how tired Loki was. He knew if he went to work on the weapons, Loki would work on the spell. Loki needed the rest.

“Come on,” he said. “We should have an early night.”

Loki frowned. “You do not wish to keep working?”

“I know they’re safe here, protected by FRIDAY and your wards. We’ve got a free night; we shouldn’t waste it.”

Loki’s eyebrows rose. “Oh? And what will we do with this night?”

“Well, I was talking about *sleeping*, but...” Tony stepped closer to Loki and placed his hands on the other man’s hips. He grinned. “I’m open to suggestions.”

Desire darkened Loki’s eyes and his arms wrapped around Tony’s waist. “Is that so?”

“It’s-” Tony stopped, his eyes closing as he shuddered.

Loki’s magic danced along his nerve-endings making him bite down on a groan. It felt like all his nerves had come to life. If Tony’s body had an on switch, Loki’s magic didn’t just flick it on, it super charged it.

“*Damn*,” he whispered, forcing his eyes open. “Your magic knows-”

Loki let him go like he was burned. He felt Loki’s seidr get pulled away and he made a protesting noise. “Loki, what? That wasn’t a complaint! That was-”

“I understand that,” Loki said, but despite his words, he sounded tense. “I apologise, but my magic is not normally so... insistent.”

Tony frowned, but he remembered the last time they spoke about this. “Is it because of that compatibility you mentioned?”

“Yes,” Loki admitted.

“And you don’t want these... bonds to happen?”

“Not so early in a relationship,” Loki replied. He sighed and looked down at his hand, a hint of green magic ran along his fingers. “These bonds usually take decades to form. Seidr is rarely so accepting of a partner. A bonding, you see, is about gifting some of my seidr to another in order to allow us a powerful connection and intimacy.”

“So, you’re telling me I’m special?”

Loki shot him an exasperated look. “This is not something to joke about.”

“Sorry,” Tony said, offering a sheepish smile. He also stepped closer, feeling relieved when Loki didn’t step away. He touched Loki’s hips again and stroked his thumbs against Loki’s side. “I get that this is a big thing, that it shouldn’t be taken lightly – but, I like your seidr too. It feels nice when it’s buzzing around me. I don’t want you to yank it back all the time.”

“And I do not want us to form a bond long before you are ready to accept it,” Loki replied.

Tony frowned. “But, it can’t force us to bond, can it? I mean, we have to actually agree, right?”

Loki gave a small nod. “Yes.”

“So, what exactly is the harm in it doing this?”

“It will let every mage know we are a couple-”

“Which we’re already doing,” Tony interrupted cheerfully. “Next?”

Loki shot him a small glare. “It will mean I have greater awareness of you; your location, your mood, if you are in danger.”

“Nothing but bonuses so far,” Tony continued while gently tugging Loki a little closer. “Next?”

“It will become possessive of you; disliking when you are touching others. It will want your mutual dedication.”

“Don’t get touchy with others while your magic is nearby,” Tony said, nodding solemnly. “Got it.”

Loki’s glare deepened. “You are not taking this seriously.”

“I am!” Tony insisted. “I just don’t see any downsides. Your magic wants us to be a couple and we already are. What’s wrong with that?”

“What’s *wrong*,” Loki insisted, “is that my magic will not want to let you *go*.” Tony blinked with surprise, but Loki wasn’t finished. “These bonds are not formed on a whim, Anthony. They are meant to last *centuries*. They are bonds so strong that nothing can sever them. They tie us together so intrinsically that you will never go anywhere without sensing me; without knowing how far I am from you. My *seidr* wants us to be forever linked. This bond is for a *lifetime*.”

“Oh,” Tony murmured, not sure what else to say.

“Exactly,” Loki muttered. He tried to pull away, but Tony held fast. Loki scowled at him. “Anthony-”

Tony glared back. “I hope you don’t think *that* is going to send me running.”

Loki looked confused, so Tony decided to enlighten him: “Your magic likes me enough it wants to pick me for a lifetime? Yeah, you’re right, it’s way too early for us to do something like that, but it’s not offensive. Hell, it’s flattering and it sounds amazing. That’s the kind of romance most people can only dream of; it’s the kind of thing *movies* are made of. So, if you think that kind of bond would sound *wrong* to someone like me, then you are way off the mark, Lokes.”

Loki lips parted, but he didn’t say a word. His eyes were wide with disbelief, while beneath that lay something raw and vulnerable. It was a look that struck Tony straight in the chest; Loki looked like someone who never believed *anyone* would want to share such a bond with him. Loki had such low self-confidence when it came to people loving him; and hell, Tony couldn’t blame him. After everything he’d been through, he had little chance of forming normal relationships with confidence and ease.

His own *family* made him doubt his self-worth and ability to be loved. How could he believe someone else would be willing to dedicate themselves to him? How could he believe the prospect would be anything other than *displeasing*?

“Anthony,” Loki murmured, the word containing a wealth of emotion.

Tony just smiled and tilted up his chin. Loki instantly bent down to claim his lips in a soft kiss. Tony felt Loki’s *seidr* humming, but this time there was a distinct soft, affectionate feel to it. Yet, when Loki cupped Tony’s cheeks, it was even more distracting. His touch was almost reverent; he held Tony like a precious treasure and it made Tony’s heart skip.

When they pulled apart, it was done slowly and Tony kept his eyes closed for a long moment, just enjoying the closeness.

“I think I would like to go to bed,” Loki murmured, his nose brushing Tony’s.

“Yeah,” Tony murmured. “Me too.”

He felt Loki’s smile as it was pressed against his cheek, and a moment later, Loki’s seidr was tingling his skin as Loki tugged on it, letting the common room melt away to be replaced by the penthouse. Tony opened his eyes, but he didn’t have long to look around. Loki let him go and stepped backwards. Tony’s fingers tightened, but he released his hold. Loki just smiled and held out his hand. Tony took it and let himself be gently tugged towards the bedroom.

It wasn’t for the first time that Tony found himself excited to go to bed; not because he’d be having sex, but because he’d be curling around Loki, and drifting off to sleep in the mage’s arms.

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The next morning, Tony woke up to the smell of coffee as Loki brought him a mug as well as breakfast in bed. Tony gave Loki a kiss for the gesture and enjoyed a few peaceful minutes sharing toast and conversation.

Unfortunately, the real world wasn’t going to leave them alone indefinitely.

Pepper phoned about reports of former Stark Industries weapons going missing. He didn’t admit anything, but she knew him well enough to realise what they’d done. She didn’t suggest coming by to talk to him about a publicity campaign as she might have years ago – instead Pepper said the PR team would email him and politely ended the call.

After that, Tony knew it was time to actually do something about his company.

The day was a whirlwind of activity. FRIDAY compiled a list of potential CEOs for him to look over this afternoon. Bruce was in the lab trying to locate Animal Whisperer. Tony headed down to the magic floor to dismantle more of the weapons while Loki went into a trance. He needed to check in with a few acquaintances to ask about Thanos and he said the best way to do it was via astral projection.

Tony had a million questions, of course, but he bit his tongue and filed it away for later. Loki looked tense enough at the prospect of the Mad Titan.

It was why Tony left him to it, glancing up every half hour to make sure Loki was okay. He also got him tea twice when Loki came back to the room looking both tired and triumphant. Thanos was being delayed by the Guardians of the Galaxy and he hadn’t found any of the Infinity Stones Loki had hidden. It was the best news they could have received; if they could keep him occupied for a little while longer, they might have enough time to prepare their weapons and their army.

Tony was already making plans to enhance his armour with magic (and build Loki a few extra weapons for when his magic was depleted) but before they could become more than notes on a tablet, Bruce voice echoed through the room.

“Tony, Loki. We’ve got a problem.”

“What kind of problem?” Tony asked, instantly on the alert.

“Animal Whisperer.”

Tony tensed, but Loki was the one to ask, “What about her?”

“She’s attacking a base, and judging by the energy signature, I’d say it belongs to HYDRA.”

Loki and Tony glanced at each other. “Whatever she’s searching for,” Tony said, “it’s not going to be good.”

“How far is the base?” Loki demanded.

“Across the country,” Bruce answered. “FRIDAY can show you a map.”

A moment later, a projection appeared in the air in front of Loki, he scanned it, committing the location to memory. He turned to Tony. “I can teleport us there.”

“FRIDAY, get me my best suit.”

“On it, Boss.”

“Do you want to send a message to SHIELD?” Bruce asked, his voice wary.

Tony made a face, but as much as he hated the idea of being around them, it was better safe than sorry. Animal Whisperer was dangerous and unpredictable, the Avengers would be useful.

“FRIDAY, can you send the update to Rhodey and Rogers?” Tony asked.

“Rogers?” Loki asked, curious.

Tony shrugged. “So far, he’s annoyed me the least. I should encourage good habits, right?”

Loki hummed, but didn’t contradict him and before Tony could say anything else, the door was opening and his suit was hovering inside. Tony stepped over to it and let it form around him.

“Going to join the party, Bruce?” Tony asked.

“I’d rather work from here,” Bruce replied, sounding apologetic. “If you need me, Loki can teleport me.”

“Assuming he’s not in trouble,” Tony said, frowning.

“I will be fine,” Loki insisted. “She is interested in me, after all.”

“That doesn’t fill me with comfort, Loki.”

Loki smiled gently and stepped up to him. He placed a firm hand on his shoulder, and although he couldn’t feel the touch against his skin, he *could* feel Loki’s magic as it rushed



over him in a warm, soothing wave.

“I will be careful,” Loki promised him.

Tony still didn't like it, but he knew he didn't have the time to argue. They had to stop Animal Whisperer before she hurt somebody, or stole whatever she wanted from the HYDRA base.

“Okay,” Tony said. “Then, let's go crash this party.”

Loki smirked at him, and a moment later, Loki's seidr was tugging them across the country to the HYDRA compound which was already looking worse for wear.

A giant hole had been blown in the side of it, although, considering Animal Whisperer's modus operandi, it could easily have been from a charging animal. Tony didn't know *where* she was getting them from, he only wanted to stop her from harming anymore of them. She still had one of the bulls from her last attack. They'd have to watch out for it and any other surprises.

“FRIDAY,” Tony said. “Can you locate her?”

“She is moving towards the centre of the compound.”

“Any animals with her?”

“It is hard to say, Boss.”

“Right,” Tony muttered while firing up his repulsors and heading into the compound. The animals were magically altered, it left FRIDAY little to go on. “Run scans and send them back to Bruce. We need a better way to know what she's up to.”

“On it, Boss.”

Loki followed behind Tony at a swift pace, but the moment they were within the compound walls, the carnage was made apparent.

“Fuck,” Tony hissed.

Loki bent down and placed his fingers to the slain man's neck. It looked like he'd been mauled. “He is dead.”

A trail of blood made a grisly path into the compound and Tony and Loki warily followed it deeper into the HYDRA base. It became obvious that while a few guards were stationed at the place, it was mostly for scientists.

They didn't find a single person alive.

“What the hell is she doing here? Wasn't she part of fucking HYDRA?” Tony snapped.

“She was,” Loki agreed, his voice terse. “But her comments would prove that she despises all humanity, even her former allies.”

They turned another corner and Tony gritted his teeth. There was a fucking slash mark in the wall.

“What the hell does she have this time?” Tony snapped. “A tiger?”

“The size of the claw marks would indicate a lion, Boss,” FRIDAY charmed in helpfully.

“Wonderful,” Tony muttered. He glanced at Loki. “You can send it to sleep like the others last time, right?”

“I can,” Loki agreed.

“Right. First chance we get, we’re tucking the kitty into bed. I never wanted to be a lion tamer and I don’t want to start now.”

Loki offered a fleeting smile, but otherwise didn’t respond as they turned down another hall and heard muffled shouting. They both tensed but didn’t stop their approach. The closer they came, the clearer the voices became. Tony quickly recognised Animal Whisperer.

“You will do it!” She shrieked, her voice high-pitched and full of rage.

“I don’t know what you want!”

“*Do it,*” she shouted. Her words were followed by a threatening roar.

Tony glanced at Loki to find the mage already looking at him; there wasn’t any choice. Tony wouldn’t stand back and let anyone get mauled by a lion, even if they were a part of HYDRA. He charged the repulsors and flew the last of the distance. He made a hard turn and burst through the doorway. It caught everyone’s attention; Animal Whisperer, the cowering scientist, the male lion and the bull.

“Honey, you miss me?” Tony asked before firing his repulsor straight at the woman’s chest.

She flew backwards and hit the ground with a thud. The lion roared and leapt towards him, but before it could hit, green magic froze the lion in the air. Tony’s heart was racing despite knowing the suit should protect him. Some fears were just inbred and being pounced on by an angry lion? Not something he’d ever wanted to experience.

He pushed the thought aside to turn his focus on Animal Whisperer. She was pushing up onto her elbows, and for the first time, he paid attention to her face. She looked sick and pallid. Her eyes were crazed and blood was trailing from her eyes down her cheeks. She was very faintly trembling and she looked thinner.

“FRIDAY?” Tony asked warily.

“The woman’s heart is erratic. She does not appear injured from the blast, but-”

“Her body is failing,” Bruce said.

“What do you mean failing?” Tony demanded.

“Whatever happened to her isn’t something a mortal body can sustain,” Bruce explained. “She’s dying.”

“Shit,” Tony hissed before projecting his voice through the speakers at the woman. “Is that why you’re here? You’re hoping HYDRA can undo what they did to you?”

She bared her teeth. “You know *nothing*.”

“Actually, I probably know more than you, about a lot of subjects. Such as animal welfare-”

She thrust her arm towards him and Tony had to jerk into the air to avoid the bull charging him. Her hand started shaking uncontrollably, her skin even seemed to start opening in small wounds and cuts.

“I think the phrase ‘*this hurts you more than it hurts me*’ is applicable here,” Tony said. He also charged his weapons and pointed his repulsors at her. “Stand down and I’ll take you to a hospital.”

“*Fool*,” she spat. “Corrupting, tainting, *fool*. You don’t *deserve* life. You don’t deserve *his* life.”

Tony raised his eyebrows. “Is this the part where you talk about my boyfriend again? Because, hun, hate to tell you, but he’s taken.”

“You will *all* be removed.” She raised both of her hands; her body was trembling so much it was a wonder she could stay sitting. “All of you!”

She tried to thrust her hands forward, but whatever she attempted to do, it was stopped as green magic leapt forward and struck her. She jerked before collapsing onto her back, the enraged bull drooped to the ground a moment later.

Tony stayed where he was, hovering with his repulsors raised just in case, but when nothing happened, Tony slowly lowered to the ground and glanced over at Loki. He held the scientist by the jacket, keeping him from getting away.

“She out for the count?” Tony asked.

“Yes,” Loki replied. “She is too weakened to pose any threat to me.”

“And the animals?”

“In a better condition than she,” he answered, glancing at the lion and then the bull. “I will send them to my associate, but for now.” Loki’s eyes glowed green and they disappeared, likely going to Stark Tower. A thought only confirmed when Loki said, “Bruce, I will have you confirm my assessment as to their health.”

“I’m on it,” Bruce said.

Loki’s eyes slowly returned to normal and Tony took a step closer. “What do you want to do now?”

“I am certain the information contained within these walls will be useful,” Loki remarked before nodding in the direction of a computer.

Tony grinned before climbing out of the suit. “Have I mentioned how perfect you are lately?”

“Not lately,” Loki replied with a small smirk.

Tony’s smile widened and he was tempted to give Loki a kiss; but with the HYDRA scientist as a hostage and the unconscious Animal Whisperer on the ground, he resisted and headed to the computer.

“How long until SHIELD and the Avengers arrive, FRIDAY?”

“ETA: thirty minutes, Boss.”

Tony snorted. “Thirty minutes? What slowpokes.”

“Not everyone has the advantage of teleportation, Anthony.”

“You mean, not everyone is lucky enough to have the perfect ally?” Tony countered.

Loki chuckled. “If you insist on that definition.”

“I do,” Tony said, flashing the mage a grin over his shoulder before pulling out a nearby, undamaged chair and sitting down in front of the computer.

He had a half hour to dig through HYDRA’s files before SHIELD arrived to confiscate anything of value. Tony would take great pleasure in beating them to it.

# Chapter 60

## Chapter Notes

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

There was a lot to be found in the HYDRA compound and Tony downloaded it all and sent copies to FRIDAY to analysis further at the Tower. The compound was a place for HYDRA to do all their dirty and inhuman experiments. Luckily, this place was understaffed, but there was still enough to make him grit his teeth and want to punch something.

These people might not have deserved a brutal death at the teeth and paws of a lion, but he wasn't sure if a fair trial would have been harsh enough either.

It made it a twisted kind of irony that Animal Whisperer had led them here; it meant the compound could be shut down before it did any more harm.

“Boss,” FRIDAY said, dragging Tony from his dark thoughts. “The Avengers are arriving.”

Tony lifted his head, looking back towards the door where Loki was standing guard. He'd had FRIDAY do a sweep of the base but those who had survived had fled, everyone else was dead. The Avengers could track down the runaways, and as much as Tony didn't like the idea of handing anyone over to SHIELD, it was the best place for Animal Whisperer. They had the facilities (and the legal rights) to contain someone, he didn't.

“How's she going?” Tony asked, directing his question at Loki.

“Her unconscious state seems to have slowed down her condition,” Loki said. “The more she uses her powers, the more damage it is doing to her.”

Tony frowned. “So, if she stopped, she'd be okay?”

Loki shook his head. “The damage is too deep. The more my seidr becomes familiar with her, the more I see it. The energy is unnatural to her body, it is corroding her. It is as we spoke of: a mortal body cannot sustain what she is undergoing.”

Tony ran a weary hand over his face. He asked, “Are you saying we might not be able to help her?”

“I think it is highly possible she won't survive,” Loki admitted.

Tony turned to the HYDRA scientist, he was docile and fearful as Loki maintained a grip on his lab coat.

“What did she want from you? A cure? A weapon? Did she tell you?”

The scientist pressed his lips together but didn't reply.

“*Speak*,” Loki growled, his voice low and threatening. It sent a shiver down Tony’s spine. It wasn’t the same as when Loki invaded New York, it was calmer, stronger and more confident. It was a little bit hot.

The scientist didn’t seem to think so. He cringed and looked between the two of them with fear lurking in his eyes. When he answered Loki’s order, Tony was a little disappointed: wasn’t he threatening enough?

“I don’t know. She wanted me to synthesise something from one of our other labs. I don’t have records for that.”

“What lab?”

“I don’t know, it was destroyed ages ago.”

Tony clenched his jaw even as he met Loki’s gaze. If she was trying to create something to mimic what was done to her, then they could find themselves with a very dangerous army of deranged timebombs.

Tony turned back to the computer. He’d already made copies of anything useful, but he double-checked anyway, searching this time for something that Animal Whisperer might have been looking for.

He was still combing through their experiments when he heard the familiar tread of Steve Rogers. He tensed, but forced himself to relax. He didn’t turn around even as the man made it to the door.

It took only a heartbeat for Rogers to ask, “Is he the only survivor?”

“The only one who didn’t flee before our arrival,” Loki replied, his voice flat.

“Clint,” Rogers said, obviously speaking into a communicator. “We need a sweep of the surroundings. Some HYDRA agents might be making their way on foot. Take Thor as well, see if you can round them up.”

“On it,” Barton replied.

“How is she?” Rogers asked next.

This time, Tony was the one to answer.

“Just peachy. She’s trying to find a way to infect others like her, probably so that when she dies – which she’s well on the way to doing – she’ll have people to avenge her.”

Rogers was silent before he stepped further into the room. Tony didn’t like having his back to a *backstabber*, but knowing Loki was there made it easier. He knew Loki would stop Rogers before he could do anything.

“What have you found?” Rogers asked – and, to his credit, he didn’t phrase it like a demand.

It was the only reason Tony answered: “Nothing. Whatever she wanted; it doesn’t seem to be here.” He jerked his thumb in the direction of their captured scientist. “He said he didn’t have access to what she wanted; I’ve started to believe him.”

“Good,” Rogers said, “but, I’m not taking any chances.”

Tony turned, pinning him with a glare. “And you think *I* am?”

Rogers winced. “No. I’m not saying that. I just mean-”

“You want SHIELD to dig their way through the files and find anything of value?” Tony smiled nastily, the words hitting too close to home. He pushed out of the chair and made a dramatic gesture at the seat. “Well, be my guest. We’ve stopped her, now *you* can deal with her.”

He started to walk towards his suit, but Rogers called after him, “Tony, wait! I didn’t mean it like that. I just meant; I don’t want to see anyone else hurt! None of us do!”

Tony paused just before his armour and flicked his eyes to Loki, the mage still held the scientist, but his attention was on Romanoff. She was standing just inside the room, her eyes cold. Her face could have been carved from marble with how hard it looked.

“Then take the two of them back to SHIELD. Maybe you can keep Animal Whisperer alive and stop her from infecting anyone else.”

He climbed into the armour and felt the comforting embrace of it encircling him. He saw Loki toss the scientist at Romanoff from the corner of his eye. She caught him with ease and yanked his arms behind his back. He wouldn’t be going anywhere.

Loki walked over to Tony and placed a hand on his shoulder, preparing to teleport them.

“Wait!” Rogers said, taking a step forward and holding out his hand. “What killed everyone? What happened? We need to know-”

“The threat has been neutralised,” Loki cut in. “SHIELD will receive a summarisation of what we encountered and what we learnt as per our contract.”

“But that isn’t-”

“It is what you will receive,” Loki said, his voice cold. “We are needed elsewhere.”

Tony felt the tingle of Loki’s seidr a moment before the compound disappeared to be replaced by the tower. He breathed a sigh of relief and turned towards the other man. They still had a lot to do when it came to sifting through HYDRA records and checking on the animals, but he was glad to be able to do it back home where he felt safe.

Loki’s smile was soft and his eyes full of understanding – and even though he could have waited until he was out of the suit, Tony didn’t want to waste a moment. He flipped up the faceplate and leant forward. Loki looked amused even as he leant into the kiss. They were almost at an equal height like this, and Tony enjoyed the novelty of it.

But, all too soon FRIDAY was interrupting them.

“I am sorry, Boss, Mr Lisemith,” she said tentatively. “But Dr Banner is requesting your presence.”

Pulling back, Tony let out a sigh. “I almost miss Asgard. We had less people trying to interrupt us there.”

Loki huffed a laugh. “I do not believe I prefer *Asgard* to this.”

“Well, true,” Tony agreed. “But maybe somewhere else. People can’t interrupt us if they don’t know where we are, right?”

“You have mentioned your other home more than once,” Loki suggested.

“Malibu,” Tony said wistfully – yet, he soon shook his head. “People can still find me there. I think we need a distant moon without cell phone coverage.”

Loki smirked. “I do believe our phones will allow us contact anywhere.” Yet, before Tony could complain or suggest *switching them off*, Loki added, “*But*, there are places in this universe I could show you where our responsibilities would not touch us. Where no one would know the name ‘Loki’ or ‘Stark’.”

The thought which had started out light-hearted suddenly became more weighted as Loki held his gaze, a wealth of promise in his eyes. Tony swallowed as the universe stretched out before him, more tangible than he ever imagined.

And yet...

“We still have too much to do,” Tony said regretfully. He saw the look in Loki’s eyes start to dim, but he stilled it by touching Loki’s chest. “But, when our battles are over, when this whole *mess* is sorted out... I’d like to see that.”

Loki’s smile returned, reaching all the way to his eyes. They were as bright as emeralds glittering in the light.

“Then, I shall look forward to the day when our battles are won.”

Tony grinned back. “Me too.”

It was still a long way away, and there was still a lot more work to be done in the meantime, but Tony felt excited and hopeful for the reward at the end of their long and harrowing road. They might be going up against a powerful enemy and dealing with threats both foreign and familiar... but, at the end, at least they would catch a break.

They just had to make it there.

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The animals were healthy and handling the change far better than Animal Whisperer. It was the same story as the last ones she tainted. Once assured they were alright, Loki sent them to



his friend along with a message that this should *hopefully* be the last of them.

The next stop on their to-do-list was the information Tony had gained from HYDRA.

They combed through it with grim faces. Tony had skimmed a lot of it back at the compound, but there were still things even he hadn't known. Bruce clenched his fists and removed his glasses on multiple occasions. Eventually, he had to stop reading for fear of Hulking out. He turned his attention on the Animal Whisperer and her condition.

Loki and Tony passed Bruce any information that might be relevant (and FRIDAY did collate and send SHIELD a nice little pamphlet on what had happened, as per their agreement).

They'd only been at the tower for an hour when FRIDAY alerted them to a communication, "Boss, Captain Rogers is trying to contact you."

"And you didn't send him to the answering service?"

"Animal Whisperer is dying," FRIDAY said succinctly, making Tony freeze. "He thought you would want to know."

"Shit," Tony hissed.

He looked at Bruce and Loki, already knowing what he'd have to do. They knew as well. Bruce started rubbing his glasses while Loki stepped forward. "I will teleport us when you are ready."

Tony wasn't ready. He did *not* like walking into SHIELD on a good day, let alone when they had a dying enemy who they still knew next to nothing about.

"They're going to make this difficult," Tony pointed out.

"They are," Loki agreed. "But, they will not be so foolish as to throw away our assistance. We are too useful to them."

"Have I mentioned how much I *hate* being kept around only because I'm 'useful'?"

Loki's expression grew pinched but before he could offer any kind of remark, Tony waved him away.

"I know we need them; I know it's shit and we can't do anything about it. I'll live." His eyes narrowed. "But we don't know how long she will. We need to go."

Loki still didn't look happy, but he nodded. He placed a hand on Tony's shoulder and came to stand beside him. Tony was about to say a goodbye, but Bruce surprised him by stepping forward.

"Room for one more?" He asked.

Tony frowned. "You don't have to come. We'll be fine."

“I know you will,” Bruce insisted. “But, this woman is dying. It might not be my area of expertise, but I still might be able to help them save her.”

“Okay then,” Tony said, smiling at his friend.

Bruce would always put himself second for the wellbeing of others, even people who would kill him if given the chance. He’d also put himself inside SHIELD and in the path of Romanoff, just to do the right thing.

Bruce came the last of the way over to them and Loki placed a hand on his shoulder. Loki’s seidr curled around them and a moment later, they appeared in a SHIELD hallway in front of a very startled Rogers. He had a phone to his ear and his eyes were wide. He clearly hadn’t expected their arrival.

“Right,” Tony said, not letting the man catch his bearings. “Where is our Animal Whisperer?”

Rogers blinked, but regained his footing annoyingly quickly.

“In here,” he said, pointing to a room to his right with clear windows and a shut door. It kept out the sound of a flurry of medical specialists and machines as they tried to treat the still unconscious woman on the bed.

“Your spell still keeping her asleep?” Tony asked Loki.

“I saw no reason to awaken her.”

“It’s a good thing you didn’t,” Rogers said grimly. “I don’t think she would have taken well to us bringing her back here.”

“I can create a magical ward around her,” Loki said, his eyes locked on the woman. “It will keep her from injuring us while giving us a chance to speak with her.”

“What about herself?” Tony asked. “Will it keep her from hurting herself?”

“You think she’ll harm herself?” Rogers asked, instantly on the alert.

“Not deliberately,” Bruce answered, “but any use of her powers causes her harm. It’s those powers that are killing her.” He looked away from her to Rogers. “I want to go in and speak with the staff. I might be able to help.”

“Then, by all means Doctor Banner,” Fury said, appearing like a fucking *rat* from nowhere. “Assist them.”

Tony looked over his shoulder and resisted the urge to glare. Fury was flanked by Barton, Hill and Wanda Maximoff. Bruce didn’t wait upon receiving permission. He stepped into the room and began speaking with the first doctor, sliding in among them with impressive ease.

It left Loki and Tony standing in the hallway with hostility on all sides. Although, that wasn’t entirely true. Barton and Hill might look ready to murder them, but Rogers and Maximoff

were unthreatening. Maximoff looked curious, and Fury... well, the politeness on his face was as see through as a comb over and twice as disturbing.

It was hiding something poisonous; Tony was certain. Fury wouldn't change his tune so easily unless he could get something out of it.

"I'm told they can't get her to wake up. I'm hoping you'll change that Loki."

Loki raised his eyebrows. "Oh?"

"We both know that there are unanswered questions. We all need to speak with her."

"And I'm sure she'll be willing to talk to us," Tony drawled.

"Us?" Fury asked, smirking. "No. But, she seems interested in Loki."

Tony tensed and couldn't help stepping closer, his hand coming to touch Loki's arm in a gesture both possessive and protective. He knew Loki could handle himself, but Tony didn't want him put in harms way.

Loki didn't react to Tony's touch, but he also didn't pull away.

"I may be able to get her to speak," Loki said, his voice flat and emotionless. "But, I do not see why it requires such an audience."

"Maximoff has experience with HYDRA's experimentation techniques," Hill drawled. "If you fail, she might have better luck."

"You think highly of that child if you believe she will do better than *me*."

Maximoff gritted her teeth, her intrigued replaced by a glare. Barton looked ready to step forward and punch Loki, but Fury made a small gesture with his hand and Barton heeled.

"There's nothing wrong with a backup plan."

"Hmm," Loki hummed before turned towards the room.

He paused just long enough to run his hand over Tony, and even when it left, Tony could feel the tingle of Loki's seidr. It made him fight down a smile, knowing that a little bit of Loki was still around and protecting him.

Stepping up to the windows, Tony settled in to watch. He tried not to react when Rogers stood beside him, although, he did note that Rogers made sure to stand *between* Tony and the others. Tony flicked his gaze to the Captain, trying to discern how much of that was coincidence, intentional, or designed by Fury.

He made himself turn away before he could divine an answer in order to focus on the room. Fury pressed a button on the wall, allowing them to hear what was happening. Loki was ordering the doctors to leave, and although they didn't want to, one command from Fury from the intercom had them scurrying.

Bruce lingered a little longer, discussing their findings with Loki, but it didn't look good. She was going to die too quickly for them to find a cure. When the necessary had been relayed, he walked out of the room and stood at Tony's other side.

They all watched as Loki created a green ward with his seidr, placing her in a bubble of magic that she wouldn't be able to penetrate. When he was done, he let a small tendril of magic brush her forehead. A moment later, Animal Whisperer shifted and opened her eyes.

She was groggy and she tried to move but her restraints held her in place. She tugged at them, trying to break the hold, but when that failed, she raised her head and caught Loki's gaze. Animal Whisperer glared.

"Release me," she spat.

"You are in no position to make demands," Loki stated, his voice cold. He also held back no punches. "You're also dying."

Rage twisted her face, and her struggles renewed as she tried to free herself.

"Release me!" She shrieked. "I must do what must be done! I must *fix*."

"What do you wish to fix?" Loki asked. "What are you trying to achieve?"

She didn't answer, continuing to struggle. Her wrists were beginning to bleed and Tony could see Bruce itching to get inside and stop this – but, Loki's next words made her stop. "Do you believe humans to be inferior?"

Animal Whisperer looked back at him and her eyes blazed with madness. "They are a *taint*. They deserve to be *removed*." She bared her teeth. "You, I would let leave, but you would take *him*. He is tainting. *You* are tainted."

Loki didn't visibly react, but Tony could see the very fine tension that briefly tightened his jaw.

"My relationship with a mortal taints me? How do you consider yourself? A mere *human*. Pitiful and useless."

"I shall free them," she snarled. "I will bring them to rule. *They* have forced them out. I will give them what they deserve."

"And die in the process?" Loki asked, his eyebrows raised.

"*Yesss*," she hissed. "Die for *them*."

"What did you want from that HYDRA scientist?"

Animal Whisperer smiled and then she started laughing. The sound was deranged and she laid back on the bed, her body convulsing with her mad cackling. There was no end to the sound and Loki grimaced before flicking another tendril of magic at her. The sound faded as

she fell back asleep. He stepped out of the room and the doctors rushed in to begin tending to her. Bruce looked like he was itching to join them, but remained to hear what Loki had to say.

“That was a waste of fucking time,” Barton said, glaring at Loki before turning to Fury. “You should have let Wanda in there.”

“And let that untrained woman enter a mind as poisonous as hers?” Loki spat. He shook his head and scoffed. “That woman seeks to glorify animals and remove humans from the planet. She wishes to give it back to the animal kingdom.”

“She didn’t say that,” Hill said, her tone suspicious.

“I probed her mind, an easy task when she is in such a state,” Loki answered. He turned to Banner. “The HYDRA scientist had no cure or knowledge of what happened to her, but she believed he did. There will be no cure he can help you manufacture.”

Bruce gritted his teeth, but nodded. Loki then turned to Fury. “She has no fear of her demise. She is only angry she cannot complete her mission. She will struggle to the last breath to destroy any human in her radius.”

Fury grimaced and turned to Hill. “I want guards here, working on rotation. Tell them, shoot to kill.”

“Yes, Sir,” Hill answered, turning on her heel and leaving.

“Do what you wish,” Loki said, waving a dismissive hand. “But she will not awaken unless I allow her to.”

“So, we’re just going to leave her there until she dies?” Bruce said, not looking happy about it.

“Do what you wish,” Loki replied, his tone gentling slightly as he turned to Bruce. “There is no magic I possess that can save her. I can only keep her from harming those around her.”

Bruce sighed and nodded. “I’m going to tell the doctors. We’ll still try to help her, but I won’t be expecting anything.”

He didn’t wait for a reply as he stepped into the room. It left them with Fury and the others. It also left Tony unwilling to leave the base unless Bruce was coming too – and Fury pounced upon the opportunity.

“Captain Rogers had a few questions about what happened in the HYDRA bunker.” Rogers made a small, confused noise, but Fury overrode him. “The contract states you *will* attend debriefings when important. This is important.”

Tony’s instant urge was to refuse, but he bit it down. Instead, he turned to Loki. The mage didn’t look happy either, but Tony could read the twist to his lips. He knew they couldn’t leave yet either. They would wait for Bruce, and that meant, putting up with Fury for a little while longer.

Maybe, they could find a way to get something out of this.

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The debriefing was annoying and boring. Fury tried to worm information out of them and catch them in a lie. Tony noticed more than a few times where he tried to ask questions that seemed innocent but were designed to ask about the weapons Tony relocated.

Tony wouldn't be surprised if SHIELD were trying to break into his tower right now. He trusted FRIDAY's defences and Loki's wards, but it just annoyed him.

They did speak about Animal Whisperer and about the HYDRA scientist. Hill brought a report in halfway through the meeting. Romanoff had been interrogating him, and while he knew nothing about Animal Whisperer, he did know plenty about HYDRA.

Tony knew SHIELD wouldn't share that information, of course – but Tony would always hack it out of them later.

The meeting was, quite frankly, tense, uncomfortable and irritating. It *was* interesting to hear Wanda Maximoff mention her own time in HYDRA. Apparently loose cannons like Animal Whisperer weren't uncommon but were usually neutralised before they got this far. The twins were the rare two that stayed alive and sane by the time the experiments were over.

When Bruce finally joined them a half hour later, he looked tired but resigned. They couldn't do anything more for her, and Bruce didn't see a reason to remain. It was all that Tony needed to jump out of his chair.

“Right, well. That's us done,” Tony said cheerfully.

He stood beside Bruce and waited for Loki to join them so they could *get the hell out of here*.

Fury was gritting his teeth, but he didn't try to force them to stay. Maybe, he *was* learning.

Loki placed a hand on each of their shoulders, but he didn't go straight away.

“Oh, and Director,” Loki said, his voice saccharine sweet. “When you try to find the little *team* that tried to visit Stark Tower, I suggest you look for a parrot.”

The change that came over Fury was instantaneous, his calm, polite demeanour disappeared to be replaced by such violent rage that Tony *almost* felt concerned. But, it was quickly wiped away by satisfaction, and he let the smirk paint his lips even as Loki teleported them away.

When they landed in the tower, Tony was already turning to Loki and smiling up at him with adoration and delight. “A parrot?”

“I may have shrunk his little team down to fit inside the cage of one of the SHIELD employees. They will be safe; the parrot is staying elsewhere. They will be discovered this evening when the woman returns home from work.”

“That is-”

“Boss,” FRIDAY interrupted, and she sounded vaguely unsettled. “I must interrupt. You have a guest.”

Tony frowned. “A *guest*? Who are they and where-?”

He cut himself off as he looked away from Loki and found the person FRIDAY was referring to. They were sitting daintily on the bar stool and holding a martini glass in a pale, almost skeletal hand. She smiled at them, her dark lips twitching.

“Your invention is quite charming, Anthony Stark,” she said. “I have enjoyed her company as I waited for your and Prince Loki’s return.” Her gaze shifted to lock on Bruce. “I would now like to meet your ally.”

It certainly wasn’t the way Tony expected to be introducing the Ruler of Helheim to his friend.

## Chapter End Notes

Just a mild cliffhanger ;)

# Chapter 61

## Chapter Notes

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

Tony caught his bearings quickly. He might have had a powerful, mystical, alien ruler appear in his tower, but he wasn't about to skimp on his hosting duties. He flashed Hel a charming smile.

"I'm glad FRIDAY has entertained you, but I apologise for our absence and for making you wait."

Her smile widened and she gave a regal nod of her head. Tony took it as his cue to motion at Bruce.

"Dr Bruce Banner, my friend and fellow scientist as well as a genius and the occasional warrior of Earth." He then gestured at Hel. "Bruce, meet Hel, the ruler of Helheim."

Bruce, probably unknowing of how else to react, gave a low bow. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

Hel nodded politely. She then put down her martini on the bar without looking away from them. She stood and glided across the room to join them. Her movements were so fluid and graceful as to be unnatural. She stopped before Tony.

"I have observed you and your allies, Tony Stark," Hel remarked. Her eyes darkening in an eerie way to remind him of a skull. "I have observed you and your *enemies*." She glanced at Loki. "I have observed you and your lover, despite all Loki has done to limit the eyes of others."

"It is not your eyes I protect us from," Loki quickly interjected.

Hel smiled faintly while Tony bit down on any comment about Hel *watching* him. It made his skin prickle in an uncomfortable way, but he knew that she wasn't the kind of woman you wanted to anger. She was the kind of woman you gave a bit of leeway, especially when Tony got the impression this had been a silent judgement of worth. He didn't want to mess up their chances of gaining and maintaining her favour.

"Humans," she continued, as if Loki hadn't spoken. "Have never held much attention in the eyes of the realms." Hel turned back to Tony. "*You* are changing that. This attention carries its benefits and its trials. Long after the one we battle is gone."

Tony watched her carefully.

"You speak about him like he's a threat we'll win against."

So far, no one else had been so clear cut.



“He will be gone, one way or another. Through your efforts or another. The cycle will take care of such things.”

Yet, despite her ambiguous words, Tony caught a spark in her eyes. It was something he couldn't quantify, but it made him wonder.

What was she up to? What allies did she have? Did she know something they didn't?

“But,” she said, turning away. “I come to meet your allies.”

She waved her hand and a tea set with five cups appeared on Tony's coffee table. She walked over and took a seat on the couch. Loki immediately went and took a seat opposite her while Bruce and Tony exchanged an uncertain glance before doing the same.

When they were all seated on the couch, Tony eyed the tea set and pointed out, “Um, there's an extra cup.”

“Yes,” Hel replied, reaching for the tea pot. She started pouring blue tea into the cups. “I did not wish to call him until his meeting had finished.”

“Meeting?”

“Just as I did not call you,” she continued as if Tony hadn't spoken, “and waited upon your arrival.”

“Oh,” Loki remarked, realisation colouring his tone.

Tony glanced at him, hoping he'd share. He didn't disappoint.

“I do believe Hel does not wish to speak without *all* your allies present.”

*Oh shit.*

Tony tried not to grimace. “Well, at least Rhodey has started getting used to teleports. FRIDAY, think you could send him a quick warning text?”

“On it, Boss.”

“Atta girl.”

Hel continued to pour tea during the silence that fell. She momentarily hesitated over the fifth cup, but her lips twitched and she began to pour. A moment later FRIDAY began, “Boss-”

Hel waved her hand absently and Rhodey appeared beside the couch, his phone to his ear and his expression morphing from pensive to confused and finally to the kind of blank politeness that he wore when on a diplomatic posting.

He lowered his phone slowly and ended the call. He placed it in his pocket and kept his gaze on Hel.

“Hey Rhodey,” Tony said, trying to remain chipper and upbeat rather than disconcerted at the absent *power* that Hel displayed.

Loki was a powerful badass mage, but he still needed to *touch* people in order to teleport them. Hel had no such problems.

“I’d like you to meet Hel, the ruler of Helheim,” Tony continued. “She stopped by for tea and a chat, but didn’t want to start without you.”

“Thank you for your consideration and the honour of joining,” Rhodey said, keeping his tone soft and deferring.

Hel’s gaze drifted from the teapot to pin Rhodey like a bug. Tony saw the man stiffen under her examination. But it lasted hardly a moment before she gave the same regal nod that she’d given Bruce and gestured him over to the couch.

Rhodey took his place, squished beside Bruce. None of them were game enough to sit next to her. In fact, Tony felt a little like they were all schoolboys brought in front of the headmistress.

When all the cups were filled with tea, they started sliding across the table and then, when there was no wood left, into the air. They made their way to the four of them without hesitation or hiccups. Hel hadn’t even indicated for the cups to move.

It was extremely disconcerting as one unerringly went for his hand. He took the handle and looked first at the blue tea before over at Loki. He took a drink without a moment’s pause. Tony then glance at Rhodey and Bruce. They were staring at *him*.

He smiled in a way he hoped was reassuring. He also brought the cup to his lips, feeling *fairly* confident the drink wasn’t poisoned. He took a sip and was pleasantly surprised to find it tasted a little like blueberries, but with something spicy underneath.

“I have watched you,” Hel said, repeating her earlier words and drawing everyone’s attention. “Each of you.”

She looked at them one after the other, holding their gazes for a few moments. She lingered the most on Tony. It felt like being turned inside out, or plucked apart until all his greatest deeds and worst experiences were placed on display. He let out a relieved breath when she broke their gaze.

He heard the others give a similar reaction once she’d inspected and passed them.

“I have examined the ones called *Guardians* and the ones who are *Avengers*,” she said.

Hel paused and took a sip of her tea, closing her eyes and savouring the taste. When they opened again, her eyes were fathomless black pits. Tony swallowed and fought down a cold shiver.

“Alone, you will not be enough,” Hel said. “But, even together, you will not prevail.”

Tony almost felt overwhelmed by the desolation and conviction of her statements, but, her earlier words were something to cling to.

“You said he would be defeated.”

“Yes.”

Hel’s smile seemed almost mischievous. The darkness of her eyes receded. She sipped her tea again.

“Someone will defeat him?” Loki prompted.

“Yes,” she said, her smile deepening. “The cycle will not suffer his actions for long.” Her eyes darted back to Tony. “Not when there are more interesting specimens.”

Hel tipped back the last of her tea. She stood with a fluid motion. They all hurried to copy her. Hel’s attention was on Rhodey and Bruce.

“Wise little mortals,” she remarked. Hel then walked *through* the table, black shadows clinging to her clothes. She touched Rhodey’s chest. He was still and stiff. “Heart.” She touched Bruce’s temple. “Mind.”

She turned to Loki and Tony, eyeing them with the same, soul-searching gaze. Tony had the feeling she didn’t even have to search. Their souls were on display for her to pick up, twist and examine to her heart’s content.

Yet, somehow, they seemed to pass.

“A parting gift from the Queen of Helheim to her favoured allies,” Hel murmured.

She lifted her hand which distorted, flickering between a skeleton and a too-thin, if normal hand.

“No eyes save mine will see within your walls,” she said, her voice soft yet echoing. She turned her hand palm up and a miniature Stark Tower rested there. A black cloud descending over it. “No body save mine may enter without your permission.”

The shadows coated the building in a thin, grey film, flickering like snakes before dissolving back into the greater shadow.

“We are honoured,” Loki whispered, sounding genuinely awed.

Tony was very tempted to ask what the hell she’d done to his tower, but much like he’d sipped the tea without question, he didn’t say a word. Last thing he wanted to do was anger the formidable Queen of the Dead.

“I shall return,” Hel said. “I have seen their hearts. I know how to prepare.”

She gave them one more haunting, unfathomable smile before from one moment to the next, she was gone. There was no light, shadows, smoke or mirrors. She was there and then she

was gone.

“*Shit*,” Rhodey said, the word coming out shaky.

He dropped down on the couch heavily. Bruce grabbed the back of the couch and lowered himself down on trembling limbs. They both looked shell-shocked and pale.

Tony glanced between them and Loki. “Are they okay?”

“I do believe Hel’s examination might have been more... vigorous than yours and mine,” Loki said, sounding apologetic. “She has seen and weighed us on Asgard. They had much to prove and a short time in which to do it.”

Tony grimaced and looked back at his friends.

“Alcohol?” he suggested.

“If you are unsettled,” Loki interjected. “I would recommend drinking more of Hel’s tea. There is no greater calmative in the Realms and when you retire for the evening your sleep will be undisturbed and deep.”

Tony smiled weakly. “You mean, we’ll sleep like the dead?”

“Quite,” Loki replied, not seeming bothered by this.

In fact, he took his seat again only to take the pot and pour himself some more. Tony sat back down beside him.

“It is a high compliment to be given her tea,” he continued with a smirk, looking both pleased and smug. “Of course, to have her ward your tower is a far greater compliment.”

“Is that what she did?” Bruce asked, curiosity fighting through his lingering discomfort.

“Yes,” Loki agreed. “She has shielded this tower more effectively than even I would manage. I will continue to work on my spell, should her ward be only a temporary measure but...” a hint of the earlier awe returned to his voice, “with her favouritism displayed for the Realms to see, there are few who would dare risk an attack upon it.”

The monumental nature of what had occurred struck the room silent. Tony was the first to collect his thoughts.

“So, you’re saying Hel made my tower a no-go zone for outer space baddies?”

“Yes,” Loki answered. “The Mad Titan himself might think twice before attacking this building.”

Tony blinked. “Huh.”

He didn’t really know what else to say, too busy reeling from the unexpected and *very, very* cool gift Hel had given them. When he heard someone shifting, he found Rhodey picking

back up his cup of tea and downing it in one go.

“Er, Rhodey?” Tony waited until he had the man’s attention. “I thought you didn’t like tea?”

Rhodey gave a rough laugh. “When someone like *that* offers you tea, you damn well drink it, Tones. You drink every last drop, ask for seconds and say, ‘*thank you very much, ma’am*.’”

Tony and Bruce exchanged a glance before reaching for their cups. Loki didn’t even try to hide his smile as he offered the pot to Rhodey who accepted a refill without protest.

Hel had made it obvious she could see them wherever they were and no matter what they were doing. It was disconcerting and a little bit creepy - but Rhodey was right, when someone like that offered you tea, you didn’t let a drop go to waste. You also did everything in your power to stay on their good side.

Luckily, Tony liked the taste of blueberries. Even spicy ones.

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When the tea pot was empty and everyone was a little more settled, Tony felt ready to tackle what had just happened.

“Okay, so. Hel likes us, she warded the tower, someone’s going to kill Thanos, but it won’t be us and she’s going to stop back at some point for more tea and chats. Did I get it all?”

“I believe so,” Loki said.

His tone was calm, but the downturn to his mouth and furrow to his brow said he wasn’t as relaxed as he seemed. Tony touched the other man’s hand, feeling worried.

“Lokes?”

The mage blinked from his thoughts and looked at Tony. His smile was a little more genuine as he linked their fingers.

“Nothing, Anthony.” Tony narrowed his eyes, not believing it. He sighed. “I did not ever believe it would be my blade alone that slit his throat but...”

Tony immediately understood and he squeezed Loki’s hand, feeling a wealth of sympathy. Revenge, after all, had been Loki’s driving force for a long time. It was the whole reason they had formed a partnership in the first place. It was all about destroying Thanos.

“Yeah,” he said quietly. “But even if it isn’t you, he’ll still be dead. I know it’s cold comfort, but it’s better than him being out there.”

Loki pursed his lips and nodded. Tony could tell his words weren’t enough. It might *never* be enough – and yet, even though Tony was worried about that very outcome, something shifted behind Loki’s eyes. Something that gave him pause.

When the mage turned to him, his gaze was a little bit lighter.

“Lokes?”

“Revenge might not be mine, Anthony. But should the day come when he is dead and *we* all live; it will not be cold comfort I feel. It will be *glee*.”

“I’ll toast to that,” Rhodey said.

Tony startled, almost forgetting his friends were still present. Rhodey was smiling at them and Bruce was still thoughtfully sipping his tea. He removed it from his lips and remarked, “Do you think Hel has a plan we don’t know about?”

“There is little doubt,” Loki replied. “She rarely interferes in mortal ventures. The Realms have begun to forget the power she wields and knowledge she holds. She is a threat Thanos will not expect, and should not take lightly.”

“Can we just send Hel after him?” Tony questioned. “I doubt he’d last five minutes with her around.”

Loki shook his head, but he was faintly smiling as if he too liked the image of Hel turning Thanos into a purple smudge.

“Hel governs the dead but she cannot kill the living,” Loki explained. “To do so would destroy the balance between life and death. She will help guide the outcome, but she will not play a greater role than that.” His smile turned a little wondering. “Even to have her play *that*, it is a boon we are beyond lucky to have received.”

Tony was silent as he took in Loki’s words. Rhodey and Bruce were equally quiet. He’d always known Hel was important, Loki had made that clear. Now, he was starting to get an inkling that the mage had underplayed just how dangerous she might be.

“You really know how to pick ‘em, Tones,” Rhodey said, breaking the quiet.

“In this case, I’m taking that as a compliment.”

“I meant it as one,” Rhodey assured. His gaze flicked to Loki and he started to smile. “Although, I’m not sure anyone can beat your last choice.”

Tony grinned and automatically turned to Loki. He was looking both smug and a little flustered. Tony leant forward and gave him a chaste kiss.

“What do we do now?” Bruce asked once Tony had pulled back.

“Don’t know,” Tony replied. “Whatever, really.” He sighed and pressed a bit more of his weight against the mage. “Me and Lokes have things to do and I wouldn’t mind examining that ward Hel put up.”

“I might see if I can do something to help Animal Whisperer,” Bruce said. “I doubt there’s anything, but I can still try.”

“FRIDAY will get you anything you need from SHIELD,” Tony said promptly.

Bruce gave a rueful smile, clearly knowing the information wouldn't be the most *legally* gained documentation.

"Thanks, Tony."

"What about you, Rhodey?" Tony asked.

"Well, I did tell my superiors I was headed into a meeting with an otherworldly ally," Rhodey drawled. "And since I was in *Washington* at the time, I doubt I'll be seeing them again today without another teleport."

"Loki is clearly too tired for that," Tony hurried to interject. "Really, he's exhausted. You should totally stay the night." He widened his eyes and asked hopefully, "Slumber party?"

Rhodey chuckled. "Yeah, alright," he said, standing up. "I'll make some phone calls and clear my schedule."

Bruce pushed off the couch next. He gave them a smile before heading towards the elevator and the lab to run tests. Rhodey made his way across the penthouse to the guest room that was always ready for when he stopped by. It left the two of them alone.

"Tired, am I?" Loki asked.

"Absolutely," Tony insisted. "It's been a big day. I'm surprised you can do anything. You should really lie down, maybe with your head in my lap so I can soothe away a headache."

Loki raised his eyebrows. "I was unaware I had one."

"Considering the offer I just gave you, are you really going to fight me on this?"

Loki thought about it for all of a moment.

"Perhaps you're right," he allowed. "It has been a very trying day."

"Just like I thought," Tony answered while scooting down the couch.

Loki was smiling softly even as he rearranged to lay just as Tony had directed. He relaxed the moment his head touched Tony's thighs. The sigh he let out only proved Tony had made the right call. Tony slipped his hand into Loki's hair, combing through the strands and removing any tangles. Loki's eyes fluttered shut.

"I thought you said we have plans?"

"They'll keep for a few minutes," Tony said quietly.

After that, Loki didn't offer any more complaints and Tony took the time to simply admire the man and enjoy the moment.

Animal Whisperer was captured, his tower was warded by the Queen of Helheim. Killing Thanos was looking a little less impossible, and his lover and friends were safe under the

tower's heavily protected roof until at least tomorrow morning.

The day was looking pretty damn good.

### Chapter End Notes

Yuuup, Hel's a badass and I really liked writing her :P

I hoped you enjoyed it too!



# Chapter 62

## Chapter Notes

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

Cuddling with Loki would always be one of Tony's favourite things to do. Normally, he didn't like sitting still so long, but Loki made it easy. Tony could sit on the couch for hours, his mind slowing down and his heart soothed by the feel of Loki's hair between his fingers. The sound of Loki's even breathing and his forehead free of wrinkles; it was a beautiful sight.

Yet, despite feeling like he could stay there forever, the lure of Hel's ward was calling them both. Loki was the first to push up from his relaxed sprawl. They locked gazes and Tony's smile was matched by Loki's smirk.

They didn't have to speak a word before Tony was hurrying to the lab to get his equipment and rattling off scans he wanted FRIDAY to perform. Loki was more sedate as he followed behind him, but when the elevator stopped at his magic room. He left at a brisk pace. Tony smiled after him.

He didn't stay long in the lab as Bruce was busy researching and he wanted to get back to Loki. When he returned, Loki was sitting crossed-legged on the floor. His eyes were glowing green and an illusion of the tower hovered in front of him with a grey curtain of lace draped over it.

Tony hardly noticed the weapons still filling the room as he dropped on the floor beside his lover. He looked at the miniature of his tower with awe.

"Is that what her ward looks like?"

"No," Loki answered. "It is merely what she allows me to see. The spell is like a tapestry and each weave offers a new protection." He smiled and tapped his finger at the roof. "For instance, this hides us from Heimdall's gaze."

"I thought your spell already did that?"

"It does," Loki agreed. "But her spell allows me to release mine and conserve seidr. It also takes something peculiar into account."

"Oh? What's that?"

"Do you remember on Asgard when you felt his eyes searching for us?"

"Yeah. I haven't felt it since."

"I believe that was due to proximity. On Midgard, the distance keeps you from feeling his gaze even when it rests on you."

"So what does that have to do with what Hel did?"

“Her spell takes new wards into account.”

Tony frowned. “Meaning, what? If you layer me with wards it will still work? Wouldn’t that be expected?”

“If it was merely my seidr she was taking into account, yes. But, there is another she seeks to accommodate.”

“Who?”

Loki’s eyes lost their green sheen and he turned his head to look at Tony. “You.”

“Me?”

“Yes,” Loki said, looking puzzled. “It seems Hel believes you are capable of learning seidr.”

Tony blinked and while he felt an initial rush of excitement. It was Loki’s confusion that made him tentative. “And you don’t think I can?”

“There was no indication to say you could,” Loki said. “I can’t sense seidr within you. It *could* be dormant, but I have never seen anything to make me believe you possessed it.”

Tony frowned. He looked back at the spot where his tower had been floating, but the illusion had dispersed.

“Could Hel be wrong?” he asked.

“No,” Loki said, shaking his head. “But she may know something we do not. She may also be anticipating a time in the future where things are different. Hel is not prophetic, as such, but she has an awareness - a sense, if you will - that allows her unerring foresight.”

“If her ward is preparing for things in the future, does that mean whatever you read from it now is going to be inaccurate?”

“It will be accurate,” Loki admitted with a wry smile. “But it will not necessarily be *helpful*. In this matter, your scans will give us more information. Although, little of it will assist you. It is the finer details I can gain that will tell us more about its nature and purposes.”

Tony screwed up his face. “Why do I feel like she’s done it deliberately?”

“Because she is far too wise to craft spellwork that holds *mistakes*. She equally enjoys her secrecy.”

Tony sighed loudly and with disappointment. He put down the scanners he was still holding. They wouldn’t be cracking the ward today. Although, learning he might eventually be able to wield *magic* was still one hell of an awesome discovery.

“Next time Hel’s over, I’m pestering her about when I can learn magic.”

Loki chuckled. “Hopefully, we will know more before then.”

“I just hope your magic is going to like my magic,” Tony said, knocking their shoulders together in a light tease. He could already feel Loki’s humming around him. “We’ll be in trouble if your seidr gets jealous.”

Loki snorted. “That will not happen, Anthony. If anything, my seidr will be ecstatic.”

“Oh?” Tony asked, immediately intrigued. “Why?”

Loki hesitated, some of his humour fading to be replaced by something almost shy.

“When mages are fond of one another, be it through friendship, romance or familial connection, their seidr can bond. It allows the mages to increase their power and craft spells they could never do on their own. It can also be a source of comfort and affection.” He gave a faint smile. “You have already experienced some of the fondness my seidr can express, but it would be even stronger and deeper if we were both mages.”

*Oh*, Tony thought. He didn’t have to be a genius to work out how important and meaningful it would be for Loki to have a partner and *lover* who was also a mage.

Shuffling closer, Tony leant a little against Loki. His hand also sought the mage’s and he linked their fingers.

“I hope I get the chance to use it soon so that you can teach me.”

Loki’s smile remained bashful but he admitted, “I would enjoy that too, Anthony.”

Tony grinned back and caught Loki’s lips in a soft kiss. Loki squeezed his hand and Tony felt Loki’s seidr hum against his skin in a gesture full of affection and happiness. Tony could almost imagine having his *own* magic that would do the same to Loki.

*I wonder how I’ll end up getting it?*

When they pulled back, Loki’s thumb was stroking Tony’s hand.

“As much as I would enjoy this. I know you wish to sort your weapons.”

Tony grimaced and looked around them. There were still too many to count. Loki squeezed his hand before gracefully standing. He tugged Tony up with him.

“Let us begin.”

Loki waved his hand and a strange golden stand appeared with a marble bowl filled with liquid. A moment later a green flame erupted within it. Loki tugged him forward.

“Whatever metal you throw into that flame will be melted beyond recognition,” Loki explained.

Tony’s fingers twitched as he looked at the numerous guns along the floor. He caught a flare of green to his left only to find a handgun resting in Loki’s palm. He held it out to Tony who

took it. The ammo had been removed and he let Loki go before taking slow steps towards the fire.

When Loki didn't tell him to stop, Tony tossed the gun into the flame. It hovered in the centre, twisting and reshaping into a molten mess of metal. When it finished, the fire spat it out onto the ground as nothing but a chunk of scrap metal.

Slowly, Tony began to smile.

Maybe he'd give SHIELD back the weapons after all. He was sure they'd love a metal sculpture permanently adhered to the roof of their building.

---

Tony was able to clear most of the room by the time dinner rolled around. He felt like he was on a high. The larger explosives would have to be detonated at a bomb range or dismantled in the lab, but almost all the guns and ammunition had been eaten and warped by Loki's magical flame.

If he hadn't been so gleeful and relieved to watch so much of his guilt and nightmares go up in smoke, he would have tackled Loki to the floor and kissed him until they both ran out of air. As it was, Loki spent the time watching Tony with a smile or examining the layers of Hel's ward. He didn't expect much in the way of answers, but it was still fine spellwork that he wished to understand and learn from.

When Bruce summoned them up to the penthouse, Tony was delighted to find he and Rhodey had cooked dinner rather than ordering takeout. Both men were very good cooks when they had the time and chance to work in the kitchen.

They'd also set up the couches for the 'slumber party' Tony had suggested, along with a movie selection. Tony gave them both a tight hug and shepherded them onto the couch, making sure he was pressed between Loki and Rhodey.

Tony hadn't even checked what movie was first, but when *Frozen* came on, he tensed and glanced at his friends. They didn't seem to notice anything out of the ordinary, but then, they didn't know about the full depths of Loki's *heritage*.

"Not a choice I expected," Tony remarked absently. "Who picked it?"

"It was FRIDAY's request," Bruce said, surprising Tony.

"Was it?" He asked, glancing at the ceiling.

His AI remained suspiciously silent and Tony glanced back at Loki. His eyes were on the TV and he didn't seem to have paid attention to the conversation. Tony hoped his AI was making the right decision. She knew some of the details of Loki's jotun form and the *ice* that he wielded, so maybe she thought this would be good for him. Tony just hoped that seeing Elsa's story wouldn't make Loki feel bitter rather than comforted. After all, Elsa gained acceptance from her sister and people, Loki had gained the opposite from his brother and Asgard.

Tony was still watching Loki with trepidation as the movie began to play. He caught Loki's flinch over Elsa's ice powers. He watched Loki's expression grow pained as he watched Elsa run away only to become pensive as she accepted her powers.

Yet, what intrigued Tony the most, was the way his gaze... softened when he looked at Anna and Kristoff.

When the movie concluded with a happy ending, Loki excused himself to get more tea. Tony was off like a shot to follow him into the kitchen, feeling more worried than he wanted to admit.

"Loki," Tony started, coming up behind him and placing a hand on the man's back.

"I am fine," Loki immediately replied.

"Are you?" Tony insisted.

Loki turned on the kettle and shifted to better face Tony. His gaze, rather than showing pain or anger, showed *warmth*. Tony blinked with surprise and Loki's lips twitched towards a smile.

"Yes. I rather liked the tale."

"You... did?" Tony asked.

"Yes," Loki repeated. "A pretty lie that you find first which makes way for a sweet and true honesty to cherish. A wise lesson for anyone, young or old."

Tony's frowned, taking a moment to parse that out. "Are you talking about... Anna and Kristoff?"

"I am talking about a family and world whom I believed I was a part of, only to learn the truth. To feel *alone* only to discover something far more precious in the form of one man and his many caring friends."

Tony felt his cheeks heating.

"It is not the woman accepting her... powers whom I connect with. Although," his eyes flicked to the ceiling, "the point has been noted." He looked back at Tony. "Rather, it is finding someone to... love you for who you are."

Tony swallowed. Love, after all, wasn't a word they'd expressed yet. But, the word itself wasn't needed for the core of the sentiment to be true. Because there was something soft and affectionate growing between them and deepening with every day. They cared, and Tony sure as hell accepted Loki for who he was.

Stepping forward, Tony took Loki's hands and tilted up his chin. Loki smiled and leant down to brush their mouths together. When they pulled back, Tony rested his head against Loki's shoulder, enjoying the man's touch and warmth.

Yet, all too soon his mouth twitched and he couldn't resist the quip.

“Does this mean we should call your helmet, Sven?”

Loki slapped him upside the head. Tony just laughed into Loki's shoulder and when he peeked up at Loki, he found the man fighting down a smile.

Tony made a mental note to thank FRIDAY for her movie choice later.

---

They ended up watching three more movies before everyone started falling asleep. It had been a busy day, and Loki assured them Hel's tea would also be encouraging rest. They all retired, leaving the couch to be tidied in the morning.

Tony still smiled to have Loki follow him to the bedroom after a quick, confirming look. They both slid into pyjamas and the moment they were on the bed; Tony was curling up against Loki's back and holding on tightly. The mage chuckled and linked their fingers against his stomach.

“I am not going anywhere, Anthony.”

“I'm making sure,” Tony mumbled against his neck.

Loki chuckled again and squeezed his hands. “You may relax. Hel's ward and FRIDAY'S eyes protect us.”

The words rather than calming him, revealed a tension Tony hadn't realised he'd been holding.

Sure, they had Animal Whisperer in custody, but they still didn't know anything about her or where she'd come from. *Sure*, SHIELD had tried to sneak in but had been stopped, but they wouldn't give up easily. And *sure*, Hel said Thanos would be killed, but she also didn't give them any true details.

There was a lot to be worried about, and not even the melting of half of his regained weapons could ease all his concern. When there was also a mystical tea involved that was meant to make him sleep without waking? Perhaps, he was a little wary.

“What if something does happen?” Tony asked quietly. “You said Hel's tea will make us sleep ‘like the dead’.”

“I believe it was *you* who used that phrase.”

“You confirmed it,” Tony rebutted.

Loki sighed. “It will make us sleep deeply and without interruption, but we will wake immediately should something threaten us. She would not give us a gift which could harm us.”

Tony let out a heavy breath, trusting Loki and feeling comforted by the knowledge.

“Okay,” he said. “That’s good.”

Loki squeezed his hands and Tony also felt Loki’s seidr wrapping around him like a soft, soothing hug.

“You may rest in peace, Anthony,” Loki said. “We have never been so protected than we are tonight.”

Tony smiled faintly and dared to press a kiss against Loki’s neck. He heard the mage suck in a breath and so he did it again.

“Don’t know what I’d do without you, Lokes,” he whispered.

“Nor I you,” Loki admitted, his voice a little rough.

Tony placed one more kiss on his neck and closed his eyes. He breathed in Loki’s scent and finally felt his tension leaving him. Sleep was calling him, but he resisted just long enough to whisper, “Hope I don’t ever have to find out.”

Loki sucked in another breath, but if he said anything, Tony didn’t hear it. He was already drifting of into a dreamless, perfect sleep, feeling warm, happy and safe.

## Chapter End Notes

**greyruffleautomatic531** requested the boys watch Frozen to make Loki feel better about his jotun heritage. It didn’t play out exactly how you wanted, but I did my best to fit it in :)

Hope you all liked the chapter!

# Chapter 63

## Chapter Notes

This is one of the few things I've had the chance to write in weeks. Not entirely happy about it, but I hope you all like it ~~I don't have the time to edit it anymore bjdhnssdf~~ :) )

Tony woke up feeling like he'd slept for years. Nothing ached, he felt ready to take on the world and on top of that, he had a still-sleeping mage curled around him.

FRIDAY started projecting him the weather forecast and other information, but Tony barely noticed. He was looking down at Loki. He looked so peaceful.

*I could wake up like this for the rest of my life.*

The thought was unexpected, but not as alarming as it might have been only a few months ago. Loki had fit so seamlessly into his life and their relationship felt like the easiest thing in the world. Maybe their previous, fake relationship had smoothed away any awkward bumps – but, Tony didn't think so.

Even with Pepper things hadn't been perfect despite years of friendship. *They'd* had bumps the size of small hills. The only issues he and Loki had were external. When you put the two of them together, everything worked.

Smiling, Tony ran his fingers through Loki's hair.

Loki shifted, but didn't wake. He leant into Tony's touch and Tony felt the familiar warmth of Loki's magic. It was like a secondary hug and Tony really hoped Hel was right about him learning magic sometime in the future. He'd love to be able to give Loki that same kind of affection.

He'd love to do all kinds of things with Loki. Have sex, for one, and travel the universe for another.

Tony twirled Loki's hair around his fingers. His mind was already running through concepts and ideas. Wondering how soon he could let Loki sweep him away to planets unknown. Once Thanos was out of the way and he'd tied up any loose ends on Earth, there really would be nothing stopping them. Bruce and Rhodey could call them if they were needed. Hel's ward would mean his friends would be safe if they only regrouped to his tower.

Sure, SHIELD might use any absence to be pains in the ass, but there was nothing new there. Tony was sure he could diffuse it once he got back.

He was so lost in thoughts, that he didn't notice Loki stirring.



“Do you plan to turn my hair into a giant knot?” Loki enquired.

Tony startled and looked down at the amused mage. His fingers were deep in Loki’s hair and they were twisted and twined around the strands. He’d absently started massaging Loki’s head too.

He grimaced sheepishly. “Sorry, Lokes.”

He pulled his hand out carefully. Loki remained smiling although a comb did appear in the air, hovering near Tony’s fingers. Tony took the hint and Loki shifted until his chin was on Tony’s chest.

Gently, Tony started brushing out any tangles. Loki closed his eyes and sighed. They were quiet as Tony worked, but when he finished, Loki asked, “What held your attention so thoroughly, Anthony?”

“Planning a vacation,” Tony answered, continuing to brush Loki’s hair.

“Oh?” Loki peeked open his eyes.

“Yeah. I figured that with Hel hinting at Thanos’ demise, I could start working out what I need to bring when you take me into space. Do I go with the suit jacket, or the hoodie?”

Loki chuckled. “Wear whatever you wish. Knowledge of Midgardian fashion is not well known among the realms.”

“So, I could convince them a greasy lab shirt is Midgardian formal wear?”

Loki grinned. “You could. Although, I would advise against tricking realms you want to maintain good relations with. They would not forgive such wide-scale embarrassment were they to come to Midgard endeavouring to mimic your ‘formal’ attire.”

Tony sniggered, imagining the dignitaries he’d met on Asgard sporting ripped and dirty lab clothes when they showed up to meet the President. It would be priceless, but probably not worth it in the long run.

“*Fine*,” Tony allowed, attempting to sound put out, while trying to quell his smile. “I suppose I better pack a suit, just in case.”

Loki shifted and Tony paused the motions of the comb to catch Loki’s gaze. His expression was uncertain as he questioned, “You are serious? You were truly planning to leave Midgard to travel with me?”

Tony blinked. “Well, yeah. I agreed, didn’t I?”

“You did,” Loki still sounded a little mystified, but the happiness and excitement from when he’d first agreed had returned. “I confess, a part of me still doesn’t expect it. I have never had a companion with whom I could show my favourite places throughout the Nine.”

The words still sent an ache through Tony's chest to hear the loneliness of Loki's past – but it was softened by the current pleasure lighting up the mage's face.

“Well, you have one now,” Tony told him, his voice coming out soft but no less firm.

Loki's dimples were revealed with the deepening of his smile. He pushed up and Tony tilted into the kiss. Tony dropped the comb to cup Loki's cheek and tug him even closer. Loki shifted and all too soon he was straddling Tony's hips.

Immediately, Tony's body began to take notice.

When the kiss broke, Loki's eyes were dark. Tony's hands had moved to Loki's waist and Loki's were on his shoulders.

“Anthony,” Loki murmured.

Loki's thumbs stroked Tony's neck, making him fight down a shiver. His eyes fluttered closed and Loki kissed him again. Tony slid his hands under Loki's shirt, touching Loki's naturally cool skin and making Loki hum against his lips. Loki was beginning to rock down against him and Tony's fingers was seeking Loki's nipples.

“I'm sorry to interrupt, Boss,” FRIDAY apologised.

Their kiss broke and Tony groaned with frustration.

“Are you *kidding* me?” Tony complained. “The world better be fucking ending.”

“Not exactly, Boss,” FRIDAY answered. “I have been monitoring SHIELD activities, but they have been utilising rooms without surveillance equipment and refraining from uploading documentation.”

“Sneaky bastards,” Tony grumbled.

“Captain Rogers has not been so... discreet.”

Tony's eyebrows rose and he caught Loki's gaze. The man was still in his lap but the mood was broken and Loki's gaze was thoughtful and suspicious.

“And what has Rogers alerted you to?” Loki enquired.

“He spoke with Sergeant Barnes regarding his departure. They have located Animal Whisper's hideout and are soon to be on route.”

Loki was off him in moments and Tony was already throwing off the sheet and climbing out of bed.

“He didn't happen to give the coordinates, did he?”

“He did not. He expressed his disapproval to Sergeant Barnes at your exclusion and the... methods used to uncover it.”

“The Maximoff child?” Loki enquired.

“She attempted to search Animal Whisper’s mind to little success. The examination seemed to pain them both. She is recovering under her brother’s care.”

“Then how did they-?” Tony stopped as the realisation hit. “The scientist.”

“Ms Romanov extracted a number of potential locations. Combined with what Miss Maximoff saw, they were able to select a target.”

“What were the options?” Loki demanded.

FRIDAY projected a number of locations along with suggestions based off the Quinjets current flight path.

Loki didn’t take long before he pointed at one of them.

“This,” Loki said. “I believe it is this.”

“Then let’s go there,” Tony said. “Even if we’re wrong. We can try one of the others faster than they can fly.” Loki nodded even as a wry smile twitched his lips. Tony frowned. “Lokes?”

“I merely wonder if Hel’s choice of tea did not factor in this very event. My seidr has benefited from last night’s rest. I feel ready to perform a hundred teleports.”

“Well,” Tony said, his lips twitching. “Thank, Hel.”

Loki shot him an amused glance before his magic was sliding over his skin exchanging his sleep wear for battle armour. Tony felt his clothing tingle and glanced down to see his undersuit appearing. He fingered the material.

“Handy. That’s one of the first things you’re going to teach me when I get magic.”

“I believe we’ll start with something less likely to end in destruction of property or bodily harm,” Loki drawled.

Tony’s eyebrows shot up. “You’re just exaggerating, right Lokes?”

Loki’s flat expression stated the opposite. Tony had a dozen questions, but FRIDAY spoke before he could ask any of them.

“I have informed Colonel Rhodes and Dr Banner of the situation,” FRIDAY said. “The Colonel is on route to join you while Dr Banner shall remain and monitor the situation in case he is needed. Your suit will arrive shortly.”

FRIDAY’s statements brought him back to the present and what they had to focus on.

“Thanks, FRIDAY,” Tony said.

They walked out of the bedroom to the main floor. It didn't take long for Rhodey to join them.

"Hey guys," he greeted. "Loki. Are you able to get my suit? It didn't come with me when Hel-" He went quiet as Loki waved a hand and it appeared beside him. "Thanks."

Tony's own armour joined them a moment later. He stepped inside, as did Rhodey and Loki placed his hand on each of their shoulders. Loki didn't waste a moment and the tower disappeared in a shimmer of green to be replaced by dense tropical foliage surrounding a crumbling stone compound with trees and bushes growing out of it. The building wasn't old, it was as if someone had invited the natural world to take over.

"Well," Tony remarked. "I think this is it."

"Why did she pick Hawaii, do you think?" Rhodey questioned.

"Every good villain needs a volcano lair," Tony quipped.

"Really, Tony?" Rhodey asked, sounding more amused than derisive.

Tony chose to ignore him. "So, what are we looking for?"

"Animals, most probably," Loki replied. "I doubt she was the kind to make detailed plans we could confiscate."

"The scans of the building show a number of life signs," Bruce chimed from the tower. "Judging by the previous creatures she manipulated, I would say only a quarter of them are genetical enhanced."

Tony's lips thinned. You could take the sanity out of the scientist, but you couldn't take the HYDRA out of the asshole.

"Well then," Tony said, charging his repulsors and lifting into the air. "Let's round up the kids and get the ones without enhancements to a sanctuary somewhere. FRIDAY, look into it. Tony Stark Animal Safety Foundation. Has a nice ring to it, doesn't it?"

"Of course, Boss."

Grinning, Tony took off for the building with Rhodey flying close behind and Loki taking a more leisurely stroll. With any luck, they'd be in and out before The Avengers even showed up.

---

It turned out to be a little more problematic than anticipated.

The genetically untouched animals seemed to be in varying states of sedation. It wasn't done medically but through the use of Animal Whisperer's abilities. Loki was hesitant to perform the usual sleeping spells for fear of hurting them.

Bruce wasn't even sure what to do. What they really needed was animal specialists. Rhodey was on a conference call with the Governor of Hawaii trying to give them authority over the animals. FRIDAY had phoned the top animal specialists in the world whom Bruce was now speaking to.

Loki had contacted his friend and she had been far from pleased, but once more was willing to take the magically altered ones. He was now walking through the compound and making sure each animal had sufficient food and water.

Tony had stepped out of his armour and was leaning against a makeshift rabbit pen, watching the four bunnies hop around. They seemed to be one of the breeds least sedated.

They'd been there almost an hour when the Avengers burst through the doors.

Tony rolled his eyes skyward at the racket they made. Two of the bunnies leapt away in fright and were now trying, unsuccessfully, to hide.

He pushed up from the pen, walking past the droopy-eyed llama and the placid alligator to stand in the doorway with his arms crossed. The hallway had branches of trees hanging above it like a canopy. There were three doors leading into rooms and further corridors. Seven rooms in total were filled with animals. One was a giant aviary and they'd kept the door shut so they wouldn't let any of the birds loose. Tony had chosen the room closest to the entrance to await the Avengers.

Barton and Thor looked angry. Romanov was impassive and Rogers was wary. Tony leant against the doorframe, projecting disinterest and boredom. His gaze never left their weapons and his suit was on standby should this turn into a confrontation.

"Nice of you to show up," Tony drawled. "But we have everything under control. You can go back home now."

"We aren't about to listen to you, Stark," Barton snapped. "We have a right to be here."

"Oh? The same way Loki and *I* had a right to be here? The same way you justly and fairly informed us of the information you'd gained so we'd be able to do what is *best* for the animals?"

"Like you give a fuck about the animals. You just want information on HYDRA."

"That sounds an awful lot like a projection to me, Barton. Are you sure you should be looking for animals? Mirrors might be better for you in the long run."

Barton snarled and moved to take a step forward but Rogers held him back with a hand on his shoulder.

"Enough," he snapped. "Tony's right. Excluding him from information he should be aware of is what caused all of our problems in the first place. If we keep doing this to each other, we're never going to be able to work together."

"Fine by me," Barton muttered under his breath.

Rogers gritted his teeth, but before he could say more, Thor interrupted by stepping forward, his hammer clasped tightly.

“Where is Loki?” He demanded.

“Loki is busy,” Tony parried. “Please leave your name and number with FRIDAY and *maybe*, Loki will get back to you.”

Thor glared and he raised his hammer threateningly, Tony tried not to tense. He trusted his suit to protect him in time if Thor got violent, but he didn’t relish a fight with the Thunderer.

Luckily, before things could escalate, Rhodey stepped into the hallway from another room.

“Alright,” he said, not seeming to notice the Avengers. “The Governor of Hawaii has given us temporary authority over the animals. FRIDAY says she’s got two animal specialists and a vet on a plane to help with the relocation. Bruce and Loki conferred about the enhanced ones and he’s sent them directly to his friend off-world.”

Rhodey paused and glanced down the hall, spotting the Avengers. He didn’t look surprised.

“So, Tony’s right,” he said. “We *do* have everything under control.”

Tony felt the overwhelming urge to throw his arms around his best friend. He managed to refrain, but he couldn’t be happier or prouder to have his Rhodey-bear by his side.

Barton looked like he’d swallowed a lemon. Romanov’s expression hadn’t changed, Thor still looked angry and Rogers had gone from surprised to relieved.

“The Governor doesn’t have authority over SHIELD,” Romanov stated.

“The Avengers has enough bad press right now,” Rhodey countered. “Do you really want them known as the assholes who stole rabbits from the vets before they could get here to look after them?”

Tony couldn’t repress his smirk. SHIELD didn’t normally care about the press, but the Avengers negative image meant even governments weren’t willing to return their calls or accept their presence during hostile situations. SHIELD hadn’t been a true covert operation since the Avengers had burst onto the scene.

“Nat,” Rogers said. “We would have handed the animals over to the State anyway. Tony will take care of them. He and Loki have taken care of all of them so far.”

Barton and Romanov both seemed to be gnashing their teeth. Well, Barton more *visually* than Romanov. But they were both smart enough to realise any attempt to undermine what was already in progress would not only fail but make them look stupid.

Thor, however, wasn’t listening to reason. He stepped forward; his hammer still grasped firmly in his hand.

“I demand to speak to Loki.”

“Well, that’s too bad,” Tony replied flippantly. “Consulting hours are from between three to five every *second* Tuesday.”

He would have said more, but Thor stalked forward, his free hand raised as if preparing to grab Tony’s throat. Tony had experienced that once before and *wasn’t* keen to do it again. Yet, before Thor could get within a foot of him, he collided with a green energy shield. Thor snarled and slammed his fist against it.

“*Loki!*” He demanded. “Show yourself!”

Instead of a verbal response, a piece of parchment appeared floating above Tony’s hand. Tony plucked it from the air and read the green cursive. He almost sniggered.

*Dramatic diva*, Tony thought fondly.

“He says ‘*I do not take orders from a child. I also will not accept a meeting with one who attempts to harm my lover.*’”

Rhodey coughed, obviously covering a laugh. Thor snarled again, but Tony just turned the paper over, allowing Thor to read the cursive. Thor slammed his hand against the shield again. Tony was surprised he hadn’t tried to use the hammer. Surprised, but *grateful*. He knew Loki’s shields were powerful, but wasn’t sure they’d stand up to *that* type of bashing.

“Thor,” Rogers said firmly, coming to stand beside him. “This isn’t helping anyone.”

Thor ignored him to growl, “Heed my words, Stark. I *will* speak with Loki.”

“I’m sure Loki will try and fit you in when he has a free moment,” Tony said sweetly.

Thor looked ready to throw Mjolnir at his head, but Rogers said, “Loki will have to come to SHIELD to see Animal Whisperer and discuss the animals. You can speak to him then.”

“I do not plan to *wait*,” Thor growled.

For a moment, Rogers gritted his teeth with frustration. It made Tony remember that not too long ago, Rogers had punched Thor in the face. Tony had to wonder if Thor’s views on homosexuality was the only thing getting on Rogers nerves lately.

It made him feel... wary. Rogers had been helping them lately and Tony still didn’t know what to make of that. He didn’t *trust* Rogers, he certainly wasn’t going to forgive him... but, if Tony had to deal with any of them right now. He knew who he’d pick.

“If Loki isn’t coming out, we can’t make him,” Rogers said, sounding low on patience. “We only came here to make sure the animals wouldn’t be a danger to anyone. Or that there wasn’t something someone could find to use against us. We should be *helping* each other, not squabbling like children.”

Tony’s eyebrows rose. Especially at the *children* reference that matched Loki’s.

It was spur of the moment, completely off the cuff, but Tony was feeling off-kilter by Rogers and he wanted to sort it out. He wanted to poke at Rogers away from SHIELD while knowing his lover's magic was ready to protect him.

“Well, in the spirit of *collaborating*,” Tony said. “I’m willing to have a chat with you – or at least *one* of you.” He gestured with his head at the room behind him. “Come through, Rogers.”

He didn't wait, choosing to walk into the room. He hoped Loki would hear him and let Rogers through, but judging by the heavy set of footsteps behind him, Rogers had followed and been accepted past the ward.

Tony didn't stop walking until he went through the next door into another hallway. (The whole place really was a rabbit's warren.) Loki was waiting in the hall with a pensive frown. He caught Tony's gaze, looking concerned, but something in his expression must have assured him as his expression smoothed out by the time Tony had taken his place beside him and Rogers had entered.

Rhodey had probably stayed to keep an eye on the rest of the Avengers. Which was for the better really. Tony still didn't trust them not to do something irritating.

Tony went to speak but Rogers beat him to it.

“This ward you've got around us,” Rogers said. “It keeps people out does it also keep out listening devices?”

Loki's eyebrows rose. “If you are enquiring as to whether your communicators will allow SHIELD or your fellow Avengers to hear this conversation, then no, they will not. My ward,” his lips twitched, “*jams* the signal.”

Tony almost smiled at the technical term, but it was wiped off his face at Rogers next words.

“Then it's safe to talk?”

“Why would you need it to be *safe*?” Tony demanded.

“Because I want to help you,” Rogers said. “I...” he looked away and clenched his jaw. “I want to *ask* for your help too.”

Tony blinked. “Why would you want our help?”

Rogers looked back and a hint of desperation showed.

“Bucky,” he admitted. “I know you can't forgive me. I know you were still struggling to forgive him before I helped ruin everything.” He swallowed and dropped his eyes to his shoes. “But he... he showed me how wrong I was to do what I did to you. He told me about Stane.”

Tony's cheek jumped at the man's name, but Rogers didn't see.



“He showed me that all we are to SHIELD are *assets*,” Rogers spat the word. “He told me to be a spy, and I’m trying to be.” He raised his head. “I’m going to *try* and help you get the information you deserve, whenever I can.”

Tony could only stare at Rogers. He felt completely thrown and didn’t know how to recover. Loki had less of a problem.

“And you require what in return?” Loki requested. “What *help* do you want?”

“Bucky,” he said again. “I want to get him out. I want to get us *both* out. I don’t want to give up on SHIELD and the Avengers entirely, but I don’t want to be forced to follow an order because they’ll threaten Bucky if I don’t.”

“And how do you expect *us* to help?” Loki enquired.

“I don’t expect anything,” Rogers replied. “I’m asking if you can.” He took in a breath and straightened his shoulders. “I’ll do anything you want, if you can promise to help, Bucky.”

*They were in a relationship before the war.*

Tony’s eyes flicked to Loki. The mage was scrutinising Rogers, but all Tony could see was what it would be like if he was on the other side. If the situations were different and he was under SHIELD’s thumb and stupid enough to be conned and backed into a corner with blind obedience his only choice to keep Loki from harm...

Well, Tony could relate. A little.

He still wasn’t ready to forgive and forget or shrug off all his bitter anger. But, well.

*A spy inside SHIELD is still a spy.*

Tony turned back to him.

“Would you swear on a magical binding to that effect?” Tony asked. “Bind yourself in a way to prove you aren’t going to double-cross us and that everything you’ve said is the *truth*?”

“Yes,” Rogers answered with hesitation.

*Huh*, he thought.

Because Rogers wasn’t a good liar.

His poker face might be better than people expected, but he wasn’t *this* good at faking his responses. *No one* would agree so easily to a magical binding if they didn’t mean what they were saying.

He’d also been acting strange for a while now and helping them. Maybe, it was all part of a long con, but Tony didn’t think so.

Besides, he didn't have to *forgive* Rogers to help him. It would also be nice to cripple SHIELD by taking away their golden boy and their captured assassin. If he could have both of them standing in his corner with the media and on the battlefield, it would be useful. Especially if he and Loki went off-world.

So far, he was only seeing upsides.

Tony turned to Loki only to find the man giving him a subtle look which said '*have you lost your mind?*'. And maybe, he was being a little lenient. But so far, Rogers actions had shown him who he could trust and who he couldn't. It had gained him Loki and allowed him to reclaim all his stolen weapons in a way he'd never dreamed.

Rogers had fucked up, but it had worked in Tony's favour. Rogers had come back with his tail between his legs apologising and asking for *help*. Tony was feeling a little magnanimous and Rogers and Barnes were about to reap the benefits.

"I think we could work something out," Tony said. "A new contract between the three of us. We'll help you and Barnes get out, and in return, you'll help us."

Rogers slumped, looking like a weight had fallen off his shoulders. He smiled with gratitude. "Thanks, Tony."

It showed how far he'd come that those words didn't make him feel anything but the briefest twinge of bitter amusement, and triumph.

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Loki, of course, didn't let them do it without first dragging him away to talk to him. He was worried, of course, and confused, but once Tony had explained everything he'd considered about the proposal and why it was of benefit, Loki had finally relaxed.

"If you are sure?" Loki had still insisted, touching his arm gently. "You do not owe him assistance. He might be a useful pawn, but we do not *need* him."

"I know," Tony had agreed. "But," he'd hesitated, not having admitted it before, "I thought about what it would be like if *I* was trying to protect *you*."

Surprise had crossed Loki's expression before it had softened, "You saw me as if I was Barnes?"

"There's not a lot I wouldn't do, if I was protecting you."

Loki's eyes, if possible, had flooded with even more affection before the mage had kissed him. They'd lingered together for a few moments before Loki pulled back. They'd both smiled at one another before Loki took him back into the hallway where Rogers was waiting.

After that, it took little more than ten minutes for Loki to craft the binding. It was closer to what had been done with Rhodey than with SHIELD. It proved Rogers was telling the truth, and it sealed his agreement. Rogers would act as a spy for them at SHIELD when FRIDAY

was unable to be their eyes and ears, and when Rogers and Barnes needed to escape, they would find safe haven at Stark Tower.

When they were finished, they showed him the animals and explained what they had learned and their plans for them. He took it back to the Avengers while offering his support of their decision. It still took the Avengers the better part of an hour to leave with Thor the most vocal with his displeasure. But once the vets, animal specialists and Hawaiian officials started arriving there was little to be done.

It was... a strange turn of events, but not something Tony was going to complain about.

SHIELD, of course, sent in a few animal specialists and while Tony disliked the idea of them being there and spying, there was little for them to learn, so he didn't fight it.

Bruce eventually teleported in to assist and with him and Rhodey handling things, Tony finally felt ready to leave it in their capable hands. He thought Loki would send them to the tower, but instead he spoke quietly with FRIDAY through his communicators before sending them to a place Tony hadn't visited in years.

It was a decommissioned but not sold off SI testing site.

"Lokes?" he asked, turning to the man.

"I thought you might wish to see more of your weapons destroyed?"

Tony smiled. He also felt the overwhelming urge to hug the other man and he didn't fight it. He wrapped his arms around Loki and pressed his cheek to the man's chest. When Loki's arms came around him, he sighed happily.

He had the wonderful feeling that everything was *finally* falling into place.

# Chapter 64

## Chapter Notes

I'm afraid this is a bit of a "loose ends being tied up" chapter, but I hope you all enjoy it :)

Loki had been worried that after Anthony's confrontation with the Avengers and agreement with Rogers he would be angry or upset. But he was not. He seemed almost at peace. A feeling that only intensified when bathed in the reflective flame of explosions.

More than once as a weapon was detonated, Loki looked at the man beside him and imagined what he would be like drenched in fury, blood and flames. But despite Loki's name of *chaos* and *fire* he found he didn't crave that sight for Anthony. He liked him as he was; happy, untethered and without weight on his shoulders. Loki liked *himself* when he was happy with Anthony - when vengeance and pain wasn't clouding his every thought and plan.

Even when a message came from Banner that Animal Whisper had succumbed to her body's deterioration, it did little more than make Anthony sigh. Her danger had passed and now it was merely a clean up of the mess she'd left behind. Anthony had admired the last of the smoke from his weapons destruction before they'd left the bomb range.

Loki sent magic to confirm the woman's death and make certain Fury hadn't lied, but once assured of her death, they visited Rhodes, Banner and the animals. The two men had everything under control and were going to stay there overnight in the makeshift tents the scientists had erected. Anthony saw no reason for them to do the same, but when they eventually retired to the tower, it was late in the evening.

Loki still felt a thrill every time Anthony reached for him and drew him into his bed. Anthony's bed was even starting to become *their* bed to him. He wouldn't admit that to Anthony yet, but he did sometimes feel as if Anthony believed the same. They didn't have a chance to return to their earlier intimacy, but Loki couldn't find it in him to complain when he was still curling up around the other man and finding his dreams peaceful and undisturbed.

When they returned to the weapons room the next morning, Anthony was light and happy. Loki sat on the floor and made sure no other weapons of Anthony's existed in the world (and if they did, to bring them to the tower) while Anthony destroyed the ones that remained. When the final gun had been thrown into the flames, Anthony had looked on top of the world.

He'd turned to Loki and questioned, "That's really all of them?"

"Yes," Loki had agreed. "There are no others."

The laugh Anthony had let out was joyous and he'd thrown himself around Loki, pressing their bodies close and kissing Loki with both passion and gratitude. Loki had wrapped his arms around Anthony's waist and kissed him back. He'd expected it would end there, but Anthony's hands had begun to wander over his body. He broke their kiss to lay smaller kisses over Loki's jaw and neck.

"You're amazing," Anthony had murmured. "Never could have done this without you."

"I was happy to do it, Anthony," Loki admitted, leaning into Anthony's touch and stroking his fingers through the man's hair.

"And *I'm* going to be happy while I thank you."

Loki had been confused, but Anthony had pulled away in order to drop to his knees. Loki's pulse had spiked. He'd looked down at his grinning lover as the man caught his hips and tugged him closer before undoing his pants.

"You don't mind me thanking you right now, do you?" Anthony has asked, a twinkle in his eyes.

Loki had shaken his head only to find his eyes closing and a groan escaping his lips as Anthony went to work. By the time his lover was finished, Loki had felt weak-kneed and in need of a wall to rest against.

But he shook it off to be able to return the favour *very* thoroughly.

Afterwards, Anthony had gone to the lab with his scrap metal to craft SHIELD a suitable monument for their hubris. He'd chosen a large shield with a crack down the centre as the symbol. A clear indication of his distrust in the agency and their lack of ability to do their job. Loki was happy to send the finished creation to rest atop their facility.

Upon its completion and after a few moments spent snickering, Anthony had turned to the next item on his every growing list: seeking out a new CEO. Where his previous tasks had found Anthony at ease, his new project found tension landing heavy on his shoulders. Loki placed down his magic text after an hour and came to stand behind the man. Loki placed his hand on Anthony's back.

"How may I assist, Anthony?"

"Be my new CEO?" Anthony asked.

Loki smiled wryly. "I'm not certain that would be of the greatest benefit to your company."

"Are you kidding? You'd destroy the competition and have SI ruling the world within minutes."

Loki snorted. "I am grateful for your confidence, but I still would advise against it." He slipped his fingers into Anthony's hair and tugged gently. Anthony went boneless. "Besides," he continued, "it would make a vacation difficult, and take up too much time if I was to do the position any justice."

Anthony sighed. “Good point. Guess I’m back to the board of directors.”

“Is there anyone suitable?”

“I have a few candidates,” he admitted. “One in particular has a reputation for honesty. If he sees a fault, he won’t sign off on it, even if it costs the company money. He took longer to get on the board than others. By all accounts, he was too busy doing a good job to climb the ladder. His staff always have a good word to say about him too.”

“He seems ideal,” Loki acknowledged.

“My only worry is he won’t want the job,” Anthony said. “Or that he won’t be able to handle the more public aspects not to mention navigate our more cut-throat rivals.”

“Those skillsets can be taught,” Loki said. “Not all take to it, but should he wish to fulfill the role and be open to tutoring, he might yet be suitable.”

“Yeah,” Anthony acknowledged. “I thought about that. I can work with him for a few months, get him ready. Hell,” he flashed Loki a smile, “if he can stand up to you without quaking in his boots, he’ll be able to withstand anything.”

Loki chuckled. “I will gladly be a test of his ability to handle pressure and intimidation.”

Anthony’s grin softened. “Well, I guess I better spring a surprise visit on him. See how he handles my presence outside a scheduled meeting.”

“A good test of his fortitude,” Loki teased.

Anthony laughed and lightly shoved him. Loki let the motion move him but he equally used it to step even closer. He continued to play with Anthony’s hair, enjoying the ability to stand so close and casually touch his partner without secrecy or hesitance.

Anthony leant more of his weight against Loki instead of his chair. He closed his eyes and relaxed.

“What will you do today?”

“I will confer with Banner and Rhodes regarding the animals and offer my assistance if required.”

“Good idea,” he said. “Hey, FRIDAY, how we looking for my animal sanctuary?”

“The SI lawyers are conferring with charity officials and animal organisations. They are hopeful for a quick approval and to gain fully trained and recommended staff so the Foundation can take in the animals displaced by Animal Whisperer immediately.”

“Awesome. Let me know if we run into any trouble so I can throw money and charm at it.”

Loki chuckled. “Is that your favoured solution to a problem?”

“It works more often than it probably should,” Anthony replied.

“Well, I shall have FRIDAY kept me abreast of any developments so I might implement them.”

“Good plan,” Anthony said.

He was resting his head on Loki’s chest by now, and Loki was enjoying the closeness. Unfortunately, all too soon he sighed and shifted to look up at Loki.

“I don’t want to move, but I should go conduct my interview.”

Loki didn’t want him to move either, but he knew the importance of a new CEO.

“Then, I best release you and visit Banner and Rhodes at the island.”

Anthony sighed again and pressed his face into Loki’s chest. Loki couldn’t stop his smile. His fingers moved from Anthony’s hair to brush his cheek.

“The sooner you are done, the sooner you may return,” Loki said. “The sooner we have sorted these particular problems, they sooner you may take me to Malibu.”

Anthony groaned and pulled back.

“Unfair,” he complained. “Tempting me with silvertongued words.”

Loki laughed. “Oh, Anthony. You haven’t *begun* to hear me tempt you.”

Anthony’s expression was quick to change, desire sparking through his eyes and making Loki feel matching interest form. It took great effort to repress it and step back from Anthony.

“We have tasks to complete,” Loki said regretfully.

Anthony looked disappointed but he nodded.

“First chance we get,” he muttered. “I’m giving us a week long holiday. The world can save itself.” Loki was more than ready for that promised break, but before he could acknowledge it, Anthony stood and said, “Okay. Can you teleport me to SI? Quicker I’m done, quicker I can get back home.”

Loki nodded, but before performing the spell, he stepped close and cupped Anthony’s cheek. Anthony smiled and leant into his touch, allowing their lips to brush in a chaste kiss. It wasn’t everything he wanted, but it was enough to sate him.

He pulled back and said, “Call me when you are through. I can bring you to the island or us both to the tower.”

“I look forward to it, Lokes,” Anthony agreed.

He also darted in for one more quick kiss before Loki sent him to SI with a fond smile and a shake of his head. He truly hoped the candidate would prove a suitable new CEO. It would allow Anthony to distance himself further from Pepper Potts and remove one further burden and worry from his shoulders.

It would also allow them to retire to Malibu sooner.

Where, should they truly be left alone, Loki had every hope of using the privacy to finally deepen their relationship with the intimacy he'd once hesitated to share. It had been overwhelming at first, but now he not only felt ready, but he desperately wanted to experience it.

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The animals were being well looked after and the specialists and vets had things well in hand. Banner had slid in seamlessly with them and was helping wherever possible and discussing his theories with a group of them. Rhodes was mostly keeping an eye on the SHIELD specialists and making sure no one tried to sneak in and steal the animals for research.

Loki had placed a small ward around the compound to avoid such things happening, but he appreciated Rhodes concerns. He stayed for an hour, offering his strength and magic to shift the larger animals or assist with any questions they had. He also passed on the information of the sanctuary Anthony was crafting. Most of them seemed happy but a few were displeased and wanted the animals at different facilities. Loki made a note to inform FRIDAY and uncover if the facilities would be better suited or if the men and women had vested interests in the animals being relocated elsewhere.

He was planning to leave and use the time to research dormant magic when Rhodes called, "Hey, Loki. Can I have a quick chat with you?"

Loki turned to look over his shoulder at the approaching man.

"Of course," he agreed. "How may I assist?"

"Can we speak privately?" he asked.

Loki's eyebrows rose but he nodded and directed them out of the room and down one of the hallways. The compound was filled with people bustling to-and-fro, but Loki selected a room free of animals and warded it.

Upon completion, he turned to Rhodes. He was concerned the man had overheard something dangerous or damaging from one of the SHIELD agents. While none of his wards or contracts had given him any cause for concern, one could never be so sure. The public had not expressed any negativity that he had seen and even the governments and political parties seemed to be giving them a wide berth.

He was expecting an explanation of what Rhodes had uncovered, he did not expect the question he was posed.

"How are you and Tony?"



Loki blinked. “We are fine. Anthony is interviewing a man whom he believes will make a worthwhile CEO. I had planned to return to the tower to revisit some magic tomes.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Rhodes said. “But that’s not what I meant.”

“Oh?” Loki asked, feeling curious. “Then what do you wish to know?”

“I wanted to check and see how you were - how you were *together*.”

Loki quickly understood. “You are enquiring as to our relationship.”

“I told you before that you could come to me if you needed anything,” Rhodes said. “And you haven’t, which is fine, you don’t ever need to.” Rhodes was watching him closely. His sharp gaze hinted at the perception and intelligence he possessed. “But, I’ve been watching and I don’t think I’d be going out on a limb to say things have changed for you. *Deepened* for you.”

Loki swallowed. He felt suddenly vulnerable and were it someone other than Rhodes he might have felt cornered. His feelings had grown and intensified with every day he shared with Anthony. Every day he held him close, kissed him and deepened their physical intimacy; it was all leading him down one path. *Love*.

He'd been dismissing his growing affections and enjoying what he shared with Anthony, but clearly Rhodes had seen right through him.

“Is there a reason you wanted to discuss this with me?” Loki asked, wary about where the conversation was going.

“Yeah,” he said. “Hel told us Thanos is going to be killed. The reason for your contract with Tony is going to end.”

Loki felt a momentary burst of panic. But, no. Anthony was already making plans with him for after the contract ended. He didn’t need to fear Anthony cutting ties with him.

“I know Tony isn’t about to let you disappear once it ends,” Rhodes said, echoing his thoughts and allowing Loki to relax. “But, that’s actually a bigger problem.”

Loki frowned. “How do you mean?”

“At the end of the day, you’re falling for a mortal, Loki. I’m not sure if either of you have talked about what that means.”

Loki flinched. He hadn’t forgotten that Anthony was mortal. He’d thought about it since the beginning of their partnership. Long before they were intimate, he had considered extending Anthony’s life, if only to gain a long-term and worthy ally. Now, his interest in keeping Anthony alive went far deeper.

He'd thought about it, in his more wistful moments: sharing a lifetime with Anthony as his partner and lover. When Hel’s spell had revealed Anthony’s potential to wield sedir his heart had leapt. It opened the doors to thousands of spells and bonds they could perform.

But any chance of having Anthony spend a long life with Loki involved *asking* him. And to ask for eternity meant opening himself to rejection. He wasn't yet ready to have that conversation. He didn't believe they were *ready* for the commitment of it.

Because he didn't wish to ask Anthony as a partner and a friend, he wanted to ask him as a lover... and as a... *spouse*.

He couldn't hold Rhodes gaze.

"At this moment," Loki admitted quietly, "I do not think Anthony is ready to discuss the subject."

"He's already contemplated extending his life before."

Loki's head jerked up with surprise. Rhodes smiled faintly.

"He's toyed around with Extremis and even the super soldier serum. He's poked at other ideas over the years too. He's never fully committed to any of them, but you'd be wrong if you thought he wouldn't jump at the chance."

Hope flooded Loki, but despite knowing the overture might not be immediately rejected, it didn't assuage all his fears.

"You say he has tried, but never committed to the idea. Perhaps it is something he likes the *idea* of and not the reality."

"Maybe," Rhodes admitted. "But, that's something you should probably ask him." Loki immediately shook his head. "Loki-"

"Our relationship is too new," Loki explained, feeling his skin crawl just thinking about expressing it to Anthony. "How could I expect him to choose me for a mortal lifetime, let alone five or ten? It is too soon." He shook his head. "I would only receive a refusal."

"Or you'd receive a '*not now*' or maybe even a '*hell yes*'. Don't underestimate him," Rhodes insisted. "I can already see he's crazy about you." Loki looked back at Rhodes feeling a shy pleasure at the words. Rhodes smiled. "I mean it, Loki. I've only seen Tony in love once, but you're well on your way to being the second."

For one of the few times in his life, Loki didn't know what to say.

Rhodes stepped closer and lightly patted his shoulder.

"I'm not saying offer it straight away, but I do think you should ask him about where the relationship is going and what you both want. Sometimes, Tony doesn't think about those things until he's asked." Rhodes shook his head fondly. "He's a great guy, but he's an idiot. And the last thing I want is to see you both hurt because Tony never realised that *he* was the one who needed to get down on one knee with a ring."

Loki almost made an undignified noise at imagining Anthony proposing to him. It wasn't so much the act (although, that was certainly something he yearned for) it was the open

acceptance and *encouragement* he was receiving from Anthony's closest friend.

Rhodes could see them marrying. He wanted to help *facilitate* that outcome.

"I... will talk to Anthony," Loki murmured, still feeling a little mystified.

Rhodes squeezed his shoulder again.

"Good. And don't forget, any issues or worries, just give me a call. I'm your friend too, alright?"

Loki nodded dumbly. Rhodes simply looked amused.

"Now, I better go make sure SHIELD aren't stealing anything they shouldn't. I'll let you and Tony know if anything happens, but with any luck, we'll clear the animals out of here within forty-eight hours."

Rhodes didn't wait for a response, merely offering him a wave and leaving to do as he'd stated.

Staring after the man, Loki wondered if perhaps, his original plans for extending a useful mortal ally and friend would still be viable. Only, they might have found a new target in the form of Colonel James Rhodes.

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By the time Anthony called him, Loki had returned to the tower. He'd attempted to read his magic texts but found his mind too distracted after his conversation with Rhodey. He teleported Anthony to the tower and was greeted with his satisfied smirk and bright eyes.

"I take it the meeting went well?"

"He'll need tutoring," Anthony answered. "And he hasn't said yes, but he will."

Loki's eyebrows rose. "You asked him?"

Anthony shook his head. "No, he was suspicious and started quizzing me for answers." Anthony chuckled. "As I said, he needs work, but I threw it on the table and then wouldn't let him make a decision immediately."

"But you are confident in his answer?"

Anthony's eyes went thoughtful and distant, but he nodded slowly.

"Yeah. I think he'll be good."

"I'm glad," Loki said, feeling relieved and pleased for Anthony.

His words made Anthony blink back to the room, but while he started to smile it stopped and he frowned.

“Hey,” he said, walking to the couch and dropping down beside Loki. “What’s up with you though?”

“Nothing is-”

“Yeah, I call bullshit.” Anthony’s frown deepened. “You’ve been here a while, but you don’t have a sea of books. You’re also sitting in your pensive pose.”

Loki blinked. “My ‘*pensive pose*’?”

“Yeah,” Anthony said, shifting closer and placing a hand on his leg. His eyes were full of concern. “What’s wrong? Did something happen with the animals?”

Loki sighed. He hadn’t intended to lie or keep the subject from Anthony, but he had *hoped* to put it off until things were less stressful for them all.

But then, their lives had hardly slowed down. Who knew what would next befall them and when?

“It is nothing to do with the animals or with SHIELD. It was merely a conversation I had with Rhodes.”

“Okay,” Anthony replied, seeming bamboozled. “What happened?”

“He mentioned the soon-to-be cessation of our contract.”

Anthony’s eyebrows flew high. “Wait? Our original contract? The one we made when I didn’t realise how awesome you were?” A small smirk caught at his mouth. “The one that we probably *should* sign in semen now, all things considered?”

Loki rolled his eyes, having forgotten Anthony’s comments from what seemed so long ago.

“Yes, Anthony, *that* contract.”

“Well, who needs to care about that?” Anthony relaxed further into the couch and even took Loki’s hand. “I can’t see either of us betraying each other. And I can’t see *either* of us deciding to walk away once the grape has been squashed. You’ll hang out on Earth, I’ll hang out in space and we’ll keep on dating and shoving our gay awesomeness in Asgard’s face.”

Loki laughed, the sound both genuine amusement and relief. Anthony’s expression softened and he leant in. Loki closed his eyes and enjoyed the soft kiss. When they pulled back, they lingered close.

“Why did Rhodey want to ask you about that?” Anthony asked softly. “Did he think things would change?”

“No,” Loki replied, not wanting Anthony to doubt his friend. “He merely wanted to make sure we were both... on the same page, as it were.”

“He wanted to make sure our relationship was more real than fake?”

“No,” Loki disagreed. “He knows that it is real. He wanted to make certain that both of us were... in the same frame of mind.”

Anthony blinked, still sounding confused. “Okay?”

Loki hesitated, a thousand thoughts rushing through his mind. There were so many things he could say or even hint at – but their relationship was still too new for him to dare. Their lives might be dangerous and a discussion of the long-term future *should* be had, but not now.

*When we are in Malibu, Loki thought. When we can discuss it at our leisure and when there are less stresses vying for our attention.*

“I told him that we were,” Loki finally said. “I told him that although our relationship is still new, neither of us have any intentions for a casual dalliance. I... *we* want this to last.” He swallowed. “Do we not?”

“We do,” Anthony immediately replied, squeezing his hand. “I’m in this for the long haul, Lokes. You don’t need to worry about that.”

*Long haul.* For a moment, Loki’s heart leapt, but he had to swallow his excitement down. The Midgardian ‘*long-term*’ was not the same as his own. Yet, despite knowing there was a difference, Loki couldn’t help the persistent spark of hope. Rhodes had even said that Anthony had considered a longer lifespan. Perhaps it was not so out of reach as he’d first feared?

The thought made it impossible to resist kissing Anthony. The other man made a sound of surprise but eagerly melted into the kiss. Loki cupped his cheek with his spare hand and pressed closer until, before too long, Anthony was lying on the couch and he was caging him.

Their kiss broke and Anthony’s expression had darkened with desire. He slid his hand under Loki’s tunic, making Loki shiver.

“I think we should take the rest of the day off, what about you?”

“I think that is a brilliant idea, Anthony.”

Anthony started to smirk, but Loki quickly covered it with his lips.

Any further talks about the future could be brought up later. For now, Loki was far more interested in the *present* and all the pleasure it had in store for him and his lover.

# Chapter 65 - Clean Version

## Chapter Notes

And for the non-smut reading readers, enjoy your "clean" chapter. There are only a few references as was needed to keep the dialogue carrying over. Enjoy!

Tony always liked to keep busy. He didn't do well with boredom or inactivity. Despite that, even he could admit, he wanted a *break*.

Three weeks since Animal Whisperer's death and he felt like he hadn't stopped. She might have been taken out of the initial '*threats to worry about*' pile, but they still had her animals to deal with as well as making sure SHIELD didn't try and use the scientist or his information to their advantage.

He left Bruce, Rhodey and FRIDAY on that particular task. He focused his attention on SI. He'd needed to not only sweep everything for bugs using both FRIDAY and Loki, but he had to go through his employees with a fine-tooth comb looking for SHIELD plants or people more loyal to Pepper than him.

While Pepper was aiding in the transition and had given an official months' notice, it was still a fucking nightmare. She was spinning it to the public as a mutual and professional decision. She was refusing to let Tony or SI get any bad press. Tony had heard she'd received at least four job offers but had turned them all down. She was taking an extended break from the corporate life.

He was almost jealous. *He* would kill for even a week without people vying for his attention.

Instead, he was vetting, training and gaining the *acceptance* of his new CEO. His candidate was a middle-aged man with a wife and two young children. He was smart and no-nonsense with a compassion that would be both an asset and a hindrance depending on how it was utilised.

Introducing him to Loki had been one of the few highlights the weeks had provided. Loki had circled him and sent a barrage of questions and accusations. The man was intimidated, but he handled it with politeness and grace. He needed work crafting emotional masks and he needed to go on the offensive rather than giving a smooth, unflappable neutrality, but it was all *positive*. Tony could *work* with this.

Loki approved too, and they were already making plans to put him under a truth spell as part of his acceptance to make sure he was genuine and wouldn't betray SI. Tony planned to make the spell a yearly requirement in order for the man to keep his position. He wasn't taking *any* chances.

The other truly *enjoyable* thing was the many irate voicemails left about his little *monument* on top of SHIELD. Tony listened to them after a long day, smiling faintly at Fury snarling and snapping about the cracked shield that nothing, not even Thor and Rogers' strength could remove.

He wasn't the only angry person trying to get their attention. Thor had tried to enter the tower on three occasions only to be bounced back by Hel's ward. Stark Tower had received the brunt of many severe thunderstorms. Tony had never seen Loki look so delighted as he stared out the window at the pounding rain and flashes of lightning.

Of course, it did leave Tony wondering if they wouldn't be tackled on the street. Him by SHIELD and Loki by Thor.

It meant they should probably acknowledge them before things got out of hand or *violent*, but, where would be the fun in that?

"I am surprised to see you here."

Tony blinked from his wandering thoughts to find Loki entering the lab. He smiled and immediately turned his chair to face the mage.

"I'm surprised to see *you*," he countered.

They hadn't seen much of each other. It wasn't through choice, but rather, necessity. Tony was busy with SI, Loki was dealing directly with his friend and the more magically enhanced animals. He was invisibly monitoring SHIELD, checking on Rhodey and Bruce, and in his few spare moments, he'd been enhancing Tony's armour with magic, or researching spells and wards that could assist them or explain how Tony might grow to learn magic.

The most they'd seen of each other was for quick conversations relaying what they'd been up to or when one of them slipped into bed late at night.

Usually, it was him joining the mage.

Once, Loki had been in his bed down on his old floor. Tony had stumbled into the penthouse, frowned and tracked Loki down to his rooms. He'd then slipped into bed and curled up around his lover. Loki had been pleasantly surprised when he'd woken up in the morning. They'd ended up kissing in bed and getting *so close* to something more before FRIDAY had informed them that they were needed elsewhere.

*Again.*

"It does seem as though we have no time with one another lately," Loki agreed, coming forward to meet Tony.

Tony shifted to allow Loki to rest between his legs. It had them closer than they'd been in weeks outside of a bed. Tony tilted up his chin and Loki smiled as he bent down and kissed Tony. Sighing into the touch, Tony brought a hand to Loki's waist, keeping him close.

It was a soft, languid kiss and when they pulled back Tony took his time opening his eyes.

“And what finds you in your laboratory, Anthony?”

“Making you some weapons for when you’re low on seidr,” Tony replied, not moving away from Loki. Instead, he let his hand wander over Loki’s side. “It’s a little like a mini repulsor. I figured you could power it with stored magic. Then, as an extra back-up, I can give you a mini arc reactor to draw from. That way, you’ve got a few more tricks up your sleeve.”

Loki chuckled. He brought a hand to Tony’s neck, stroking it softly and making Tony’s eyelids flutter.

“Did you feel a need to match me, Anthony?”

“More like look out for you,” Tony replied. He opened his eyes fully, catching Loki’s soft smile. “That’s what partners do, right?”

Loki’s gaze softened even further and he drew Tony into another kiss. Tony hummed softly into it even as he let his hand slide under Loki’s shirt. Loki pressed even closer, caging him against the chair. Tony arched forward and slid further down, wanting to get even more of their bodies touching.

When they broke for air, their breath was ragged and Loki’s eyes were dark with desire. Tony’s body was singing with lust.

“FRIDAY,” he said roughly. “Put the lab on lockdown. No interruptions unless the world is ending.”

“Done, Boss.”

“No interruptions?” Loki murmured, trailing his lips over Tony’s jaw. “Is that wise?”

“Fuck wise,” Tony growled. “I want *five fucking minutes* knowing I don’t have anything or *anyone* on my mind but you.”

Loki grinned. “Well, I shall hardly complain about that.”

Any witty response Tony might have given was quickly lost as all his attention centered on finally having some time alone with Loki.

---

Tony was boneless in his chair by the time they were finished. Loki was straddling his thighs and he’d ended up with his face near Loki’s shoulder. He curled into Loki’s neck, breathing in sweat and spice and *Loki*. He didn’t ever want to move.

Loki was the first to shift, turning his head and pressing a kiss to Tony’s hair. Tony sighed and actually wished they were in bed if only so he could flop on top of Loki and cuddle him close. He settled for slinging an arm around Loki’s waist.

“Can we not leave the lab for a week?” Tony mumbled.



He followed it up by pressing a series of soft kisses to Loki's still flushed neck. Loki tilted into his touch.

"You do keep promising me a trip to Malibu," Loki remarked.

"Mm. I've got a lab in Malibu too," Tony agreed. "We can christen both."

Loki chuckled. "Do not tempt me to simply teleport us there."

"Do I have to?" Tony asked, letting his teeth scrape Loki's neck and making him shiver. "I like the sound of it."

"As do I," Loki agreed, yet his voice was already heavy with regret.

It sent a rush of agitation over him. He wished, not for the first time, that he could just throw his hands in the air and give up all their plans. If fucking *Thanos* wasn't in the picture, he probably would. He was a *consultant*. Call him only when he was needed. If the world wasn't in immediate danger, he didn't have to do squat.

But the world *was* in danger. And his new CEO wouldn't train himself. And SHIELD wouldn't behave without careful monitoring. And *then* there was keeping Loki in Earth's good books so that he could live on Earth in *peace*.

Tony sighed with frustration and pulled back until he was able to look Loki in the eyes. Loki's smile was sad but his hand came up and traced Tony's cheek and the edges of his goatee.

"Soon, Anthony," he promised.

Yet, the vow seemed too far away. If Tony hated boredom, he hated *waiting* just as much. Maybe, it would make the prize all the sweeter, but Tony was getting real sick of dreaming about a vacation he didn't know when he could take.

He could see in Loki's eyes, that he felt the same way. Neither of them was used to putting what was necessary in front of what they *wanted*. Not for such an extended period of time, at least.

"Soon," Loki repeated again.

He then sealed it with another kiss. Tony closed his eyes and tried to forget about the world and simply enjoy the touch and taste of his lover. This was the first slice of time they'd been able to steal together in far too long.

Tony was wondering if they might be able to have another round, maybe even a meal and some time in the lab *together* when they were interrupted.

"Boss," FRIDAY said, sounding tentative.

Tony broke the kiss with a frustrated groan.

“You have *got* to be fucking kidding me,” he snapped. “What is it now?”

“I am sorry, Boss,” FRIDAY replied. “But, the Bifrost has activated on the landing deck of the tower.”

Loki immediately straightened and Tony tensed in his seat. The Bifrost *shouldn't* have activated. Loki had admitted gleefully that he'd discerned that Hel's ward against *unwanted visitors* included even Asgard.

“Who has landed?” Loki demanded.

There was a brief pause before she answered, “The Aesir named Fandral.”

“Fandral?” Tony frowned and looked at Loki. “Why would he be here?”

“Perhaps because Odin has realised that he is the only Aesir we would allow entry into the tower,” Loki muttered, already scowling.

He pushed off his seat and Tony immediately missed his warmth. Loki waved a hand over them, cleaning them of their activities and fixing their clothes. They were now presentable and ready to meet their guest.

“Come,” Loki said.

He held out his hand and Tony took it. They appeared within moments in the penthouse. Loki moved to walk towards the landing pad where Fandral was standing and admiring the view, but Tony kept hold of him. It stopped Loki from moving forward and he glanced back at Tony with a frown.

“Do we want to get Bruce and Rhodey?” Tony asked.

Loki raised his eyebrows. “I did not think you considered Fandral a threat.”

“I don't,” Tony insisted. “It's actually why I think getting them would be a good idea. Fandral is the closest to an ally that we have on Asgard. It might be good to have him meet our allies here.”

Loki looked thoughtful and eventually he gave a small nod.

“FRIDAY,” Tony said. “Relay a message to Rhodey and Bruce, see if they've can teleport over here for a chat.”

“Colonel Rhodes is in a meeting with his superiors,” FRIDAY relayed. “Shall I still send the message?”

Tony hesitated. He knew it would be good to have Rhodey meet Fandral, but he didn't want to drag him out of something important just for an introduction.

“No, don't worry about it for now. Just see if you can grab Bruce.”

“Dr Banner says he can be ready to teleport in a few minutes.”

Tony nodded. One out of two wasn't bad.

“Okay, thanks, FRIDAY.” He turned to Loki. “Shall we let him inside in the meantime?”

“Very well,” Loki agreed. He flicked his gaze to the ceiling. “FRIDAY, allow him entrance.”

She didn't respond verbally, but they both watched the doors of the tower open. Fandral glanced up as if addressed. He smiled, nodded and said something before walking confidently into the tower. When he alighted on them, he smiled. He didn't blink at their clasped hands. He walked over with what seemed to be genuine joy at seeing them.

“Anthony! Loki! I hope you are both well.”

“Fandral,” Loki greeted. “Yes, we are fine.”

“I am glad to hear it.”

He stopped before them and hesitated. Tony was surprised when Loki offered his arm. They clasped arms in a gesture more friendly than Tony would have expected considering their parting. Granted, Fandral had *bowed* on Asgard and hadn't done anything but be nice to Loki.

Maybe, he was willing to extend Fandral the courtesy of a polite greeting? Fandral seemed delighted, and Tony followed Loki's example. They didn't let go of their hands, but they both gave Fandral the Asgardian equivalent of a handshake.

“Why do you venture here?” Loki asked, cutting through any further pleasantries.

“I was sent to request Thor return to Asgard,” Fandral stated.

Tony raised his eyebrows. “Well, uh, hate to break it to you but he isn't here.”

“I have already given him the Allfather's message, I merely wished to speak to you as well.” His expression turned serious as he caught Loki's gaze. “The Allfather knows of your visit by Hel. He knows of Thor's attempts to gain entry to this tower. He is calling him back to force his visits to cease. He does not wish to aggravate the ruler of Helheim.”

Loki's eyebrows rose. “I doubt that Odin expressed this plan to *you*.”

“He did not,” Fandral admitted. “But the Allfather has been calling the ambassadors to Asgard and speaking with them.” He shifted awkwardly and did not hold Loki's gaze. “Hel visited unexpectedly and expressed her... displeasure with Thor's actions and the Allfather's meetings with the ambassadors.”

Loki barked a sudden, sharp laugh.

“Oh, I shall have to find a suitable item with which to gift Hel,” Loki remarked, delight and satisfaction dripping from every word.

“Uh, Lokes?” Tony asked, hoping for some clarification.

Because, he wasn't sure he was hearing things correctly. And if he *was* then he was a little awed and very floored.

Loki turned to him with a wide grin.

“Odin sought to unravel our alliances with the realms,” he explained. “To spread lies and undermine our efforts. Hel witnessed this attempt and combined with Thor *attacking* her ward in a show of fury and stupidity, she has revealed these *underhand* and *childish* displays to the ambassadors.”

Tony gave a low whistle. He'd thought that was the case, but *damn*, that was a hell of a powerplay in their favour.

“I think we'll *both* need to find a suitable present,” he murmured. “Holy *shit*.”

It seemed that Hel was *very* fond of them. He wasn't sure what they'd done to manage that, but he really, *really* didn't want to do anything to piss her off. Did Queen's of the Dead appreciate diamond necklaces? He'd have to ask Loki.

“Indeed,” Loki intoned. He then turned back to Fandral. “Thank you for relaying this, Fandral.”

He nodded, his face turning surprisingly solemn. “You are welcome, Loki. It did not seem... right, to keep you from this knowledge.”

Loki's lips twitched. He looked wryly amused and Tony almost winced, wondering if some new reference to their fragile past was about to be unleashed. Luckily, FRIDAY interrupted with perfect timing.

“Prince Loki, Sir?” she addressed, making Tony's lips twitch.

*That's my girl.*

If Loki was amused by the sudden title, he didn't show it. “Yes, FRIDAY?”

“Dr Banner is ready to be brought to the tower.”

“Ah, thank you, FRIDAY,” he replied. He turned back to Fandral. “You are in luck. He was present before, but now you shall be *meeting* Anthony's friend and our ally, Bruce Banner; the famed *Hulk*.”

Fandral's eyes widened. It made Tony wonder just *what* stories Thor had told about Bruce's alter ego. The Einherjar had certainly reacted when they'd briefly seen him before their trip to Asgard. But before anything could be said, Loki's hand glowed green and in shimmer of light, Bruce appeared only a few metres from them.

He blinked and rearranged his glasses before smiling at Tony and Loki.

“Thank for the teleport, Loki.” He then turned to Fandral, his expression wary but not openly hostile. “Fandral.”

Fandral stepped towards him eagerly. “It is an honour to meet such a famed and strong warrior.”

He looked like an eager puppy which was clearly bemusing Bruce.

When Tony glanced at Loki, he found the mage with a faint, amused smile. It felt *good* seeing Loki greet Asgard and Fandral without tension, frustration or bitterness. Things were going in their favour and Fandral was even helping them out. Things were looking *up*.

Squeezing Loki’s hand to get the mage’s attention, he waited until he had Loki’s focus before tilting up his chin. Loki’s smile grew and he bent down for a kiss. It warmed Tony all the way through.

It was moments like this which made all the assholes and bullshit worth it.

# Chapter 65 - Full Version

## Chapter Notes

Would you look at that? We finally get some smutty stuff. It's still pretty light, but enjoy it, my sexytime hoping readers XD

Tony always liked to keep busy. He didn't do well with boredom or inactivity. Despite that, even he could admit, he wanted a *break*.

Three weeks since Animal Whisperer's death and he felt like he hadn't stopped. She might have been taken out of the initial '*threats to worry about*' pile, but they still had her animals to deal with as well as making sure SHIELD didn't try and use the scientist or his information to their advantage.

He left Bruce, Rhodey and FRIDAY on that particular task. He focused his attention on SI. He'd needed to not only sweep everything for bugs using both FRIDAY and Loki, but he had to go through his employees with a fine-tooth comb looking for SHIELD plants or people more loyal to Pepper than him.

While Pepper was aiding in the transition and had given an official months' notice, it was still a fucking nightmare. She was spinning it to the public as a mutual and professional decision. She was refusing to let Tony or SI get any bad press. Tony had heard she'd received at least four job offers but had turned them all down. She was taking an extended break from the corporate life.

He was almost jealous. *He* would kill for even a week without people vying for his attention.

Instead, he was vetting, training and gaining the *acceptance* of his new CEO. His candidate was a middle-aged man with a wife and two young children. He was smart and no-nonsense with a compassion that would be both an asset and a hindrance depending on how it was utilised.

Introducing him to Loki had been one of the few highlights the weeks had provided. Loki had circled him and sent a barrage of questions and accusations. The man was intimidated, but he handled it with politeness and grace. He needed work crafting emotional masks and he needed to go on the offensive rather than giving a smooth, unflappable neutrality, but it was all *positive*. Tony could *work* with this.

Loki approved too, and they were already making plans to put him under a truth spell as part of his acceptance to make sure he was genuine and wouldn't betray SI. Tony planned to make the spell a yearly requirement in order for the man to keep his position. He wasn't taking *any* chances.

The other truly *enjoyable* thing was the many irate voicemails left about his little *monument* on top of SHIELD. Tony listened to them after a long day, smiling faintly at Fury snarling and snapping about the cracked shield that nothing, not even Thor and Rogers' strength could remove.

He wasn't the only angry person trying to get their attention. Thor had tried to enter the tower on three occasions only to be bounced back by Hel's ward. Stark Tower had received the brunt of many severe thunderstorms. Tony had never seen Loki look so delighted as he stared out the window at the pounding rain and flashes of lightning.

Of course, it did leave Tony wondering if they wouldn't be tackled on the street. Him by SHIELD and Loki by Thor.

It meant they should probably acknowledge them before things got out of hand or *violent*, but, where would be the fun in that?

"I am surprised to see you here."

Tony blinked from his wandering thoughts to find Loki entering the lab. He smiled and immediately turned his chair to face the mage.

"I'm surprised to see *you*," he countered.

They hadn't seen much of each other. It wasn't through choice, but rather, necessity. Tony was busy with SI, Loki was dealing directly with his friend and the more magically enhanced animals. He was invisibly monitoring SHIELD, checking on Rhodey and Bruce, and in his few spare moments, he'd been enhancing Tony's armour with magic, or researching spells and wards that could assist them or explain how Tony might grow to learn magic.

The most they'd seen of each other was for quick conversations relaying what they'd been up to or when one of them slipped into bed late at night.

Usually, it was him joining the mage.

Once, Loki had been in his bed down on his old floor. Tony had stumbled into the penthouse, frowned and tracked Loki down to his rooms. He'd then slipped into bed and curled up around his lover. Loki had been pleasantly surprised when he'd woken up in the morning. They'd ended up kissing in bed and getting *so close* to a handjob before FRIDAY had informed them that they were needed elsewhere.

*Again.*

"It does seem as though we have no time with one another lately," Loki agreed, coming forward to meet Tony.

Tony shifted to allow Loki to rest between his legs. It had them closer than they'd been in weeks outside of a bed. Tony tilted up his chin and Loki smiled as he bent down and kissed Tony. Sighing into the touch, Tony brought a hand to Loki's waist, keeping him close.

It was a soft, languid kiss and when they pulled back Tony took his time opening his eyes.

“And what finds you in your laboratory, Anthony?”

“Making you some weapons for when you’re low on seidr,” Tony replied, not moving away from Loki. Instead, he let his hand wander over Loki’s side. “It’s a little like a mini repulsor. I figured you could power it with stored magic. Then, as an extra back-up, I can give you a mini arc reactor to draw from. That way, you’ve got a few more tricks up your sleeve.”

Loki chuckled. He brought a hand to Tony’s neck, stroking it softly and making Tony’s eyelids flutter.

“Did you feel a need to match me, Anthony?”

“More like look out for you,” Tony replied. He opened his eyes fully, catching Loki’s soft smile. “That’s what partners do, right?”

Loki’s gaze softened even further and he drew Tony into another kiss. Tony hummed softly into it even as he let his hand slide under Loki’s shirt. Loki pressed even closer, caging him against the chair. Tony arched forward and slid further down, wanting to get even more of their bodies touching.

When they broke for air, their breath was ragged and Loki’s eyes were dark with desire. Tony’s body was singing with lust.

“FRIDAY,” he said roughly. “Put the lab on lockdown. No interruptions unless the world is ending.”

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“No interruptions?” Loki murmured, trailing his lips over Tony’s jaw. “Is that wise?”

“Fuck wise,” Tony growled. “I want *five fucking minutes* knowing I don’t have anything or *anyone* on my mind but you.”

Loki grinned. “Well, I shall hardly complain about that.”

Any witty response Tony could have given was lost by a gasp as Loki’s free hand slid down his chest and settled just above the growing bulge in his pants. Tony squirmed, trying to get Loki to touch him.

“*Loki*,” he complained.

“Hmm?” Loki hummed. “Are you impatient, Anthony?”

“I’ve gone *past* impatient,” Tony muttered.

He removed his hand from Loki in order to grab his wrist and tug his hand down until it was cupping him through his pants. Tony’s eyes fell closed just feeling Loki’s palm resting against him. It had been *too damn long*.



Loki must have felt the same as *he* was the one to grunt at feeling Tony's cock. His hand started to slowly massage him through his pants. Tony tilted his head back against the chair. He was hardening rapidly under Loki's ministrations.

When the chair *moved*, he jumped and jerked up his head, but all Loki did was push it until the back was firmly fixed against the table. Loki then smirked and put one knee beside Tony's thigh.

"Brace your feet, Anthony," he commanded.

Tony quickly complied and although Tony wouldn't have thought the chair was big enough for two, Loki was soon straddling his thighs. The bulge in Loki's pants was noticeable and Tony's hands immediately moved to the ties of Loki's pants. He got them undone and shoved down in record time. When he gripped Loki's cock the mage groaned loudly. His head fell forward and his hand stilled on Tony's clothed cock.

Tony had a quip on his tongue, but when he saw Loki's gaze hazy with pleasure, a soft flush on his cheeks and his hair falling over his face, Tony heart stuttered. He also felt a yearning to be even *closer* somehow.

"Loki," he murmured, making the mage look up at him. "Come 'ere."

Loki blinked only to smile softly. He shifted closer until their lips could press together. Tony sighed against his lover's mouth. It was only a chaste peck, but Loki didn't move away, their foreheads rested together as Loki sightlessly opened his pants. Tony shivered and his hips twitched at Loki's first touch.

They didn't need to speak as they started up a slow, matching rhythm on each other's cocks.

Their breaths soon came in ragged gasps while soft grunts and groans escaped their lips. Despite the sometimes awkward shifting of their hips on the chair, their faces always stayed close. Tony trailed kisses over Loki's jaw and Loki pressed their mouths together.

Tony had slept with countless people. He'd been with *Pepper* for years, and yet, he'd never experienced anything as intimate as this. They were still mostly dressed, Tony's feet and his workbench were the only things keeping the chair braced, they weren't even having true *sex* – and yet, Tony felt like trembling.

They were having sex in the *lab*. It was his most intimate, important space and he'd never been with anyone down here. Pepper had always seen the workshop as *his* place and neither of them would have ever instigated something here. She was all about getting him *out* of the workshop. Loki was all about settling down here *with* him.

"Loki," he whispered, feeling something bubbling up in his chest.

It was overwhelming and *warm*. It made him never want to let go of Loki. He used his free hand to grip the man's shirt.

"Anthony," Loki groaned back.

He brought their foreheads together and Tony closed his eyes. He sped up his hand on Loki's cock and felt the mage do the same. Their hips rocked forward in a stuttering rhythm as they each chased their climax.

It had been too many weeks feeling unfulfilled and Tony was quick to reach his climax in a blinding burst of pleasure. He cried out and tightened his grip on Loki's shirt. He kept moving his hand against Loki until the mage also moaned out his release.

Loki collapsed forward on him and Tony went boneless in the chair, sliding down slightly and ending up with his face near Loki's shoulder. He soon curled into Loki's neck, breathing in sweat and spice and *Loki*. He didn't ever want to move.

Loki was the first to shift, turning his head and pressing a kiss to Tony's hair. Tony sighed and actually wished they were in bed if only so he could flop on top of Loki and cuddle him close. He settled for slinging an arm around Loki's waist.

"Can we not leave the lab for a week?" Tony mumbled.

He followed it up by pressing a series of soft kisses to Loki's still flushed neck. Loki tilted into his touch.

"You do keep promising me a trip to Malibu," Loki remarked.

"Mm. I've got a lab in Malibu too," Tony agreed. "We can christen both."

Loki chuckled. "Do not tempt me to simply teleport us there."

"Do I have to?" Tony asked, letting his teeth scrape Loki's neck and making him shiver. "I like the sound of it."

"As do I," Loki agreed, yet his voice was already heavy with regret.

It sent a rush of agitation over him. He wished, not for the first time, that he could just throw his hands in the air and give up all their plans. If fucking *Thanos* wasn't in the picture, he probably would. He was a *consultant*. Call him only when he was needed. If the world wasn't in immediate danger, he didn't have to do squat.

But the world *was* in danger. And his new CEO wouldn't train himself. And SHIELD wouldn't behave without careful monitoring. And *then* there was keeping Loki in Earth's good books so that he could live on Earth in *peace*.

Tony sighed with frustration and pulled back until he was able to look Loki in the eyes. Loki's smile was sad but his hand came up and traced Tony's cheek and the edges of his goatee.

"Soon, Anthony," he promised.

Yet, the vow seemed too far away. If Tony hated boredom, he hated *waiting* just as much. Maybe, it would make the prize all the sweeter, but Tony was getting real sick of dreaming about a vacation he didn't know when he could take.

He could see in Loki's eyes, that he felt the same way. Neither of them was used to putting what was necessary in front of what they *wanted*. Not for such an extended period of time, at least.

"Soon," Loki repeated again.

He then sealed it with another kiss. Tony closed his eyes and tried to forget about the world and simply enjoy the touch and taste of his lover. This was the first slice of time they'd been able to steal together in far too long.

Tony was wondering if they might be able to have another round, maybe even a meal and some time in the lab *together* when they were interrupted.

"Boss," FRIDAY said, sounding tentative.

Tony broke the kiss with a frustrated groan.

"You have *got* to be fucking kidding me," he snapped. "What is it now?"

"I am sorry, Boss," FRIDAY replied. "But, the Bifrost has activated on the landing deck of the tower."

Loki immediately straightened and Tony tensed in his seat. The Bifrost *shouldn't* have activated. Loki had admitted gleefully that he'd discerned that Hel's ward against *unwanted visitors* included even Asgard.

"Who has landed?" Loki demanded.

There was a brief pause before she answered, "The Aesir named Fandral."

"Fandral?" Tony frowned and looked at Loki. "Why would he be here?"

"Perhaps because Odin has realised that he is the only Aesir we would allow entry into the tower," Loki muttered, already scowling.

He pushed off his seat and Tony immediately missed his warmth. Loki waved a hand over them, cleaning them of their activities and fixing their clothes. They were now presentable and ready to meet their guest.

"Come," Loki said.

He held out his hand and Tony took it. They appeared within moments in the penthouse. Loki moved to walk towards the landing pad where Fandral was standing and admiring the view, but Tony kept hold of him. It stopped Loki from moving forward and he glanced back at Tony with a frown.

"Do we want to get Bruce and Rhodey?" Tony asked.

Loki raised his eyebrows. "I did not think you considered Fandral a threat."

“I don’t,” Tony insisted. “It’s actually why I think getting them would be a good idea. Fandral is the closest to an ally that we have on Asgard. It might be good to have him meet our allies here.”

Loki looked thoughtful and eventually he gave a small nod.

“FRIDAY,” Tony said. “Relay a message to Rhodey and Bruce, see if they’ve can teleport over here for a chat.”

“Colonel Rhodes is in a meeting with his superiors,” FRIDAY relayed. “Shall I still send the message?”

Tony hesitated. He knew it would be good to have Rhodey meet Fandral, but he didn’t want to drag him out of something important just for an introduction.

“No, don’t worry about it for now. Just see if you can grab Bruce.”

“Dr Banner says he can be ready to teleport in a few minutes.”

Tony nodded. One out of two wasn’t bad.

“Okay, thanks, FRIDAY.” He turned to Loki. “Shall we let him inside in the meantime?”

“Very well,” Loki agreed. He flicked his gaze to the ceiling. “FRIDAY, allow him entrance.”

She didn’t respond verbally, but they both watched the doors of the tower open. Fandral glanced up as if addressed. He smiled, nodded and said something before walking confidently into the tower. When he alighted on them, he smiled. He didn’t blink at their clasped hands. He walked over with what seemed to be genuine joy at seeing them.

“Anthony! Loki! I hope you are both well.”

“Fandral,” Loki greeted. “Yes, we are fine.”

“I am glad to hear it.”

He stopped before them and hesitated. Tony was surprised when Loki offered his arm. They clasped arms in a gesture more friendly than Tony would have expected considering their parting. Granted, Fandral had *bowed* on Asgard and hadn’t done anything but be nice to Loki.

Maybe, he was willing to extend Fandral the courtesy of a polite greeting? Fandral seemed delighted, and Tony followed Loki’s example. They didn’t let go of their hands, but they both gave Fandral the Asgardian equivalent of a handshake.

“Why do you venture here?” Loki asked, cutting through any further pleasantries.

“I was sent to request Thor return to Asgard,” Fandral stated.

Tony raised his eyebrows. “Well, uh, hate to break it to you but he isn’t here.”

“I have already given him the Allfather’s message, I merely wished to speak to you as well.” His expression turned serious as he caught Loki’s gaze. “The Allfather knows of your visit by Hel. He knows of Thor’s attempts to gain entry to this tower. He is calling him back to force his visits to cease. He does not wish to aggravate the ruler of Helheim.”

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“I think we’ll *both* need to find a suitable present,” he murmured. “Holy *shit*.”

It seemed that Hel was *very* fond of them. He wasn’t sure what they’d done to manage that, but he really, *really* didn’t want to do anything to piss her off. Did Queen’s of the Dead appreciate diamond necklaces? He’d have to ask Loki.

“Indeed,” Loki intoned. He then turned back to Fandral. “Thank you for relaying this, Fandral.”

He nodded, his face turning surprisingly solemn. “You are welcome, Loki. It did not seem... right, to keep you from this knowledge.”

Loki’s lips twitched. He looked wryly amused and Tony almost winced, wondering if some new reference to their fragile past was about to be unleashed. Luckily, FRIDAY interrupted with perfect timing.

“Prince Loki, Sir?” she addressed, making Tony’s lips twitch.

*That's my girl.*

If Loki was amused by the sudden title, he didn't show it. "Yes, FRIDAY?"

"Dr Banner is ready to be brought to the tower."

"Ah, thank you, FRIDAY," he replied. He turned back to Fandral. "You are in luck. He was present before, but now you shall be *meeting* Anthony's friend and our ally, Bruce Banner; the famed *Hulk*."

Fandral's eyes widened. It made Tony wonder just *what* stories Thor had told about Bruce's alter ego. The Einherjar had certainly reacted when they'd briefly seen him before their trip to Asgard. But before anything could be said, Loki's hand glowed green and in shimmer of light, Bruce appeared only a few metres from them.

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# Chapter 67

## Chapter Notes

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

Watching Fandral talk to Bruce was one of the funniest things Tony had seen in a while. He acted like a fanboy. In fact, if Tony didn't know how God damn *backwards* Asgard was about homosexuality, he'd have made a quip to Loki about Fandral having a crush. All things considered though, he kept that thought to himself.

Bruce was actually playing things up, which was at complete *odds* to his usual way of talking about the Hulk. It seemed he wanted to give the gossip mill the best possible version of events. Which was: The Hulk could take Thor in a fight, The Hulk was the meanest biggest, baddest thing on Earth, The Hulk *loved* Tony and the Hulk was on *Loki's* side. Tony could have kissed his friend, but he settled instead for making Bruce his favourite pot of tea.

Unfortunately, Fandral couldn't stay long as he had to get back to Asgard, but Loki surprised everyone by conjuring a small charm and giving it to the swordsman. It wasn't as impressive or personal as the bracelets, but it would warn Fandral of deception or immediate danger. Fandral had taken it with reverent hands and promised to find a means to wear it at all times.

He gave each of them an arm clasp in farewell, but he paused in front of Loki.

"I am truly glad you are well, Loki," Fandral said, sounding firm and genuine.

"Thank you, Fandral," Loki replied. "I am pleased you are too."

Loki even sounded like he meant it. He had a small upturn of his mouth as if he not only believed Fandral's words but appreciated them.

"I know you do not lack for fine warriors," Fandral continued, "but should there ever come a time of need, it would be my honour to fight at your side once again."

Loki's smile disappeared and his eyes widened imperceptively with shock. If he didn't have such a good poker face, Tony was pretty sure Loki would be gaping. Fandral just smiled. If he knew the effect his words had created, he made no mention of it.

He gently clapped Loki on the shoulder before giving another formal bow.

"Until we meet again, Prince Loki," he said.

He then gave a courteous nod to Tony and Bruce before turning on his heel and leaving the way he'd come. The moment he was free to call for the Bifrost, it was activating and taking the Aesir back to Asgard. The moment he was out of sight, Tony turned his attention on his lover. Loki had masked his expression until nothing but a pensive frown remained.

"Lokes?" Tony asked, uncertain how the man would be feeling.

“Fandral continues to surprise me.”

“In a pleasant way though, right?”

Loki’s lips twisted. “I find it difficult to believe the man to be genuine.”

“He seemed genuine,” Bruce remarked, but he was frowning too.

It was clear that Bruce, like Tony, *believed* Fandral meant no harm, but they didn’t have the centuries of history and knowledge that Loki did and were reserving judgement. Tony might be good at spotting a fake or a suck up, but at the end of the day, it was Loki’s call on Fandral’s motives. They didn’t know him well enough. Tony was *hopeful* though. And there were other things working in his favour.

“Hel’s ward did let him in,” Tony pointed out. “That means he wasn’t out to harm us directly.”

“Yes, it is the *indirect* that has me concerned,” Loki answered. “Fandral has never been a good liar. Hardly able to conceal his thoughts or feelings when displeased or repulsed. No, for his part, I do believe he is genuine and seeking to mend our...friendship.”

His use of the word was cautious, but Tony didn’t press him on it. He knew *friendship* with anyone Asgardian would be a tough thing for Loki to acknowledge.

“Okay,” Tony said. “So, we’ll say he *does* mean it. What do we do with that?”

“I have already made a start. That protection charm will not just guard him, it will give me a small means with which to locate him should the need arise.”

Tony grinned. “Have I mentioned I love your brain?”

Loki offered him a brief smile. “It is only a part of what must be done. I will need to venture to the realms and discern the truth of Fandral’s words.”

Tony instantly tensed. “Wait. Leave the tower? Leave our safety net while Odin is pissed and Fandral has dangled this information in front of us like *bait*?” He glanced at Bruce, hoping for assistance. “Am I the only one smelling *trap*?”

“I thought you did not fear Fandral?” Loki enquired, raising an eyebrow.

“Him? No. I fear a purple grape, a pissed off man in an eyepatch and a whole host of other things *that* are in space.” His worry was strong enough that he reached out and snagged Loki’s wrist, holding on and making the mage catch his gaze. “I really don’t like the idea of you running off right after Fandral’s shown up.”

“He’s right,” Bruce chimed in. He was frowning with concern. “If anyone is manipulating Fandral, this is exactly what they’d be hoping you’d do.”

“Odin will not attack me after so recently displeasing Hel,” Loki said. He also brought his free hand to Tony’s, covering it and squeezing gently. “The ambassadors will be equally wary



and more inclined to answer my enquires than rebuff me. The Mad Titan should still be some distance from the Nine Realms and, if he is *not* then I would rather know as soon as possible.” He squeezed Tony’s hand again and held his gaze. “I assure you, I will be fine.”

Tony shook his head. “I don’t like it, Loki. I should come with you.”

“No,” Loki insisted. “A second person will only draw attention. If there is reason to be on guard, a single person will have better chance of evasion.”

“That is *bullshit*,” Tony interjected. “Evasion isn’t any good if you’re *caught*. The suit has stealth mode! I could sneak around with you just as easily and then you’d have *double* fire-power if anything goes wrong.”

“Anthony, if something goes wrong, I have our bracelet which will bring me back to Midgard.” He stepped close and placed his hand on Tony’s cheek, cupping it gently. “But, I assure you, I will be fine.”

Tony made a noise of protest, but the sound was quickly smothered by Loki’s lips pressing against his own in a soft kiss. He closed his eyes and leant into the touch, squeezing Loki’s wrist harder and trying to press his affection and worry into the kiss, hoping something would get through.

Unfortunately, when Loki pulled back, he was no less determined. He stroked Tony’s cheek.

“Stay in the tower with Dr Banner. You will both be safe and I will return swiftly.”

“Loki-”

“Trust me, Anthony,” Loki said, holding his gaze imploringly.

The words cut through any of his protests. He still felt tense and worried, but he wouldn’t fight Loki. At least, not the same way.

“I want a phone call, every hour.”

“Anthony,” Loki said, a hint of fondness mixing with exasperation.

“No, shut up and deal. It’s that or you take me or Bruce with you. I’m not sending you off *alone* without communication after Fandral’s told us that Odin got bitchslapped by the Queen of Hel in front of everyone.”

“An interesting visual,” Loki drawled.

But before Tony could respond with indignation about him *missing the point*, Loki was kissing him again. It was only for a few moments before he pulled back enough to whisper, “I will call you every hour, but I do not expect to be long.”

Tony still wasn’t *happy*, but he knew it was the best he was going to get. If Loki said he needed to go and it would be safe, well, he had to trust him. And Tony *did* trust him. But, fuck, he was allowed to be worried, wasn’t he?

“Just be careful,” Tony said, not able to keep all the concern out of his voice.

Loki smiled softly and nodded. He gave Tony one more chaste kiss before he pulled back and Tony was forced to let him go. He turned to Bruce.

“You will remain in the tower during my absence?”

“Yeah,” Bruce nodded. “I’ll be here.”

Loki gave another nod, and after another quick glance and reassuring smile for Tony, he disappeared in his usual green sparkles. Tony watched the place he’d departed, unable to help how tense he automatically became knowing that Loki was out somewhere in space and he had *no way* to follow.

When Bruce placed a hand on his shoulder, he tried not to flinch. He jerked his head to face the man only to find Bruce’s expression filled with sympathy and compassion.

“He’ll be okay, Tony.”

Tony smiled tightly. “He better be. Or I’ll find a way to get us *both* into space and drag his ass back here.”

Bruce chuckled softly. “I’ll happily join that rescue mission. As will both Rhodey and Fandral, I’m sure.”

The thought loosened some of his tension, but he still didn’t feel at ease. He knew he wouldn’t feel calm again until Loki was back safe and sound inside Hel’s ward.

Bruce squeezed his shoulder again.

“Loki is incredibly powerful, smart and cunning,” Bruce said. “He won’t let anything stop him from coming back to you.”

The words were comforting and Tony knew they were meant to assure him and while they *did*, they also made something in his brain trip. He blinked at Bruce. “You mean coming back to the tower.”

Bruce raised his eyebrows. “I know what I said.”

Tony swallowed, feeling a whole different tension flood him. This one came with a mixture of feelings that left him wanting to shift on his feet.

“Uh, well, I mean, sure, I’m *part* of it, Bruce. But, it’s not really...erm...”

He trailed off, but Bruce was smiling and looking very amused.

“Tony, I may not have known you a long time. But I’ve seen you with Pepper and I’ve seen you with *him*. I don’t think I’m wrong when I say that you’ve never looked that content or connected with another person. He seems to match you in ways I don’t think I could ever comprehend. And it’s obvious you do the same for him.”

Tony's eyes were wide and his heart was beating too hard. The urge to squirm had only gotten worse and his cheeks felt too warm.

"I've also seen the way he looks at you," Bruce continued, his voice gentling. "It's obvious that you make him happy. And I don't think I'm exaggerating to say that if he makes a promise to you, he'll keep it. In fact, I would say that the one thing in the universe he'll fight to keep and protect above all else, is you."

Tony's lips parted but no words escaped. His chest felt flooded with warmth and he both wanted to run away and find Loki and bury his head in the mage's chest. It didn't quite feel like being slapped in the face, but it certainly felt like a very sudden, sharp awakening, because *holy shit*. If Bruce was right... then...

*I'm in love.*

*And Loki is too.*

And with the battle of the universe on their doorstep, he wasn't sure if that was an amazing thing or a spectacularly bad one. Because, if something happened to Loki now that he knew how he... felt... how was he going to handle that? And if they were both *fine* and they saved the universe and *lived*, would their... feelings... be able to stand the test of time? Hell, he was a *mortal* for God's sake. That had to be a bad bet on at least Loki's part.

*Shit. Shit. Shit.*

Tony felt panicked for a whole new reason. Sure, they'd talked about their relationship when they first started something in Asgard. But, well, Tony hadn't been thinking this far ahead. Or if he *had*, he'd have thought it would be either a long time in the future or something that would never come to pass. How was he supposed to know he'd fall for Loki?

Because, *fuck*, now that Bruce had pointed it out, it was fucking obvious wasn't it?

And then there was Loki and the *last* thing he wanted to do was hurt the mage. But, wouldn't that be inevitable for a thousand year old mage with a fucking *mortal* for a lover? *Fuck*.

"Tony!"

Flinching, Tony was jerked from his thoughts as he blinked back to the room and Bruce. He was looking concerned and he had both hands on Tony's shoulders.

"Tony, calm down. Stop panicking." He grimaced. "I didn't mean to make you worry even more. I just... I wanted to make sure you knew he'd do everything to come back safe."

Tony swallowed. He didn't blame Bruce. Hell, Bruce hadn't realised *exactly* what he was freaking out about. Rhodey probably would. Bruce clearly thought he was a little more self-aware than he was. *No need to let him know the truth. Actually, let's both not know.*

He needed to think about something else. Something that was not his feelings for Loki or Loki's feelings for him or whether or not the mage was *okay* out in space.

“Right. Um. Lab. Can we go to the lab? I think we should go to the lab.”

Bruce still looked noticeably concerned, but slowly he nodded and let Tony’s shoulders go.

“Okay. I think that might be good.”

Tony nodded abruptly and turned on his heel to hurry from the penthouse and towards the elevator.

Was he running away from his problems and emotions? *You fucking ‘betcha*. But at least no one was going to notice or call him on it.

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He spent most of the afternoon in the lab with Bruce. Loki called every hour, as promised, but it soon became anything but comforting. The first hour, Loki was amused and teasing, but by the second he was notably distracted. The third found him tight-lipped and tense. *Something* was going on and the more time he spent in space, the more quiet and wary he became. Tony found it increasingly impossible to concentrate.

Bruce and FRIDAY both tried to distract him, but he couldn’t focus properly. He kept tugging on his bracelet and wishing Loki would come *back*. When it was time for the fourth phone call, he was pacing in the lab, twitching with anxiety and glancing at the phone ever few seconds.

Bruce had made a pot of tea and was sipping from his cup. Tony could feel the man’s gaze on him, but didn’t turn to look. He’d already turned down a cup of the calming tea. He wasn’t willing to be *calmed*. At least, not by a brew. Only Loki would suffice. He knew he was acting irrationally, but he’d only *just worked out* he was in love with Loki. He was allowed to be terrified something would happen to remove Loki from his life.

He was so busy wearing a hole in the ground, that he almost didn’t see the green flash from the corner of his eye. But it wasn’t just the visual it was the *feeling*. The way Loki’s magic leapt towards him and he felt it rush across his skin. Tony’s heart leapt and he rushed forward to where Loki had appeared. He didn’t even think as he threw himself into Loki’s arms and tightly hugged the man. Loki let out a surprised exhale before relaxing and wrapping Tony in his arms.

“Anthony?” he questioned. “Is everything well?”

“I have no idea,” Tony mumbled into Loki’s shirt. “Also, that’s *my* line.”

“Ah,” Loki said as comprehension dawned. He also stroked Tony’s back. “You were worried.”

“Damn right,” Tony muttered.

Loki pressed a kiss to his head and Tony sighed and relaxed a little more.

“I am sorry to have worried you,” Loki said. “But I discovered things that were... unexpected.”

Tony pulled back, noticing the strange undercurrent in Loki's voice. The mage's face was pinched and he looked uncertain, even worried. Tony's fear returned and he gripped Loki even tighter.

"What happened?"

"It is nothing I can pinpoint," Loki admitted. "It is rather... a dissonance. I am not the only one to feel it." He sighed. "I visited the realms we had dealings with. They are all preparing for Thanos which I was grateful to witness. They were all accepting even *welcoming* of my presence and any questions I had. They asked of you, and of Midgard, and confirmed Fandral's recounting of Hel's visit to Asgard."

He paused, a heavy frown furrowing his brow.

"But?" Tony asked.

"But each mage I saw held the same discontent, the same deep-seated wariness. There is something new, something in the very *air* and it forms discord among us." He grimaced. "I can feel it here, on Midgard, but it is but a faint twinge. A small misgiving easily dismissed. There is too little magic and mages on this realm. But, on Alfheim the realm's inherent energy is abundant and divine, but now, it quivers."

"Do you mean it's fearful?" Bruce asked. "As if something is... frightening it?"

"I do not know," Loki admitted. "It feels unbalanced as if it is in an unnatural state of flux. We are all unsure what it means, but," Loki paused and his eyes dropped to catch Tony's. "I fear it is the start of what is to come."

*Thanos. Infinity Stones. War.*

"Shit," Tony whispered.

If possible, his response made Loki hold him even tighter.

"We'll need to talk to Rhodey," Bruce said. "And SHIELD. Everyone. If this is starting..."

"We need to be ready," Tony agreed.

Yet, for all that he said the words, he followed it by pressing his forehead against Loki's chest. He breathed in the mage and felt an irrational urge to never let Loki go.

"I'm going to go arrange things with Rhodey," Bruce said quietly. "I'll see if he can join us at SHIELD."

He didn't wait for a response, instead he walked out of the lab and left them alone. Tony knew they needed to get moving. If Thanos really was on the verge of attack, they needed to be at the forefront of the movement to stop him. They had absolutely no time to waste.

Yet... Tony didn't loosen his grip on Loki.

“Anthony?” Loki questioned gently.

Tony didn't know what to say.

*I've worked out I'm probably in love with you and the idea of something happening to you makes my heart freeze and leaves me feeling like I'm going to shake apart.*

He couldn't admit that. He wasn't *ready* to admit that. But, he equally didn't want to brush it aside.

“I know we planned for this,” he murmured. “I know we're as ready as we can be, but it doesn't make me *feel* any better.” He closed his eyes. “I spent the last four hours worried about you, Loki.”

Loki's fingers came to his hair and started carding through it. Tony shivered and leant further into the touch.

“I hate that something might happen to you,” Tony whispered.

Loki's fingers stilled and Tony felt a jolt of panic go through him before Loki started up again.

“You are not the only one to fear that,” Loki replied.

Tony let out a breath he hadn't realised he was holding. He'd known, of course, that Loki cared about him, but thinking it and hearing it were two different things.

“The time ahead will be difficult,” Loki acknowledged. “But we have been told by Hel that the Mad Titan will be defeated.”

*We just have to survive to see it.*

Tony sighed. He knew neither of them could promise that. They would do their best, and they'd be *careful*, but that was it. The rest was up to luck. Tony closed his eyes and squeezed Loki a little bit tighter. He also raised his head and caught Loki's gaze.

He was trying to hide his worry, but Tony could still see it.

It was why he pressed even closer and tilted his head. Loki immediately met him in a kiss. Their lips caressed and Tony tried to have it express all the things he couldn't put into words.

Because they had no guarantees about what their futures held and they weren't going to lie about the truth for momentary relief. If Thanos started his war, they'd have to be ready for anything. Including, losing each other.

DUN, DUN, DUN, DUNNNNNN.

Things are approaching on the horizon. What will it have in store for our boys and their allies? Only time will tell.

~~(For anyone waiting on comment replies, you have not been forgotten! I'll get there! I'm just super busy and there's almost 100 in my inbox and kjfjskfb EVENTUALLY I WILL HAVE THE TIME.)~~

Thank you for reading! ♥

# Chapter 68

## Chapter Notes

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

They didn't pull apart for a long time. Their kiss broke but Tony just leant his head on Loki's shoulder. The mage stroked his back and they just rested together in the silence of his lab.

It took FRIDAY gently prompting them to make Tony even lift his head.

"Sirs," she said, sounding apologetic. "Dr Banner is ready to depart for SHIELD. I have sent a message to Director Fury so that the Avengers may be summoned."

Tony sighed. He just wanted to stay wrapped around Loki indefinitely. He *really* didn't want to deal with Fury's typical bullshit. But there was no putting off this one. e pulled away from his lover.

"Yeah," he said. "Okay. Is Rhodey going to come?"

"He said he would rather stay with the Air Force, Boss."

Tony narrowed his eyes. "He worried about SHIELD making us look bad?"

"I believe so, Boss."

Tony nodded. "Tell him thanks, and pass on anything new we learn. Hell, send him a recording of our meeting with SHIELD." He flashed a tight smile. "I know you'll show off our best angles."

Despite trying to keep things light-hearted, Tony knew his words fell flat. He couldn't summon the enthusiasm. He already knew this was going to be a shitfight.

Loki caught his hand which pulled Tony's attention back to the mage.

"Whatever they attempt," Loki said quietly. "It matters little. You have allies far greater than them at your side." He tugged Tony close and cupped his cheek. "We shall prevail." Loki smiled. "And when the universe is safe, I shall show you its many wonders, Anthony."

Tony leant into Loki's touch and closed his eyes.

"And I'll take you to Malibu," he murmured. "Just us, no one else. Our perfect holiday."

"Yes," Loki whispered.

A moment later, his lips brushed Tony's in a sweet kiss. It flooded Tony with warmth and had emotion bubbling through his chest. It was God damn *criminal* when they were interrupted again.



“I’m sorry, Sirs,” FRIDAY said. “But Director Fury is attempting to contact you.”

Tony groaned and broke the kiss. He pressed his face to Loki’s neck. *Better get this over with.*

“Fuck, fine. Where’s Bruce? We’ll teleport there and tell them what’s about to hit.”

“We cannot guarantee it is the Mad Titan,” Loki pointed out.

Tony caught and held Loki’s gaze. He knew the truth without having to ask. No one *knew*, but everyone *suspected*.

“Do you know if he got any more stones?”

“None of my contacts believe as such.”

“Well, that’s something.” Tony rubbed a hand over his face. “Remind me to contact Vision and make sure he’s still hiding with the Tibetan Monks or wherever else he is now. He’ll need to know what’s going on.”

He still felt a pang just thinking about JARVIS even more so, knowing how little Vision wanted to do with him. He didn’t *dislike* him, but rather, he was busy finding himself and his place in the world. Tony respected that, but it didn’t lessen the hurt. So, he tried not to think about it.

“I can pass on the message, Boss,” FRIDAY offered.

He smiled faintly. His girl really did know how to read him.

“Thanks, FRIDAY.”

With nothing else left to sort, it was time to go.

“Okay, let’s get Bruce.”

Tony reluctantly pulled away from Loki and went to leave the lab, but he didn’t get far before Loki’s hand was linking with his own. He glanced at Loki to find the mage falling into step with him. He didn’t make a comment on it and Tony didn’t see a need to do it either. He wasn’t going to complain about being able to keep the mage a little closer.

They went up in the elevator together, neither saying a word. FRIDAY opened the doors on Bruce’s floor where the scientist was waiting. Bruce saw their clasped hands and smiled faintly. He also stepped forward to meet them outside the elevator.

“Ready?” Tony asked.

Bruce nodded and Loki placed a hand on his shoulder. The tower dissolved from around them only to be replaced by the bland walls of a SHIELD conference room with a full table and numerous chairs. There was no one else present and Tony raised his eyebrows.

“I thought we might make some alterations,” Loki remarked.

He let Bruce go and flicked his fingers. Three of the chairs changed shape. They weren't as dramatic as the seats Loki had given them during their first meeting with SHIELD. In fact, if Tony wasn't mistaken, they looked a lot like the seats found on Asgard in the council rooms where they'd debated their contracts.

It only further brought the point home. This was a *war* briefing. This wasn't the time for one-upmanship and blatant gloating. Loki still had them sit together at the head of the table with Bruce at their right. Loki wasn't giving SHIELD a *completely* level playing field, it wasn't in his (or Tony's) nature, but everything had been toned down.

This wasn't a pissing contest. This was what they'd all been building towards.

Loki took his seat and Tony and Bruce followed. Loki even magiced a pot of tea and three cups into existence. Loki was in the process of pouring when the door flew open with enough force to slam loudly against the wall. Bruce was the only one to flinch.

“Good afternoon, Director,” Loki said, continuing to fill Tony's cup.

“What the *fuck* do you three think you're playing at?” Fury demanded.

Loki lifted his gaze and caught Fury's eye.

“The Mad Titan is on the move. The realms sense change in the air. *War*, Director, is approaching your doorstep. I would choose your next words *wisely*.”

Fury looked livid, but unlike the explosion Tony had expected, he seemed to be reigning in his temper.

“And you expect us to play nice now?” Fury all but growled. “You've been off in your own little world and kept us out of every God damn thing. You think we'll just fall into line because you snap your magical fingers?”

“You have little choice,” Loki said simply, keeping his voice calm. “You have lied, schemed and manipulated your contract. We saw no reason to give you additional favours after such behaviour. You have treated Anthony *appallingly* and were it not important this world be heavily defended should the Mad Titan arrive here; I would gladly never speak to you or your organisation again.”

“An arrangement *we* wouldn't be fighting,” Fury replied.

“Then let's get this over with,” Tony interjected, giving a sharp smile. “We work together, we kill this asshole, we don't go anywhere near each other again. I'm happy to leave the ‘*world saving*’ to the Avengers unless they're desperate for a helping hand.” He reached for Loki's hand and relinked their fingers. “*We* plan on taking a holiday.”

“Make it an extended one,” Fury spat.

Before either Tony or Loki could respond, he looked over his shoulder and made a gesture. It was almost comical at how he was almost bowled over by Thor. Unfortunately, the fact that it meant they had to deal with *Thor* soured seeing Fury collide with the wall. Rogers came in next with a wince. Tony wondered if he hadn't been holding the Thunder God back.

The rest of the Avengers and Hill were trailing in behind them. But, most of Tony's attention was on Thor who looked ready to rip Loki limb from limb. It almost made Tony roll his eyes when the man collided with an energy shield. Did he *ever* learn?

"Loki!" he snarled.

"Thor," Loki remarked dryly. "The Mad Titan approaches. Do try and conduct yourself with a hint of tact." Loki's lips twitched. "I had heard that you received some rebuke for not doing so earlier."

Thor's face went bright red. Whether that was anger or embarrassment, Tony didn't know, but it made him fight down his own smirk.

Thor leant forward, the air crackled with magic and lightning. He glared acidly at Loki.

"You may have tricked yourself into the favour of the Queen of Hel, but I know your lies and duplicity." His gaze flicked to Tony and his disgust deepened. "I know you will sink to whatever depravities you require to seek your goal."

"Did you call their relationship a depravity near Jane?" Bruce asked, sounding remarkably calm. "Is that why she ended your relationship?"

Thor's head snapped to Bruce, he looked wounded. Tony was surprised. He hadn't heard *that* bit of news. Bruce seemed to feel his gaze as he glanced at them. He shrugged faintly.

"We exchange the occasional email. She, um, still doesn't like Loki, but it turns out, she doesn't like Thor much anymore either."

"She is wise not to think well of me," Loki acknowledged. "I have never treated her kindly."

Bruce almost smiled. "I think she'd be willing to come around. She's an intelligent woman and she understands... extenuating circumstances."

Tony's eyebrows rose. *That* was interesting, and probably also some salt in the wound for Thor. He was grinding his teeth as it was while little sparks of electricity were forming around his fists. Loki wasn't unaware of the impact it was having on the Asgardian.

"Hmm," he hummed. "Perhaps then, I shall try to make reparations with her. Apologise for my uncouth behaviour and-"

"You will do no such thing!" Thor burst out. He slammed his fist on the energy shield.

Bruce closed his eyes and started to breath deeply.

“I believe you lost any right to dictate that woman’s life when she ended her relationship with you,” Loki said sharply. “And you have *long* lost any influence on *mine*. Now, I would suggest that you stop acting like a *child* and sit beside your mortal allies. Unless you wish to unleash the Hulk on this facility due to your ineptitude and bruised ego?”

Tony fought down a shiver of pure delight. There was something incredibly satisfying and attractive in watching Loki verbally flay people. He squeezed Loki’s hand and leant in, unable to keep from rubbing their relationship a little more in Thor’s face.

His lips brushed Loki’s ear as he murmured lowly, “I fucking *love* it when you live up to being a wordsmith, babe.”

Loki smiled faintly and squeezed Tony’s hand back.

“If you’re all *done*,” Fury snapped. “We have more important things to discuss than your ongoing melodrama.”

Thor glared at Fury, but once again it was Rogers grabbing him and forcing him into a seat. He placed himself between Bruce and Thor. Next came Romanov, Barton, Hill and the Maximoff twins.

One big dagger-glaring, trigger-finger, back-stabbing family.

How the fuck they were all going to work together to save the universe, Tony had no fucking idea.

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As Tony had predicted, it derailed within fifteen minutes.

They ended up with shouting matches, accusations and Bruce having to leave the room to avoid going green. It took another twenty minutes before Tony threw his hands in the air and stalked outside so he wouldn’t throw a punch.

Bruce was back in the room by that point, but Tony wasn’t taking well to being told that he and Loki were responsible for Earth being unprepared because they were too busy fucking to give a damn about their allies.

Tony had been *so fucking close* to losing his shit.

It was why he was out pacing in the hallway.

Loki joined him less than a minute later.

“Anthony-”

“He’s a fucking asshole pushing my buttons, I know. Give me five minutes then I’ll go back in there. But, put me back in there now, and I won’t be responsible for the damage I do.”

Loki’s hands came down on his shoulders and squeezed gently.

“I did not come out here to complain or accuse you of something. I came to ask if you wished for me to throw a dagger into his good eye.”

It startled a laugh from Tony and broke through some of his anger. He smiled at Loki and was rewarded by the mage’s hands moving to his neck and gently massaging. Tony closed his eyes and groaned, immediately relaxing into his lover’s hands.

“Tension is high,” Loki said quietly. “We are all wary of what will come. Compounded by the lack of goodwill and trust, it is only natural for you to react this way.”

“I don’t see you storming out in a huff.”

“If the Director was to let Thor talk for more than a minute, you would see me doing so after pinning his hand to the table with a knife.”

Tony chuckled, but he also opened his eyes and turned to better observe Loki.

“Two dagger threats in under a minute,” he said. “You’re more on edge then you’re letting on.”

Loki inclined his head in acknowledgement. His hands also stopped moving and merely rested on Tony’s shoulders. Tony sighed.

“Okay. I can keep my head. We can-”

Loki’s head snapped to the side and Tony immediately went quiet and followed his line of sight. A figure in black slipped out from the shadows at the end of the hall and walked towards them. The silver arm gave him away instantly.

Tony tensed instinctively before forcibly relaxing. He and Barnes had made their peace. He didn’t think he’d ever be comfortable with the former assassin, but he equally doubted the man wanted to see him harmed. Hell, his conversations with Rogers implied the opposite.

Barnes, for the most part, was on *their* side.

He came to a stop a few metres in front of them. He eyed Loki for a long moment before turning to Tony.

“Heard the war’s starting,” he remarked.

“Yeah,” Tony replied. “SHIELD didn’t want you at the debriefing?”

Barnes smiled faintly. “They don’t trust me.”

“That makes three of us.”

Barnes’ smile spread a little wider. “They’re not keen on Steve either. Always knew the punk couldn’t do shit as a spy.”

Tony winced. “They suspect he’s helping us?”

Barnes shrugged. "They know he isn't happy. Same brush, isn't it?"

"And you are looking out for his interests?" Loki questioned, watching Barnes sharply. "Protecting him."

Barnes caught Loki's gaze and held it. A whole silent conversation seemed to occur.

"I watch his back," Barnes eventually said. "I'm with him 'till the end of the line. If it's your side he takes, I'm with him every step of the way."

"And you approve of our side?" Loki asked.

"A hell of a lot of more than SHIELD's."

"Hmm," Loki hummed.

He then flicked his hand and a piece of parchment appeared, it then zipped through the air to stop in front of Barnes. He took it, looked at it and smiled. He nodded at Loki once more before turning on his heel and leaving.

Tony waited until he was out of sight before asking, "And what the fuck was that?"

"We agreed to assist him and Rogers, did we not?"

"Well, *yeah-*"

"And as we are soon to begin battle, I believe it a good time to consolidate all the allies we possess."

"That's *fine*, but what did you give him?"

Loki opened his mouth to reply, but before he could the door was opening and Bruce was sticking his head out. He looked a little strained and while he wasn't quite green, there was enough tension to be concerned.

"You guys able to come back in now?"

Tony shot Loki one more look, promising that their discussion was *not* over before turning back to Bruce. He pulled away from Loki and clapped his friend on the arm. He squeezed gently.

"Yeah, Bruce. Sorry you had to play lionkeeper. Ringmasters are on their way."

It had the intended effect of making Bruce roll his eyes, yet despite the brief balm of humour, the tension remained thick as the three of them walked back into the room.

Tony just hoped they could get everyone to shut up and work together soon. Because if they couldn't even organise a *war briefing* then this war was going to be a *mess*.

---

Luckily, after another five minutes, everyone stopped the pissing contest and complaints and finally got down to business.

Fury still gave the occasional snipe about never being introduced to Earth's off-world allies. Thor still refused to do more than glare in their general direction. Romanov wouldn't even look at them. Rogers was often sidelined and talked over by Fury. Barton and the Maximoff's were mostly silent.

It ended up with Hill being the most diplomatic and useful. Tony was fairly sure they could have kicked everyone else out and been done quicker and with more productivity. The twitch to Hill's eye implied she probably felt the same.

But, despite the setbacks, brimming anger and general hostility, they *were* able to explain what Loki had learnt and what they feared was coming. SHIELD was going to muster their agents and the Avengers should an attack begin. Rhodey would coordinate with the Air Force and other military groups from War Machine.

Thor would go to Asgard and confer with Odin as to what he and his realm were up to. Loki would keep an eye on the other realms and relay his findings to SHIELD. They all acknowledged and agreed that their communications would be verbal. They couldn't afford any delays.

They were as ready as they'd ever be and as much as it had to *kill* Fury, he had no power when it came to the other realms. Everything hinged on Loki and what information he could gain and pass on. He had access to more and was quicker than Odin.

*Loki* was the focus point, the pivotal player and with him sitting in his chair concisely explaining, Tony could see how much of a *King* he could be. It was obvious in every well-chosen word and in his regal posture. Tony didn't know how *anyone* would choose Thor as a ruler over him, especially when Odin was at least *mildly* intelligent.

*But personal biases are a bitch. And Loki was never going to win that battle. He was so much smarter, powerful and better than the actual son and that had to sting Odin. Too bad for him.*

When the meeting finally finished, it was Loki who declared it. He stood up and smoothed out his jacket.

"Then we have an understanding," he said.

His gaze was on Hill not on Fury. She glanced at Fury, but the Director just clenched his jaw. It was as good as acceptance, even if he wasn't happy about it. She gave a barely perceptible incline of her head. Tony stood and Bruce did the same.

No one but him and Bruce looked happy. On his part, Tony was just glad to be *getting the hell out of SHIELD*.

"Now," Loki said, "we will be taking our leave."

Tony glanced at Loki, feeling something rush over his skin at the man's words. It *felt* like magic but Loki gave no indication he was about to perform a spell and teleportation felt *different* than what had just happened. This was there and gone and normally his magic didn't appear without anything to show for it.

Loki also rarely announced his intent to leave without departing immediately after. He seemed to be *waiting* for something. It was only because Tony was watching him that Tony saw the hint of a smirk appear on his face.

"All of us," Loki said.

Tony felt comprehension dawn, but before he could react, Loki's magic was teleporting them away to the tower. But it wasn't just him and Bruce. Loki had also grabbed Rogers and Barnes.

They arrived in the penthouse without any fanfare, but Tony immediately whirled on Loki. He and Barnes were the only ones relaxed about the situation. Hell, Barnes even had a *bag* with him.

"Is that what was on that paper? An *invite*?"

"And instructions," Loki agreed. "Things he could collect from SHIELD while its Director was otherwise engaged."

"You stole from them?" Rogers asked, the question directed at Barnes.

The man shrugged. "Nothing they won't miss. Only fair anyway, they've been keeping us out of the loop for a while. I just put us back *in*."

"While getting you out," Bruce murmured, glancing between everyone but lingering on Loki. "They're under Hel's ward now."

"Yes."

*And in my tower.* Tony thought but didn't say. He'd known this was a potential outcome. Hell, he'd all but agreed to it when he'd offered Rogers the olive branch. It was just *sudden*. He didn't blame Loki, it was easier to grab them now, especially with Thanos on the horizon. It would piss off Fury too. So, Tony could see how it was a good idea. He still felt a bit uncomfortable with Rogers and Barnes under his roof. He probably always would. But it made *sense*.

He tried to shake off his discomfort with a smile and a clap of his hands.

"Right then, guess we better get a floor cleared for you. At least until we make sure SHIELD won't try and pull some bullshit about Barnes."

"Here," Barnes said, stepping forward and unzipping the bag to reveal a thick folder full of paper. "Info SHIELD's been keeping out of digital channels."



Loki took it and flipped it open. Tony leaned in to take a look. The first page listed the outline of operations to sneak into the Tower. Tony almost rolled his eyes. Hel's ward had well and truly foiled any attempts, but it certainly helped to get a leg up on Fury's next plans.

"I got what I could," Barnes continued. "Limited time to sneak in and the box around us has been getting smaller every day. Romanov's been spying too."

"She has?" Rogers questioned, surprised.

Barnes looked at Rogers with fond exasperation. "Yeah, punk. Don't think they expected us to get into Stark's Tower, but they definitely knew you weren't playing ball."

Rogers immediately looked frustrated and disappointed. He turned to Tony.

"I'm sorry. I really wanted to be more help."

Tony shrugged. It wasn't ideal and he would have liked having a spy inside the organisation for longer, but it was what it was. He wasn't about to go back on his promise for safe haven just because their time had run out quicker than he wanted.

"It's fine. You'll be able to help us now."

Rogers nodded. "I can make a statement. I'll let everyone know I'm on your side over SHIELD's."

*How the tables have turned.*

"We'll see what happens," Tony said, noncommittally. "Coming up to Thanos, we don't need a divide down the centre." Tony's gaze flicked to Barnes. "But we *will* need to get you out in the public more."

Tony almost ran a hand through his hair. He'd navigated one PR campaign with Loki, it looked like he'd just signed up for a new one with Barnes.

"I think that can wait a day," Bruce said quietly. "I think things have been stressful enough. I'll show them to a spare floor. If FRIDAY can direct me?"

"I would be happy to, Dr Banner," she replied promptly.

Tony felt relieved it was one less thing he had to do.

"Thanks, Bruce."

He nodded and flashed Tony a smile before walking towards the other men.

"Thanks, Tony," Rogers said, catching and holding Tony's gaze. There was a wealth of gratitude in it. "I can't ever repay you for what you've done. Or fix the damage *I* did. But I'll do everything I can to try."

Tony didn't know what to say to that, so he merely nodded. Rogers didn't say anything more. He turned to follow Bruce. Barnes gave him a solemn nod before doing the same.

It was only when they were all in the elevator that Loki said, "I hope you are not displeased with me."

Tony turned to the mage to find Loki looking pensive.

"You had already given permission for them to reside here should the occasion call for it," Loki continued. "I did not wish to distract you from the conversation with the Director."

Tony sighed and rubbed a hand over his face.

"It's alright," Tony said. "It makes sense. I know you would have warned me if we had the time. Bruce interrupted us in the hall. I get it."

Loki stepped closer and cupped his chin, tilting up Tony's face. He looked apologetic.

"I am still sorry, Anthony."

Tony sighed again, but this time, it took his lingering agitation with it.

"I know, and thanks, but I'm not mad at you." Tony caught Loki's wrist and held onto it. "Everything's shit right now. We're going to have to make snap decisions without conferring with each other. I know you wouldn't do anything to intentionally harm or anger me. You didn't do anything I hadn't already agreed to. I'll get used to the idea of them in the tower. I know it's not permanent." He smiled faintly. "And it's nice to picture how angry Fury is."

Loki finally smiled back. The pages in his hand disappeared and he bent down. Tony met him halfway, welcoming the kiss. He closed his eyes and felt the last of his tension draining out of him.

When the kiss broke, Loki pressed his forehead to Tony's.

"I am still sorry," Loki murmured. "I did not like seeing you unsettled by my actions."

"Stop apologising," Tony said. "I'm fine. Really."

Loki pulled back just enough to catch his gaze and search his face. Tony smiled, and unlike before, it was completely genuine. When Loki realised, he let out a breath of relief and cupped Tony's cheeks to kiss him again. Tony clasped Loki's wrists and leant into his touch.

Their kiss remained chaste and Tony was sure it would have continued for a few minutes more if Tony hadn't felt Loki's magic spasm. Tony gasped and Loki flinched. Tony's eyes snapped open. He'd never felt *anything* like that. It was as if Loki's seidr was the needle of a seismometer that had just seen the mother of all earthquakes. Tony swore the fucking *air* was shivering in the aftermath.

"What the *fuck*?" Tony gasped.

Loki was pale and his eyes were wide. “I don’t... I’ve *never*...”

The air behind Tony seemed to shudder, and Tony spun around, Loki grabbed his shoulders and kept him close. Tony got the impression that Loki was preparing for them to flee. But a small section of the penthouse turned black and blue before Hel stepped out.

She looked utterly regal. Her dress flowed like a Victorian gown and a crown of black thorns decorated her head. She was every inch the *Queen* of Helheim and Tony felt the urge to bow.

But was her presence and the way she was dressed a good thing or a bad one?

“Queen Hel,” Loki murmured. “To what do we owe the honour of your visit?” Loki sounded hesitant. “Does the Mad Titan approach?”

A small smirk touched Hel’s lips. She looked incredibly content.

“Our threat has been overcome.” Her smile widened. “Sooner than anticipated.”

Tony blinked. “Wait, *what?*”

Did she mean after everything they’d fucking been through and all the bullshit with SHIELD, Thanos was already *dead* before they’d even fought him? Tony shook his head, unable to believe it.

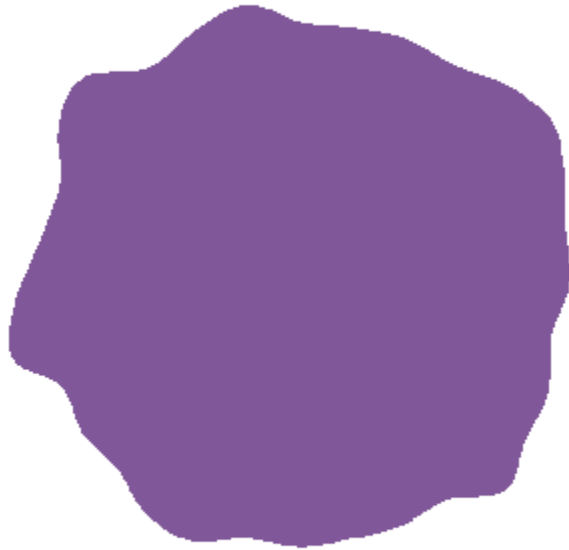
*You have got to be **fucking** kidding me.*

## Chapter End Notes

For all you people gearing up for a big battle with angst, drama, death and tension...



Buuuuuuut I've always preferred (and planned) for the sudden:



Surprise? XD

# Chapter 69

## Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! Sorry we missed a month for an update. Life has been so bloody hectic and yesterday/today was the first chance I'd had to sit down and write this.

Hopefully, you all enjoy it! ~~Well, actually, I know I won't be able to please everyone with this outcome but, eh.~~ What can you do? I went through a few debates with this chapter and asked a wide variety of sources [Thank you **Rabentochter**, **dayzor** & **NamelesslyNightlock**] (+ took comments into consideration) regarding what happens. Luckily, it fit in a lot with my original notes.

But, enough ~cryptic remarks. Here is the chapter. Enjoy!

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

The silence was loud. A pin could have been dropped, but even if it had, Tony doubted he or Loki would have noticed or looked away from Hel.

She stepped towards them, all but gliding across the floor.

“The Mad Titan has been removed,” Hel said, answering Tony’s earlier question.

She sounded satisfied and a pleased smile curled her lips. Tony still felt wrongfooted.

“Do you mean he’s *dead*?” Tony demanded, seeking clarification.

She inclined her head.

“How the hell does he just *die*?” Tony asked. “I thought he was so fucking powerful we needed the *realms* to do something about him?”

“Tony,” Loki hissed, there was a warning in his tone.

Tony shot Loki a look, not caring about the sharpness of his tone. He felt frustrated and confused and he wanted fucking *answers*.

He wanted to know what Hel had done to swipe Thanos out of the running and *why* she couldn’t have done it a good few fucking months earlier. After all, *she* wasn’t the one who had to handle the fucking aftermath, now was she?

Hel’s gaze flicked to him and Tony stiffened. There’s was something in her eyes that seemed to see right through him. He got the *very* unnerving feeling that all his less than flattering thoughts had been heard by her.

“It was not *I*, Anthony Stark,” she remarked while stepping towards him.

The lights in the penthouse dimmed and Tony swallowed. Feeling more intimidated than he wanted to admit. Her eyes were dark and her face looked far too much like a skull. She seemed to loom over him as she stopped before them.

“The Norns whispered of ruin and death. The span of time fractured. Billions of lives tortured, tormented, *destroyed*.”

Hel raised her hand and the flesh was gone. White bone cupped the air and the shadows seemed to attack the light, drawing the penthouse into darkness. Tony grabbed for Loki, clutching him in an instinctive need to keep him nearby. Loki dragged him close until they were pressed together.

Neither of them looked away from her hand.

Tony had never seen Yggdrasil, but he didn’t need to. The word was breathed in his mind. He *knew* what he was looking at. He could see the worlds hanging from the tree. He could see a galaxy of planets and stars and everywhere he looked, the universe was either rotting or exploding into stardust.

And then suddenly, everything reversed as if someone had hit rewind. The universe disappeared and, in its place, there was a woman, knives in hand, standing behind a hulking figure. There was so much anger and hate rolling off her. From the shadows behind her shoulder, Tony saw a flicker of a skeleton and a heard a whisper without words pressed right at her ear.

It happened in a moment. A knife was raised and with a slice that was too clean, too *lethal* for a blade that size, the head was entirely cleaved off to land on the ground and roll.

Blue lips curled into a vicious, *peaceful* smile – and then, as if something had been released, the woman was surrounded and being attacked. She didn’t seem to care. She *laughed* and Hel abruptly shut her hand.

Everything disappeared and Tony blinked as he came back to the suddenly bright room. Tony rubbed his eyes against the light.

“His daughter,” Loki whispered.

Tony’s head snapped to Loki. “Daughter? Wait. The one you mentioned? The-”

“No,” Loki said, shaking his head. “This is the other. I had not thought she would betray him, but then... I cannot imagine someone more ill-treated than a child of Thanos.”

Knowing even a *fraction* of what Tony did about Loki’s dealings with Thanos, he didn’t even want to *think* about what this woman had gone through.

Taking Loki’s hand, Tony squeezed it gently. Loki’s gaze had been turned inwards, lost in memories Tony was certain couldn’t be pleasant. When he blinked back, Tony waited until Loki’s gaze fully focused on him to ask with concern, “Lokes?”

Loki raised his hand and cupped Tony's cheek. His thumb stroked the edge of Tony's goatee.

"I had sought my vengeance, but were any other to remove his head, I believe she out of all deserved to." He smiled faintly. "And unlike she, I have much to live for."

Tony's chest warmed – and yet, he equally felt conflicted. Because, he remembered the army that rushed to her. Tony shifted enough to look at Hel. She was no longer skeletal, but her crown remained.

"She died?"

Hel's placid smile remained, but she gave no comment. Tony didn't know if that meant a yes or a no, but he found, he wasn't willing to press it. Instead, he turned back to Loki. There was a weight off his shoulders, Tony could see it. There was a light in his eyes that hadn't been present. Even in their softer moments, the fear of what would come had always lingered - now, it was wiped clean.

Thanos was gone.

Slowly, Tony started to smile. Because, it would be a fucking mess to untangle it with SHIELD, the politicians and the Nine Realms. But, at the end of the day, Tony wasn't sure he *cared*. So what if the world yelled at them and didn't understand how lucky they were? Who gave a *shit*?

*He* knew they were all lucky to be alive – and, more importantly, with Thanos out of the way, there was only *one* thing he could think of.

"Hey, Lokes. I think you owe me a vacation."

Loki laughed. His eyes flared with delight and his dimples showed. Tony didn't care that the Queen of Helheim (and possibly the instigator and magical powerhouse puppetmaster responsible for Thanos' death) was watching. All he cared about was leaning in and kissing the happiness from Loki's smile.

For the first time since this all began, everything really *could* wait. They were finally able to do what they wanted without guilt or fear.

And that called for a kiss. And maybe, a bottle of champagne.

---

Tony did end up ordering numerous bottles of champagne.

Hel couldn't stay, which was a pity. She *did* however accept the onyx necklace that he'd had FRIDAY order on his and Loki's behalf as a thank you. She even promised to deliver the news of Thanos' defeat to the Nine Realms, including Midgard.

Tony was sure he saw a twinkle in her dark eyes when she left. Tony would pay good money to see the reaction of the world's leaders when she appeared in their offices. Maybe, they wouldn't even cause a fuss about not needing to prepare for war. He could hope.



Explaining the situation to Rogers, Barnes and Bruce was a little more complicated. Luckily, FRIDAY had the recordings from Hel's visit, and apparently, watching her little display worked just as well through the cameras. Tony felt just as sucked in as the first time. He swore he could hear Thanos' head hit the ground with a sickening thud.

After that, it was a sea of champagne. Granted, he was the only one who could really get *drunk*. And that was unfair. He wheedled and pouted at Loki until he teleported in Rhodey, and after that, well, it was a bit of a blur.

At least until he was stumbling into the bedroom. He was clinging to Loki who was chuckling softly. He wasn't *drunk*. More like tipsy. Maybe a bit more than tipsy. But fuck it, he'd *earned* it.

Tony wrapped his arms around Loki's neck and placed a slightly sloppy kiss to the mage's chin.

"Loki. *Lokes*. Fucking amazing. You know that? You are. We are. *Everything* is."

Loki chuckled. "Yes, it is, Anthony."

He slid his hands over Anthony's sides before up to cup his cheeks. Tony closed his eyes and sighed as Loki kissed him gently. The taste of champagne was sweet on his tongue. When they broke apart, Tony didn't open his eyes.

"We don't have to listen to any of them anymore," Tony said quietly, feeling a zing of pleasure at the prospect.

"No," Loki said, stroking his cheeks. "We may do what we wish without care for their approval or alliance."

"Mm," Tony hummed. "We need to celebrate this."

Loki huffed a laugh. "I thought that was the reason for your crate of champagne?"

"Part of it." Tony pressed in closer and slid his hand under Loki's shirt. He lowered his head to run his lips over Loki's neck. "Now, I want a celebration with *you*."

Loki groaned softly and tilted into his touch. Tony nibbled at Loki's neck before sucking gently on the skin.

"Ah," Loki breathed. "Anthony."

Loki's hand ran up his back only for his fingers to scratch through Tony's hair. But, instead of pushing him forward, he gently tried to ease him away. Tony frowned, but moved with the pressure. He looked up at Loki with confusion. Loki was smiling.

"I think the celebration should wait a few days. When we are alone and can indulge as much as we wish without interruptions."

It took Tony a moment to realise.

*Oh*, he thought, feeling an excited thrill. Because, Loki wasn't talking about their usual acts. He was talking about *the* act, the one they'd been waiting to do.

Tony smiled and ducked in to kiss Loki. It was a softer embrace and Tony relaxed completely against his lover. His arms went around Loki's waist and he held him close.

Their vacation couldn't come soon enough.

But, in the meantime.

"We can still have a *mini* celebration, right?"

Loki's smirk was devious and Tony allowed the mage to lead him to the bed and push him down on the mattress. There really was nothing like the avoidance of a war to make you feel energised and alive.

---

Tony woke up curled around Loki. He sighed happily, just luxuriating in the feel of his lover and the knowledge that they didn't have to do *anything*. He felt fingers tracing patterns on his back through his shirt and smiled.

"You know," he said, his voice a little rough, "I don't feel hungover *at all*."

"Oh? Is that so?" Loki asked, sounding far too innocent.

"Mm," Tony hummed. "Should I be thanking a god at this point?"

Loki chuckled. "I would be surprised if you did." A kiss was brushed to the top of his head. "You do not believe in gods."

"Mm, true," Tony agreed, trying to snuggle even closer. "So, how about I thank my amazing, magical boyfriend instead?"

Loki laughed again. "You are welcome, Anthony."

Tony smiled, feeling completely content and happy where he was. Loki's arms were around him, there was barely any part of them that wasn't touching. They were safe in the tower. All his precious people were under Hel's ward. Not even the knowledge that Barnes and Rogers were nearby could dampen his good mood.

In fact, the only thing that could improve it was coffee.

But that would involve moving... unless...

"Can you teleport me some coffee?" Tony asked.

The words were barely out of his mouth before Tony could smell the caffeine in the air. He opened his eyes and lifted his head. A cup hovered in front of him. Unwrapping one arm, Tony gleefully took it. He had to then sit up to take a sip, but it was well worth it. The mug was half empty by the time he pulled his lips away and focused on Loki.

The mage was still lying relaxed against the pillows and watching him fondly. Tony couldn't resist placing one hand on Loki's arm, just so he could touch him.

"Did you have one of these just waiting?"

"I requested FRIDAY prepare the beverage when I noticed you beginning to wake," Loki acknowledged.

Finishing the last of his coffee, Tony leant over Loki to put it on the bedside table before retaking his earlier position curled around his lover. He placed his ear to Loki's chest, enjoying the soothing rhythm of Loki's heartbeat. Loki's fingers came to run through his hair.

"I have rarely seen you so content to laze in bed," Loki remarked.

"Nowhere to be. No one to appease," Tony replied. "Just you and me."

"And the other guests in your tower," Loki pointed out with amusement.

"They're adults, they can handle themselves," Tony dismissed.

Loki laughed softly. He scratched Tony's scalp and Tony arched into the touch.

"While I would enjoy spending a long morning in bed with you, Anthony," Loki said. "We are not yet on 'vacation'."

Tony groaned and buried his face completely in Loki's chest.

"*Loki*," he whined. "Bad guy is *dead*. Why can't we tell everyone to fuck off?"

"We can and we *will*," Loki insisted. "But first, I would like to discern whom Hel has told and their reactions. I also believe your allies will have questions. A single video and champagne will not be enough to quell their concerns and curiosity. Nor should it quell ours."

Tony groaned again, but as much as he hated it, Loki was right. He allowed himself a few more moments cuddled with Loki before he pushed off the bed. He glared down at his lover for good measure.

"I better get a long, *long* uninterrupted holiday with you after this."

Loki huffed a small laugh. He cupped Tony's face and pulled him down into a chaste but affectionate kiss.

"I will not complain nor deny you that, Anthony," Loki said gently. "Rather, I wish to speedily remove these final hurdles so that I might have you all to myself."

Tony shivered, both from the desire that last night had barely sated, but also from the yearning to finally get a chance to be with Loki without prying eyes or dangerous deadlines.

"Think we can get Hel to ward my Malibu mansion too?" Tony murmured.

Loki quirked a smile. “What makes you believe she has not already done so?”

Tony’s eyes had drifted closed but he snapped them open at that. “Wait. *What?*”

“Do not underestimate the Queen of Hel, Anthony,” Loki said, his eyes twinkling.

It abruptly reminded Tony of the otherworldly being who’d been in his tower last night, radiating power and revealing the way she’d obliterated the galaxy’s biggest threat like he was an irritating fly. She hadn’t *officially* done anything, but at the same time, she’d nudged someone at the right moment and maybe boosted the woman’s power just a tad.

She’d *influenced* things – and if that was what she could do when she wasn’t even *trying*, then Tony was *really fucking glad* that she liked them.

“You know,” Tony said. “I’m getting that.” He cleared his throat. “Do you think that onyx necklace was enough? Should I have maybe tried for something a bit bigger to show our gratitude?”

Loki shook his head.

“No, the choice was ample. And I am glad you did not go with your original suggestion of diamonds.”

“Yeah, onyx did seem a bit more fitting.”

“Indeed.”

Sighing, Tony knew they couldn’t put it off any longer. He ducked down for one more, quick kiss before pushing out of bed to stand beside it. He stretched only to startle when Loki cupped his hips and pressed a kiss to the back of his neck. Tony twisted just enough to see Loki kneeling behind him.

*You’re affectionate today.* It was on the tip of his tongue, but Tony held it back. They’d made great leaps and bounds in their relationship and the last thing he wanted to do was make Loki feel like he was complaining or criticising Loki’s usual amount of affection.

So, instead, he merely smiled. Loki kissed his shoulder before letting him go and climbing off the bed as well.

They’d both ended up in sleep pants and tops last night, but instead of getting changed, they made their way out of the bedroom. There were a number of empty champagne bottles and flutes littering the bar and coffee table. Rhodey was sitting at the bar with his forehead resting against his palm, a coffee was under his face but he made no move to drink it.

“Oh, honeybear,” Tony said softly.

Rhodey grunted, but otherwise didn’t respond. Tony sniggered while Loki merely walked across the room. He placed his hand gently on the back of Rhodey’s head. Tony saw a hint of green and after a few seconds, Loki removed his hand and Rhodey raised his head. He looked at Loki with relief and gratitude.

“If I didn’t already like you, that would be enough to seal our friendship.”

Loki snorted before stepping into the kitchen to turn on the kettle and make tea. Tony sat down beside Rhodey and lightly knocked their shoulders.

“He’s pretty amazing, isn’t he?”

“I knew that before he could dispense hangover cures, but yes.” Rhodey looked Tony up and down only to smile. He knocked Tony’s shoulder in return. “How about you? You’re looking happy.”

“That would be because I am,” Tony answered.

Rhodey’s smile widened. “Good. I don’t hear you say that enough.”

“Waking up in my boyfriend’s arms *and* knowing the war’s over? Definite recipe for happiness.”

“You better keep waking up in his arms then,” Rhodey said, picking up his coffee and taking a sip. “Happiness looks good on you.” His gaze flicked to Loki. “Both of you.”

“I assure you,” Loki said, putting another coffee down in front of Tony before taking a seat beside him. “I have no plans on letting Anthony go.”

He followed it by snaking his arm around Tony’s waist. Tony relaxed into his hold. His heart was racing a little, but it was the good kind. It was the same kind that let him know, deep down, that what he felt was *love*. And even though it was still a little bit terrifying to even think about admitting that, the idea that Loki saw them as *long term* helped a lot.

So did the knowledge that he didn’t have to fear one of them going up against Thanos and *dying*.

They had time and Tony wasn’t going to waste any more of it.

“So,” Tony said, “Loki and I are thinking about having a vacation. You know, after we make sure Hel passed on the messages and you and Bruce have everything under control.”

“I like that you think *you* could have better control over things than *me*.”

Tony rolled his eyes and shoved his friend. Rhodey grinned and took another drink of coffee. Yet, when he put the mug down, his expression had sobered.

“Things are going to be difficult; I’m not going to deny that. We put a lot of time and effort into organising the world for a war. The fact it didn’t happen could be seen as wasted effort and resources.” Rhodey rubbed his face. “And even though we all believe the video you showed us, everyone else might not be so accepting.”

“Actually, Colonel Rhodes,” FRIDAY announced into the quiet. “I have not received any messages of complaint. There have been some messages but they all seem to be congratulatory as to Thanos’ defeat.” She paused for a moment, seeming to weigh up her

words. “If I may presume to guess, Boss, I believe they are more fearful of Hel than the threat outlined about the Mad Titan.”

Tony blinked before suddenly, he was laughing. He leant over the bar and shook with the force of his humour. Rhodey was chuckling more quietly under his breath. Loki was rubbing his back, but he was *sure* the mage would be smirking.

“So,” he managed to gasp out, “instead of her putting the fear of God into them, she put the fear of *Hel*.”

Tony didn’t know why it was so funny. Maybe, because it was so fucking ironic and full of *bullshit*. Oh, he liked the image of the politicians and *Fury* cowering at being presented with Hel. But it also annoyed him that after all they’d done, it took *her* to make them stop treating him and Loki like either alarmists or annoyances.

Well, whatever got the job done and meant less work for them. But, it was still bitterly irritating.

“I will advise, Boss,” FRIDAY added once he’d got his reactions under control. “Director Fury will not take the removal of Captain Rogers and Sergeant Barnes as quietly.”

Tony sobered. “Yeah, I wonder why they haven’t blown up about that yet.”

“Perhaps they believe Rogers and Barnes will return, or that they had only come solely due to the war effort,” Loki theorised.

Tony snorted. “If Fury thinks *that* then my already serious doubts to his intelligence won’t be doubts anymore.”

“I would think they plan to avoid you and go straight to them,” Rhodey said. “They know you can’t be bluffed or sweet talked. But, Rogers and Barnes? They probably plan to use you against them.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “They might have been able to play Rogers once, but Barnes isn’t so stupid. They made a bad call leaving him to his own devices.”

“Perhaps we should stop theorising over SHIELD and their plans and instead, speak to our guests?” Loki suggested.

Tony screwed up his face. He didn’t exactly relish his good morning being ruined by two super soldiers he still didn’t fully trust, but... the call of vacation was a siren song. If they cleared this mess up, they could be free to do their own thing.

“Yeah, okay,” he agreed. “FRIDAY, are they awake?”

“Yes, Boss. They have been for the past hour. They are on the floor given to them.”

“What are they doing?” Tony asked, feeling curious.

“They are sitting together and conversing.” FRIDAY hesitated before admitting, “I believe they have not felt safe to relax in some time.”

Tony felt a small twinge at hearing that. His gaze drifted to Loki and he saw the mage had the same understanding. Asgard was a lot different to a SHIELD base, yet, at the same time, there were enough parallels. Tony had sure as hell enjoyed being back in his tower afterwards.

“Okay, send them a message. See if they want to come up for breakfast and a chat. Bruce too. Make sure they know it’s not mandatory. Just a run down and game plan moving forward.”

“Yes, Boss.”

With that done, Tony took another sip of coffee. He also shifted enough to let his head rest on Loki’s shoulder. He closed his eyes and felt Loki’s hand soothing run over his waist. Tony knew he could get used to mornings like this. Whether Rhodey or anyone else was here or not. Just being able to sit and drink coffee, to have a day to do what they wanted. Magic for Loki, inventing for him. The occasion SI project or heroic duty if and when it cropped up.

He could get used to spending his *life* with Loki.

Smiling to himself, Tony knew that Rhodey had hit the nail on the head. For the first time in a long time, he was *happy* – and he knew, from now on, things would only be getting better.

## Chapter End Notes

Yesss. There is much fluuuuuff in this chapter. Boys being happy and domestic without the weight of the world on their shoulders. Isn't that a lovely thing to see and read?

# Chapter 70

## Chapter Notes

A HUUUUUUUUUUGE amount of thanks to **tarot\_card** for reading over this chapter for me and giving thoughts on it. I had procrastinated starting this way too long. But I was determined and I got it done with a few days to spare for my monthly update, phew!

I hope you all like (and it answers some of your questions!)

Tony was able to enjoy leaning against Loki for a few minutes. Rhodey and Loki, by silent agreement, were only talking about how the hangover cure worked. Tony listened with half an ear as he sipped his coffee and enjoyed the calm.

When the elevator pinged, Tony sighed and straightened, but Loki didn't let him go far. His arm came around Tony's shoulders, keeping him close.

Rogers, Barnes and Bruce walked out as a group. Tony tried not to feel disconcerted by seeing them together. He knew it was probably just coincidence since they were all told at the same time, but it still rankled. He knew Bruce was on his side, but he didn't want the people close to him getting *too* comfortable with people who had turned their backs on him.

It didn't matter that Rogers was making amends and Barnes had, really, had nothing to do with it. The discomfort and distrust would linger for a long time. Possibly forever.

Regardless, Tony smiled brightly, knowing that at least to Rogers, it would look genuine.

"Welcome to the 'Q&A Breakfast'. I hope no one is hungover."

Rogers frowned. "Q and A?"

"Yup," Tony popped the 'p'. "This is to get all the questions asked and answers wrapped up so that Loki and I can get our *long* overdue vacation."

Barnes didn't hesitate.

"With Thanos dead, what are you going to do with us?"

"Bucky," Rogers murmured, touching the man's arm.

Barnes didn't look away from Tony.

"We were useful. Now we're not. Do you want us out of here?"



Tony's eyebrows rose. He hadn't expected the question to be dropped so suddenly, but Tony supposed he could appreciate a cut to the chase approach.

"I wonder," Loki mused, "if *that* is why SHIELD has made no attempt to approach anyone." Tony glanced at Loki and the mage caught his gaze. "Perhaps they believe the alliance a last resort for everyone and they are merely waiting to collect the soldiers now that their new sanctuary has been revoked."

Tony felt a twinge of annoyance at Fury and SHIELD. It was all too easy to see and it left a sour taste on his tongue.

"Trust Fury to think my word is as good as his," Tony muttered.

He turned back to the soldiers. Rogers was noticeably worried but resolved. Barnes was watching them with calculation. Tony could tell that if he kicked them out, they'd go without a fuss. They'd endeavour to make it on their own and maybe they'd manage it. Or maybe SHIELD would facilitate a confrontation that put Barnes in the bad books of the public and forced them to seek help from someone.

Their only options would be him or right back into SHIELD's hands once more.

If Tony hadn't already given his word and made his decision, he'd would have reconsidered, if only to spite Fury.

"I'm not kicking you out," Tony said. "Am I completely comfortable having you both here? Frankly, no. But I made a deal and just because Thanos is gone it doesn't mean I'll retract it. Odds are we'll have to fight together at some point either to stop some new idiot from trying to destroy something or to defend the planet. And to do that, we want the media to like all of us."

"You mean get them to like *me*," Barnes remarked.

Tony snorted. "Well, sure. But the same could be said for Loki, even The Hulk." He flashed Bruce a smile. "Sorry, Brucey."

Bruce shrugged. He was in the kitchen making a tea.

"I hope not to be involved beyond the minimum, so my image doesn't matter overly. But, I'm not unaware of his reputation, Tony."

"Totally not your fault though. Totally *fixable* too."

Bruce almost smiled. "We'll see."

"If Anthony can make his world come to accept *me*," Loki said. "I do believe anyone has a chance."

"And at the end of the day, we've all had a bad rep at some point." Tony scrunched up his nose. "Well, apart from Rhodey. He can't do anything wrong."

Rhodey barked a laugh. “Yeah, sure, you keep thinking that Tony.”

“You’re perfect, platypus. Live with it.”

Rhodey shook his head but he was smiling. Bruce also came to sit beside him with his cup of tea. Rogers and Barnes were still standing to the side, obviously unsure what to do. Tony waved in the direction of the kitchen.

“Make a coffee or something. I’m not going to stop you.”

Rogers stepped into the kitchen only to pause. “I, um, could cook something. If anyone’s hungry?”

Tony’s eyebrows rose. He’d only experienced it a few times, but Rogers was *good* in the kitchen. Tony could also see it for the olive branch it was. Additionally, thanks to Loki practically living in the penthouse, the fridge was actually stocked with enough supplies that a big breakfast *could* be made.

“Sure, why not,” Tony said. “Have at it. Don’t skimp on the cheese in the omelette.”

Rogers actually smiled and Barnes tentatively took a seat down from Bruce. He kept a spot between them, but it was obvious he didn’t fear the Hulk, merely his own welcome. In response, Bruce turned to him and enquired about whether he would like a cup of tea. Barnes was a little stilted, but he responded readily enough.

Tony just leant a little further against Loki and glanced up at the mage. Loki was watching Rogers move around the kitchen critically. Tony didn’t know if that was residual wariness or because he doubted the man could cook to Loki’s satisfaction. Tony took another sip of coffee and decided to wait and see.

But Tony already had a feeling it would be the latter – and that it wouldn’t take very long before Loki was in the kitchen, shoving Rogers aside because he wasn’t cutting things *‘perfectly’*.

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Tony’s prediction proved correct and Loki ended up sharing breakfast cooking duties. It was actually unsettling to watch the two of them debate different spices and preferred dishes. Loki was still noticeably standoffish (and the lack of seidr being used or brushing Tony was a real indication of how high his guard was up), but they were talking politely and seeming to, if not get along, then at least work well together.

Rhodey was also watching it like a bizarre science experiment. Bruce and Barnes had moved from teas to other topics. Most of Barnes memories had returned and Bruce was clearly interested in the process and if he might be able to assist any further.

When the food was finally complete, Rogers placed it all on the counter while Loki organised refills of Tony and Rhodey’s coffee. Bruce grabbed fresh tea for himself and Barnes. Rogers poured himself a juice and took a seat beside Barnes. Tony noticed Barnes had closed the

space between him and Bruce. When everyone was settled, they started loading their plates and began to tuck in.

The food was *damn* good and Tony could admit, Loki and Rogers complemented each other *really* well when they cooked.

A very small part of him almost felt jealous. But he'd never been a great cook and Loki always seemed to enjoy cooking *for* him. So, he tried not to take it to heart. But he made a mental note that no matter how good the food was, he wasn't going to encourage his boyfriend to share the kitchen with Rogers again.

For a few minutes there was nothing but the sound of cutlery on plates and compliments being given to Loki and Rogers. But, all too soon, as the plates started to empty, the reason for everyone's presence had to be broached.

"So, we're really certain everything's done and dusted?" Rhodey questioned. "I mean, I buy that video. I've met Hel once and I know better than to doubt her. I'm more concerned with the world in general."

"FRIDAY said everyone's accepted it," Tony pointed out.

"Yeah, but for how long for?" Rhodey questioned. "Politicians change on a dime. Not to mention, if the public start kicking up a fuss, don't expect them to stand in your corner."

"Well," Tony remarked. "If they decide to pull *that* crap on us, I'll just play FRIDAY's little video on my next interview. Put up a viewer advisory and give everyone the show of their life."

"Boss," FRIDAY quickly interjected. "The likelihood of general fear and conspiracy theories make that an unwise option."

Tony gave a noise of disgust.

"Well, it's better than having them all doubt us." He huffed a frustrated breath. "Damned if you fucking do and damned if you fucking don't."

Loki's hand came to the back of his neck, squeezing gently.

"Perhaps you might speak with your public relations department and your new CEO? After they view the video, they may have an option you have not considered. One that can better distribute the narrative best suited to our popularity and interests?"

Tony looked at his lover and smiled.

"Have I mentioned lately that you're amazing and I'm never letting you go?"

Loki chuckled and smiled faintly. He also leant in and kissed Tony's temple briefly.

"Thank you, Anthony."

“Alright,” Rhodey said, drawing Tony’s attention again. “I’ll start looking at the political side of things and keep you apprised of how it’s sinking in and whether it’ll become a problem. You guys get a backup plan for if it does.”

“The, um, Queen of Helheim, she informed the rest of the worlds, didn’t she?” Rogers piped in for the first time.

“Yes,” Loki agreed. “But I shall be venturing to them in the coming days and conversing with my contacts. I wish to know whom has been informed and the extent the information has travelled.” He sighed. “While I have little doubt some new threat will soon appear, this has at least galvanised the realms to watch their borders. Additionally, his armies will be without a leader and begin to squabble amongst themselves. With any luck, the Guardians shall tear down these potential leaders.”

“What about the Infinity Stones?” Tony questioned. “We don’t want those being put together by anyone else.”

Loki’s smirked. “Yes. I have a few plans for those. But, rest assured Anthony, I will not make it *half* so easy for them to be located as they once were.”

Tony frowned a little, suddenly thinking back to the moment before Hel had appeared. He debated asking the question with everyone around, but if what he’d learned about magic was correct, Loki wouldn’t have been the only one who was affected.

“When your magic reacted before she arrived,” Tony said. “Was that because of Thanos?”

Loki’s expression turned pensive. “In part, yes. But I also do not believe it was *him* that caused the reaction.”

“What do you mean?” Bruce asked. “What happened to Loki’s magic?”

“It spiked,” Tony explained. “Hell, the whole fucking air seemed to quiver.”

“Yes,” Loki said with a small grimace. “And it was not something I ever wish to repeat.”

A very fine shiver ran down Loki’s spine and Tony immediately wrapped an arm around his lover’s waist. Loki sent him a small, grateful smile.

“So, what caused it?” Rhodey questioned.

“I believe it was Hel,” Loki admitted. “She implied she gave Nebula the push needed to end Thanos’ life. Although not a direct action, it was an *influence*, something Hel is not meant to do. Yggdrasil felt her touching the scales and bristled. I am very familiar with the world tree’s branches, most mages are, but I am more sensitive than others.”

Tony tensed. “Is that going to be a problem?”

Loki shook his head. “No. Whatever she did has been accepted. Things have returned to the way they once were. I doubt Hel would have lent her support if she was not certain it would be accepted. It is not within Hel’s best interests to unbalance the fabric of the universe.”

This time, it was Tony's turn to shiver. The fact someone like Hel could simply unravel the universe was terrifying to contemplate. Once again, he was *very* happy she was on their side.

Everyone else seemed to realise as much, taking a moment to just absorb the magnitude of the statements.

"Then if we're all off the hook," Barnes said, breaking the quiet. "What do you want us to do?"

Tony leaned further over the counter to better see the man. His expression was wary but calculating. It made Tony remember that for a long time all Barnes had been was a weapon. Even when he'd been deprogrammed with SHIELD, he'd ended up as little more than leverage over Rogers and forced to stay confined to a SHIELD base. He'd never really been allowed to be a free person, ready and able to do his own thing.

Tony still had issues with Barnes for a lot of things, but he felt a pang of sympathy. No wonder the guy wanted to understand where he stood.

"Whatever you want," Tony said, holding the man's gaze. "If you both stay in the tower, there will be floors and areas you can't access. The penthouse will be by invitation only as well. If you want to leave, you can, but I wouldn't recommend it until we've sorted out your public image and whether or not SHIELD will target you. FRIDAY will monitor you both, but no more than she'd monitor anyone else living here. If a battle comes up, you can join in or not. If you want something, FRIDAY can get it for you. My resources aren't limitless and there are things you'll have to earn before I offer them." His eyes hardened. "And if you betray me again and I'll do a lot worse than just kick you out."

"Understood," Barnes acknowledged immediately.

Yet, despite Tony laying down the law, Barnes only seemed to relax. Rogers also let out a breath of relief.

"We really do appreciate this, Tony," he said, his voice earnest. "We won't forget it or abuse your hospitality. I can't offer a lot, but if you ever need my shield." He met Tony's gaze unflinchingly. "I'll be on the battlefield at your side in a heartbeat."

*That* was one for the books. Rogers willingly putting himself at Tony's side. Hell, willing to be *under his command*. It said a lot about how much guilt and gratitude Rogers had.

"Yeah, well, maybe not the battlefield. We'll start with the press and go from there."

Rogers nodded firmly; his gaze determined. Tony still felt a little incredulous that things had turned out this way. It was hardly something he'd have wanted let alone expected all those months ago when Loki first teleported into his life.

But then, he was a world away from that hurt, bitter person. Now, as Rhodey had pointed out, he was *happy*. And it was a lot easier to be charitable to people who had hurt you when you were on a high and they were down on their luck.

Taking the final mouthful of his coffee, Tony felt like everything important had been covered.

“Well then, I think that finishes the Q&A.” Tony glanced at everyone but didn’t see any protests. “Time to take the rest of the day off?”

Rhodey snorted. “*You* might be able to do that. Some of us actually have a job.”

“I’ve told you, just quit and come work for me!”

“Thanks,” Rhodey drawled. “But I value my sanity.”

Despite his words, when Rhodey pushed out of his chair, he paused long enough to wrap Tony in a hug. Tony sighed and relaxed against his best friend. He closed his eyes, just enjoying the warmth and comfort James Rhodes always provided him.

“You’ve done good, Tones,” Rhodey said quietly.

Tony’s eyes stung a little but he blinked it away. He’d never had a great track record of being a good person, making the right decisions or ending up in the right place. But everything *was* falling into place, and having Rhodey see it too. Well, it meant a lot more to him than he wanted to admit.

“Thanks, Rhodey,” he mumbled.

Rhodey pulled back with a smile. He also shifted to Loki and to Tony’s surprise and amusement, wrapped Loki in a hug too. Loki looked equally startled but he relaxed and lightly patted Rhodey on the back.

“Take care of this idiot,” he told Loki. “And make sure he takes care of you.”

Loki chuckled. “I’ll endeavour to follow both orders.”

Rhodey grinned as he pulled back. He squeezed Loki’s shoulder before stepping back. He smiled at Bruce, nodded at Rogers and Barnes before looking back at Loki.

“Alright, send me back to base.”

Tony waved and was just able to catch Rhodey’s smile before magic was sending him away.

“Well, if that is everything,” Bruce said. “I might go to my rooms for some meditation.” He gave a wry smile. “There’s been a lot to take in over the last few hours.”

“Have fun, Brucey.”

“Not exactly what meditation is designed for, Tony,” he remarked drolly.

Tony laughed, but didn’t make another quip. He was distracted by Rogers and Barnes standing. His humour faded a little, not sure what to expect.

“We’ll head down to our floor,” Rogers said. “Thank you again for letting us stay here.” He hesitated. “Is the gym a floor we can access? We wouldn’t mind some training. I know Bucky never really had much chance to use one at SHIELD.”

Tony winced. Remembering, briefly, from before the betrayal. He’d never spent a lot of time around Barnes, but he’d seen the gawking and whispers. He’d heard that Barnes preferred to do a small fitness regime in his room. It had to have gone past boring *months* ago.

“Yeah, go for it,” Tony said. He eyed Barnes arm shrewdly. “Not sure what that will take. But FRIDAY can recommend some of the more durable things. Let me know if something breaks and what you did when it happened. I’ll see if I can build something stronger.”

“I don’t need to use its full strength,” Barnes remarked. “I won’t break anything.”

Tony snorted. “You breaking something is not a complaint. It’s a *challenge*. I’m not saying actively rip everything apart, but if something can’t hold up to it, I want to know and *improve* it.”

For a second, Barnes faintly smiled. It was there and gone again, but Tony *knew* he’d seen it.

“I’ll let you know,” he answered.

Nothing more was said and when they turned and left, Tony didn’t even mind that Bruce was following behind. He trusted his friend and he... well, he didn’t *trust* Rogers and Barnes but he didn’t distrust them either. It was an odd feeling, but he was distracted from it by Loki touching his cheek and gently encouraging him to face the mage.

“Lokes?” Tony asked.

“I believe you mentioned a day off, Anthony?”

Slowly, Tony smiled and when Loki gently pulled him forward, Tony pressed into the kiss with happiness and relief. And because it was a day off, Tony had absolutely no problems with leaving all their dishes on the counter.

That was absolutely a tomorrow problem.

# Chapter 71

## Chapter Notes

Only a short chapter this time, I'm afraid, but the spot it ended on felt too fitting. Hopefully, I'll be able to get the next (and a longer) chapter out sooner ^^;;

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

Miracle of miracles they actually *managed* their day off.

Granted, there were phone calls, including one from his CEO after FRIDAY forwarded the video of Hel, but that was only with the request for a meeting *as soon as possible*.

Tony pencilled it in for tomorrow, only because he was feeling generous while cuddled up around Loki on the couch watching movies.

FRIDAY also kept him apprised of how the other tower occupants were doing. Bruce was happily meditating. Rogers and Barnes were actually having *fun* as they trained and fought each other. Some people had the strangest hobbies.

Tony just enjoyed being able to lazily do *God damn nothing*.

He and Loki had made use of the bed, then shared a shower and after their movie marathon, they'd gone to the lab to meld magic and science. Not for defensive purposes but just because they *could*. Bruce even joined them at one point.

And for the first time in a *long* time, Tony had an inventing bender - only for once there was someone at his side. A *partner*. Not someone who was asking him to come to bed, or complaining that he was buried in the lab. Loki was *with him*, as manic and inspired as he was.

They were *together* and Tony couldn't resist kissing Loki for that.

Which ended up with them using the couch in the corner of the lab to make out and eventually get in another slow and unhurried round. When they finished and Loki had magicked them clean, he actually felt comfortable enough to snuggle into Loki and close his eyes.

He fell asleep in the lab, and for the first time, someone did it *with* him. (And not once did he feel lonely or worn out – not with Loki warm and breathing softly underneath him. He just felt *content*.)

Tony didn't think he'd ever forget that. In fact, he held the memory and feeling close as he went out to meet with his CEO. Sunglasses on, coffee in hand and not even regretting how



little he'd slept. Not when he'd spent them awake with Loki.

His lover had looked *far* less ruffled as he'd headed off world to check in on things with the realms. Because a day off was all well and good, but *weeks* off and time to themselves would require a bit more than a quick meeting and an email. Tony wasn't naïve enough to think otherwise.

It was why he'd braced for impact.

And the world didn't disappoint.

Fury was living up to his name and being, predictably, *furious*. The CEO and board were a little ashen after Hel's display but they were already devising ways to spin things to the public. They didn't even flinch when he threw in the request that they do some positive PR for Barnes. After Hel, it was probably an easier topic to cover.

The public was, of course, kicking up a stink over the war being called off. So much for people being *happy* that their planet wouldn't be in the firing line. No, it was only a "big deal over nothing". Tony's fingers had twitched towards releasing the footage more times than he wanted to count. FRIDAY had threatened to lock him from it.

It didn't help that Loki's trip off world was turning bigger than he'd expected. Everything was fine, but Hel's little *influence* and Yggdrasil's responding shudder had all the mages clamouring to talk to him. He'd phoned with the frustrated explanation that he would be gone a few days.

Tony was used to fending off paparazzi and SHIELD on his own, but it didn't mean he *wanted* to. He preferred Loki beside him. Even having Rhodey fly in to tackle the UN with him wasn't really *enough*. He loved his Rhodey bear but he wasn't *in love* with him.

And that was the big kicker. The glaring fact Tony wasn't able to push to the side anymore.

With no threat to life and limb and with Loki worlds away, the truth was becoming ever plainer. He'd fallen in love. Deeper and *harder* than ever before. Loki completed him in ways he'd never expected and made him happy in ways he'd never imagined someone could.

And now that the truth had taken root, Tony had to decide whether or not to vocalise it.

Because he'd started this relationship unsure of his feelings or what he *could* feel for Loki. The mage had been deeper invested than him from the start – but, what if Tony had beaten him on the final jump? What if he'd confess his feelings and it would be *Loki* who couldn't repeat it back?

The last thing he wanted was to make a mess of something that was so perfect and *easy*.

It was what he thought about, laying in bed at night without Loki curled up beside him. He didn't think about inventions, the bullshit with SHIELD or even what Rogers and Barnes were doing on their floor of his tower. No, all he could think about was where Loki was

spending the night, how much he wanted him back and *how* he would tell the mage exactly what he felt – followed by how Loki might react.

And, funnily enough, the more he thought about it, the less he worried about Loki loving him back. He started to worry about *how* to say it. Because, Loki had a backlog of crappy relationships (if one could even call them that) and Tony wanted to do it *right*.

He wanted it to be God damn romantic. Not something blurted by accident or dropped too casually. It had to be *perfect*. And that meant, it needed to happen while they were on vacation.

He almost made a project for it, but stopped at the last moment. Because, the last thing he wanted was Loki stumbling on it in the lab. And he didn't want to put locks and restrictions on it and make Loki think he was *hiding* something. So, it had to stay in his head. No paper trail.

And in his spare moments, he tinkered with it. Zoning out and picturing exactly how he would tell Loki. It made him want their vacation even more.

And after a week. *Seven God damn days*, he finally had everything under control.

The press and public weren't exactly appeased, but he'd done all he could to settle the storm. Their plan to introduce Barnes to the media was set to start when the world had calmed down about the lack of Thanos. SHIELD was still swinging between wounded sulking and demands for one, or all of them, to visit. Both of which were ignored by all.

The only thing that he was really being hounded about was to get some of the foreign dignitaries to visit so that the UN and various military and political bodies could get at them. Which would only come about after Loki came back – which *he hadn't done yet*.

He was calling every day, so Tony knew he didn't need to worry, but he *missed* Loki. He knew Loki missed him too. He also knew, Loki was well and truly *over* the political wrangling he was doing. He had passed on Tony's request to try and organise for the dignitaries to visit Earth, but he had his own nightmares to field.

Tony had offered to come up and help, but Loki assured him it wasn't worth the hassle (and that his presence would only make people curious and interested, further adding to the drawn-out manner of the proceedings.)

For one highly insecure moment, Tony had worried Loki was lying and trying to get rid of him now that Thanos was gone. But Tony *knew* Loki cared about him. He knew Loki was in it for the long haul. Neither of them was having any fun apart – but they'd started all these balls rolling and now, they had to keep them under control if they wanted to stay useful.

But, logic wasn't the greatest balm when he was alone in his penthouse, staring out the window and sipping a scotch. The city was an amazing view at night – but instead of the lights, he could only see his reflection. Alone, tired and with a frown he couldn't wipe away.

He wanted to be watching the ocean lap at sandy shores. Feel and taste the salt breeze as he leant against his lover and sipped pink and green cocktails; watching Loki's nose scrunch or his eyes flash with delight depending on what flavour he tried.

Tony almost smiled, but the thought was tainted with melancholy. He wanted Loki and the mage wasn't *here*.

Sighing, he closed his eyes and pictured his lover. Trying to bite down on the worry something had happened between their last phone call and now. He knew Loki could take care of himself. He knew Thanos was mush on the floor and that Hel *liked* them. They had all the cards stacked in their favour, but it was impossible not to worry for the one you cared about.

“And here I had expected a happier sight on my return.”

Tony's eyes snapped open and he spun around to find Loki standing beside the couch. He'd shrugged off his jacket and thrown it over the back and while he was smiling, he looked tired. Tony crossed the space in quick strides to be able to wrap his arm around Loki in a hug. Loki pulled him close and sighed softly. Tony closed his eyes and breathed in the scent of his lover.

“Is everything well, Anthony?” Loki questioned, lightly stroking his back.

“Better now.”

Loki's hand briefly stilled before he started again. He also shifted and pressed a kiss to the top of Tony's head.

“I am sorry,” Loki said. “I had not anticipated our favour among the realms would make things so time consuming.”

Tony understood. He often had the same problem on Earth. “You're popular now. People want to talk to you.”

“Far more than *I* wish to talk to *them*,” Loki grumbled. He held Tony tighter and pressed his face into Tony's hair. “I have wished to return *home*.”

Tony smiled. It didn't happen often, but he would *never* get sick of Loki calling the tower home.

“Welcome to popularity babe,” Tony said. “Always knew the realms would wake up to how good a catch you are.”

Loki snorted and his voice turned dry, “Yes, well. We shall see how long it lasts.”

“We'll *make* it last,” Tony quickly and fiercely assured. “I'm not about to let Odin crap all over our hard work.”

Loki snorted again, but he also kissed Tony's head once more.

“With you by my side, fighting so fiercely, I am certain Odin shall have no chance.”

Tony’s grin widened, he also pulled back just enough to be able to look at Loki. The mage was smiling softly and when Tony tilted up his chin, Loki immediately leant down and let their lips brush. The kiss remained soft and reaffirming. It was as much a greeting as the hug and it found all the tension falling from Tony’s shoulders.

When they broke apart, Tony tucked his head back against Loki’s chest, near his neck.

“Things have progressed well here?” Loki asked softly.

“Yeah,” Tony replied. “Got everything sorted or as best as I can. Some things you have to leave alone for a bit, you know?”

“I do.”

They fell quiet, but the silence was comforting. It had been oppressive and lonely before with Loki gone, but now Tony enjoyed the steady feel and sound of Loki’s soft breaths and the crinkling of his shirt if Tony moved his head.

*Only thing that could make it better would be ocean waves.*

And Tony didn’t want to wait anymore.

“What do you say we get out of here?” he asked.

“And go where?”

“Malibu.”

There was a brief pause.

“You wish us to leave now?” Loki questioned, sounded surprised. “Without any warning?”

Tony lifted his head to better see Loki’s face. He looked uncertain but far from unhappy at the prospect.

“FRIDAY can send the warnings. Rhodey and Bruce can call us if we’re *really* needed, but frankly, I can’t see anything being important enough to drag us away for at least a week.” He unwound his arm and touched Loki’s chest, stroking him through the fabric. “Just you and me. Nothing and no one else.”

Loki’s gaze flooded with yearning, yet, he still hesitated, “Are you certain? Your company-”

“Can run on its own,” Tony insisted. “Trial run for the new guy. Come *on*. When’s the last time we did something for us?” He grinned. “Something selfish because we *wanted* to do it and fuck the consequences? We’ve wanted our break, so let’s fucking *have* it.”

Slowly, Loki smiled. It was a mischievous, *gleeful* expression that Tony really wanted to see more often. The kind of look that made Tony see *how* Loki had become known as the

Trickster God.

“I do hope you will not miss anything in your tower, Anthony.”

Tony had a moment to feel puzzled before Loki’s seidr was wrapping around them. Tony knew what was happening then and he only leant into Loki and his lover’s magic as they shifted from one location to another. They didn’t land inside his mansion, instead, Tony felt the cool breeze and heard crashing waves. He turned, feeling sand under his shoes only to look out at the moonlit ocean.

He knew the view, but he still looked over his shoulder to confirm his mansion was on the clifftops behind them. Loki had dropped them more or less on his doorstep. He turned back to his lover and quipped, “Felt like a roll in the sand?”

Loki shook his head, but his smile remained.

“We are on a vacation, are we not? I see no reason to begin our time indoors near devices where people might hunt us for attention.”

“I like the way you think, Lokes.”

Loki smiled. He also pulled away from Tony but only so he could drop to sit on the sand. He closed his eyes, something peaceful fluttering across his face. It was *another* reason Loki would have chosen nature over walls. If he’d been on Alfheim, surrounded by magic and life, he would prefer to be around it again, however he could.

Tony still had his scotch and he had a sip as he walked to drop down beside his lover. The sand was cool without the heat from the sun, but Loki’s seidr was already dancing along his skin, keeping him from the chill. He pressed their sides together but Loki didn’t immediately wrap an arm around him. He was confused until he felt something heavy land on his shoulders. Tony looked down only to feel surprised. He touched the fabric.

“Is this the coat I wore on Asgard?”

“Yes,” Loki agreed.

“I’m surprised you didn’t put me in your own.”

Loki huffed a small laugh. “Although I would enjoy seeing you in my colours, this shall actually fit you.”

“You could have just conjured a hoodie from my room.”

Despite his remark, Tony pulled the sleeves on. He knew from experience that it would keep out even the stiffest breeze.

“Perhaps,” Loki murmured. “But it has been some time since you wore this.”

Tony glanced back at the mage, feeling confused again. Sure, Loki had *liked* him in the outfit, but there seemed something else at play. But Loki’s gaze was distant and focused on the

waves. He knew there was more going on - Loki would hardly drop *this* jacket without forethought - but, he had just got back from space and there were numerous things that could have inspired him to desire this.

Maybe he wanted to see Tony in the outfit that had started their relationship and success with the realms?

Either way, it was such a small thing, Tony didn't see a need to fight it.

He'd make sure to ask about it later, but for now, he was happy to just have Loki with him again. Just the two of them, alone and *finally* on vacation

## Chapter End Notes

Yes, this is a bit of a filler chapter, sorry! But I wanted them on vacation, damn it! And all these other things got in the way and needed to be acknowledged. Hopefully it was still enjoyable!

Thanks for reading!

## Chapter 72 - Clean Version

### Chapter Notes

Sorry this chapter is overdue! Things have been very hectic!  
Still, I hope you like it. The story did two things I 100% didn't plan for and we can blame Tony for both XD  
Enjoy the schmoop XD

And major thanks, as always to **tarot\_card** for reading this chapter and assuring me it all fits and works and flows. You're a gem ♥

They sat on the beach for a half hour. Only the first few minutes were spent in silence before Loki started talking about the beaches on Alfheim.

There weren't many as it was a mostly forested planet and the Elves preferred to live among the trees, but Loki had explored them in his youth. The ocean had a more purple sheen due to an unusual but harmless algae. The sand was a soft pink and he had been rather charmed by the unusual colours. Additionally, the water was always warm due to the more humid climate where the beaches resided.

Tony had listened with fascination as it was detailed. Loki painted an easy picture so it was easy to imagine, even if it defied his preconceptions of a *beach*. There were animals as well and Loki spoke about them. The fish were large and rarely hunted by the Elves as, again, they preferred to remain in their forests.

It made it almost too easy to fish as they didn't have any innate suspicion of lures or bait. Loki had once caught a deep blue fish *from the shore* which was almost as large as him.

Tony had long finished his scotch and the glass was sitting on the sand. He'd also kicked off his shoes, burying his feet in the grains and leaning back on his hands as he listened to the mage.

"You definitely have to take me there," Tony said. "I'm not too keen on the fishing, but I'd be happy just to walk on pink sand and experiment on the algae making the sea *purple*. God, I'm going to be exploring *everything*. I'll need to bring a mini lab with me."

"I could introduce you to the few Elves who reside by it. Some have spent many years studying the waters there. Even now, they do not know much about it having favoured seidr and the trees for millennia."

“Sounds like fun,” Tony agreed. “Then again, *everywhere* you describe sounds like fun.” He laughed. “I’ll probably want to spend years on every planet.”

He heard Loki shift and he looked away from the starlit sky to find Loki’s gaze on him. His expression was oddly intense. Tony frowned.

“Lokes?”

“Our vacation here. How long do you intend it to be?”

Tony raised his eyebrows at the non sequitur. “Um, I don’t know. I wasn’t thinking that far in advance. Ideally, a week. I’d like it to be longer, but I doubt it will happen, you know?”

Loki’s expression turned pensive and he looked away. He stared out at the ocean and Tony pushed up into a better sitting position. He brushed his hands free from sand. He felt worried about the mage.

“Loki?” He touched the man’s arm. “Is everything alright?”

Loki’s frown deepened and Tony waited, wondering what the man would say, but in the end, he looked at his hands before back at Tony. His expression had cleared. It was *unnaturally* smoothed out.

“It is nothing, Anthony-”

“Don’t do that,” Tony said quietly. “Don’t sweep it under the rug and tell me it’s fine when it’s not.”

Loki’s bland expression froze before melting away. He lifted a hand and rubbed it over his face.

“Perhaps it is not. But there is nothing to concern yourself with, Anthony.”

“You’re not happy. That’s a damn big concern for me.”

Loki smiled faintly and lowered his hand. He brought it to Tony’s and linked their fingers.

“I will always be grateful that it remains of such high priority to you.” He hesitated. “I suppose, it is not yet something I wish to discuss. It has been a long week. I must collect my thoughts first.”

Tony didn’t like it, but he *did* understand it. He’d spent the week Loki had been gone debating how he would tell the man exactly how far he’d fallen for him. Loki didn’t even have to say anything half as monumental – it could still take time to process, especially after his week away and the draining nature of it.

“Okay,” Tony said. He squeezed Loki’s hand. “Whenever you want. You know I’ll be here to listen.”



Loki's smile became larger and more genuine. He leant forward and pressed their lips together in a gentle kiss. Loki didn't say thank you, but Tony could feel it in the man's touch.

When they broke apart this time, Loki remarked, "Come. We should go inside before even my seidr finds it difficult to protect you from the cold."

Tony snorted. "I doubt that will happen, Lokes. But, I won't complain about finally having you back in my bed."

Loki's expression softened. "Yes. I have missed having you with me as well."

They climbed to their feet without further discussion. Tony only let Loki go so that he could pick up his shoes and his glass. Loki's hands were empty, but he soon closed the distance to snake his arm around Tony's waist. Tony leant into Loki and they walked up to his house in silence.

Tony knew they must have looked a sight. Two dark figures in Asgardian jackets, one holding sneakers and an empty crystal glass. He almost hoped Heimdall could see them and report back how *happy* they were.

And just in case the voyeuristic, homophobic eye in the sky was watching them, Tony shifted in Loki's hold and kissed the mage again. Loki wrapped both arms around his waist and drew him closer.

There was the salt breeze in his hair, the sound of crashing waves behind him and sand between his toes. There was *Loki* all around him and the mage's seidr rushing over his skin.

He'd never had a vacation start so good.

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Tony woke up slowly. He blinked open his eyes to find his Malibu bedroom bathed in a soft light. Loki was a warm, sleeping weight beside him. The mage's arm was over his waist and one of his legs was just touching Tony's.

He smiled warmly and closed his eyes, breathing in the feeling of Loki back at his side and the knowledge they were alone and free from obligations.

They'd gone to bed not long after returning from the beach. Loki had been exhausted and Tony wasn't going to miss a chance to cuddle with his lover. They didn't even do anything further, not when Loki had laid his head on the bed and given a sigh of contentment and relaxation.

Tony knew Loki wouldn't have slept easily while far away from the safety of familiar territory and both his and Hel's wards.

Looking at Loki's peaceful expression, all he wanted to do was brush the hair from his face and lean down and kiss him. He wanted to climb out of bed stealthily and make him a tea. He wanted to make his lover smile.

*God, I love you.*

The words burst through his mind, coupling with a warmth and passion that flooded his chest. It strained against him, wanting to slip free so Loki would know *exactly* how much he was cared for and adored.

And suddenly, all his grand plans about rose petals, moonlit dinners and gifts wrapped in bows all fell to the wayside.

He did exactly what he yearned to do. He shifted on the bed and brought his hand to Loki's face. He brushed aside his stray, frizzing locks and traced his thumb over the brief frown that marred his brow. Loki's eyelids fluttered before opening.

They were filled with sleepy confusion which soon cleared to soft affection when he saw Tony.

"Anthony," he murmured.

"Morning, Lokes," Tony said.

His heart was beating a mile a minute but he was more excited than scared. He was too much *in love* to do anything but stare at his half-awake lover with adoration. Loki started to frown again, just a small furrow. He lifted his hand and touched Tony's face.

There was something quizzical, a little bit wary and oddly uncertain to the expression.

"Anthony... you look ... is something different?"

"Yeah," Tony said. He smiled and leant into the touch. "Something is. It's what happens when you work something important out." He took Loki's hand and curled his around it. "I thought about a couple of ways to do it. But the way you looked just now... I can't think of a better way or place to say it."

Loki swallowed thickly. "To say...?"

"I love you, Loki."

Loki sucked in a sharp breath. His eyes were wide and disbelieving. Tony just kept smiling.

"Say... say that again?" Loki murmured.

"I love you, Lokes," Tony repeated. Then, he did it again for good measure. "I love-"

Loki shifted. He rolled them over until he was straddling Tony and looking down at him. Tony continued to smile, especially when Loki cupped his cheeks and stared hard into his eyes. He even felt magic slide over him. It seemed to tremble as if it was worried or unsure. Tony relaxed into every touch. He tried to show in every easy, simple gesture that it was *true*.

"You are in love with me?" Loki asked quietly.

Tony brought up his hands and cupped Loki's cheeks, holding him tenderly.

“Yeah, and I have been for a while.”

Loki swallowed roughly. He then lowered his head and pressed their foreheads together.

“I love you as well,” he whispered, the words rough enough to sound pained.

Tony gently kissed his lover’s jaw even as he teased, “Well, don’t sound so devastated about it.”

Loki gave a watery laugh. “I am far from it, Anthony, I am exalted.” He laughed again and closed his eyes. “I am *disbelieving*. I wish to say *you cannot love me* and yet, I know that you do. Despite all I have done, despite what I *am*. You love me.”

“I do,” Tony confirmed. He ran his hands over his lover’s shoulders and sides, offering affection and comfort. “I *love* you.”

Loki laughed again and finally, he *smiled*. He pulled back and Tony got to admire every inch of it. The dimples, the bright happiness to his green eyes, the flush in his cheeks. He looked as if everything was *perfect*. As if there was nothing but the moment they were sharing and the simplicity of knowing they felt the *same*.

Tony had never seen anyone or anything more beautiful.

*I never want to let you go. I want this to be ours, forever.*

The idea didn’t even feel scary, it felt *right*. Tony felt he was looking at his future and he didn’t even want to shy from it. If he lived the rest of his life with Loki, he knew it would be a life well lived. A *happy* life, no matter how short it might be.

At least for him.

But, Tony pushed that thought aside. He didn’t want to ruin the moment. Instead, he stroked Loki’s side and simply admired his lover. It was because he was watching so closely that he saw something shift in Loki’s expression. His smile didn’t dim but there was something new to his gaze as he lowered his hand and touched Tony’s chest.

“Lokes?” he asked, confused.

“I think I would like to have you now, Anthony.”

Tony’s breath caught and his eyes widened.

“You mean?”

“Yes,” Loki agreed. He leant down even as his fingers stroked Tony’s chest. “I think we have waited long enough, don’t you, my love?”

*My love.*

The words hit Tony hard in the chest. It made him feel on top of the world and like he could do anything. He grinned brightly and caught Loki's hand in his.

"Would have waited a lot longer than this, Lokes," he said. "As long as you wanted."

Loki's eyes softened. "Yes. I know."

After that, they didn't need any further words, not when Loki was leaning down and kissing him. Tony cupped his cheeks and tried to pull him even closer. He *would* have waited for Loki, but now that the moment was here, he was just happy to be able to share it with the one he loved.

When they broke apart, Loki brushed their noses together. He pressed a tender kiss to Tony's jaw. His hands moved, brushing over Tony's chest, but there was a hesitation to them which hadn't been present for a long time. Tony frowned.

"I have looked forward to this moment," Loki said softly.

Tony ran his hand over Loki's back. He kept his voice gentle and encouraging, "Then why do you sound nervous?"

Loki's breath hitched and he took a moment to reply.

"I am not sure how you wish to... be with me."

Tony's frown deepened, and while a small part of him wanted to make a quip, the rest of him smothered that instinct – because, although it had been a while since it was brought up. Tony knew what it meant. He used all his self-control to keep anger from bleeding into his voice.

"Asgard has something to say about when men are in bed together, don't they?"

"When it is ever acknowledged, yes," Loki admitted quietly. "There is a term – a slur for one who takes rather than... gives."

*My brother is ergi. He claimed to have unmanned you.*

Thor's words from what felt like a lifetime ago ran through his mind and had him making some really *bullshit* conclusions. Despite how much he wanted to go back up to Asgard and punch a few choice people, he didn't want to ruin the moment. *Their* moment.

"Loki," he said gently but firmly, "I'm happy to be with you in any and *every* way." He brought his hands to the man's cheeks and held him firm, making sure to meet his gaze. "I want you to be comfortable, but as long as we're together and having fun, that's all that matters to me."

Loki smiled; it was small but affectionate.

"I know it does not matter what they think of me, or you. I have been to other realms and partaken in both." He ran his thumb over Tony's cheek. "But I also know there are some men

who will only take one position.” He ducked his head a little. “I am happy you are not one of them.”

Tony grinned, feeling relieved that, despite Asgard’s backwards bullshit, they were on the same page for this.

“Whichever way you want, Lokes,” Tony said. “I just want you.”

Loki pulled in a sharp breath before kissing Tony. It barely contained Loki’s passion and Tony felt seared from the man’s touch. He caught Loki’s shoulders and arched into his touch. His body was flooding with desire. When they broke apart, Loki lingered close.

“I would like to have you now, Anthony,” Loki said firmly, repeating his earlier words and making his choice clear.

Tony’s grin widened and although it was difficult with Loki straddling his waist, he did his best to spread his legs.

“Then take me,” he requested.

Loki groaned and kissed him again. Tony felt excitement flood through him. They’d crossed the final hurdle and now, he would finally have Loki as his lover in *every* sense of the word.

And it was a hell of a thing.

But it wasn't just the sex, Loki's reverent looks and touches or the way they'd *finally* come together. No, it was Loki's seidr. Running over his skin, making the room *glow*. He'd curled his fingers around the tendrils of magic, only making Loki shudder and spur them on further. Tony had only wanted more - to be *closer* and give back the feeling of utter joy, intimacy and devotion.

Loki's seidr had hummed and Tony had sworn he saw another colour among the green - something burnt orange and small, but only for a moment before Loki's magic had sunk under his skin - and he was gone.

It was the most intimate, intense thing he’d ever experienced. It made him feel like Loki was inside him in a way deeper than sex. It felt like something magnificent, something *more* as they each lost themselves to pleasure. The green in the room flared and seemed to spiral around them before dissipating in a rush that left him strangely bereft.

Tony laid panting on the bed, trying to catch his breath and categorise everything he’d just experienced. Loki was lying on top of him, his own breathing uneven. Tony’s eyes were shut, but a smile was on his face, right up until Loki pulled away from him.

Tony let out a small noise of protest and squinted open his eyes. Loki didn’t go far but there was a small grimace on his lips. The haze of afterglow disappeared and Tony sat up a little better.

“Loki? What’s wrong?”

“I’m sorry,” Loki whispered, looking upset.

Tony frowned. “What for?”

“I wanted to be slower. To be good for you.” He looked away. “I couldn’t contain my seidr and you didn’t give permission and-”

“Loki. Hey, Loki, no.” He cupped Loki’s cheek and turned the mage to face him. “It was *awesome*,” he said softly but firmly. “We can always go slower next time. I love you and I love your seidr. It was *amazing*. You can include it any time. In fact...” his eyes unfocused as he remembered the feeling. “I almost *miss* it.”

Loki pulled in a sharp breath. His hand touched Tony’s chest.

“My seidr wanted to bond with you as much as I did,” Loki confessed. “I could not hold it back, not when I – *we* both wanted it.”

Tony stroked his cheek. “Well, I’m not going to be complaining. One of the most intense and *best* things I’ve had in a long time.”

Loki grinned. He also pressed forward and kiss Tony, it was a languid, loving embrace and Tony shifted closer to better curl around his lover. Tony didn’t ever want to stop. Unfortunately, they were quickly interrupted.

“Boss?” FRIDAY questioned, sounding hesitant.

Tony broke their embrace with a sigh. He shifted and looked up at the ceiling, feeling annoyed.

“What is it FRIDAY? It had better be the end of the world.”

“No, Boss. I noticed during your... coupling with Mr Liesmith that an unfamiliar energy registered.”

Tony frowned. “What kind of energy?”

“I am not sure, Boss, but based off scans I have taken of Mr Liesmith I believe it to be seidr.”

Loki immediately sat up, looking on the alert. “I noticed no signs of intruders, FRIDAY.”

“No, Sir,” she answered. “I believe it came from... Boss.”

Tony sucked in a breath and sat up straight, his eyes wide. He looked at Loki who seemed equally shocked. Tony remembered the colour he’d seen briefly.

“I saw something,” he murmured. “It was a dark orange colour.” He swallowed. “Like a flame.”

“My seidr might have coaxed it out of you,” Loki whispered. “Hel said you were capable. But I did not sense it.”

Tony shook his head. “It was only for a second.”

“Anthony, you do not understand,” Loki said, sounding stunned and yet at the same time, reverent. “To coax a dormant mage’s magic during such an intimate act.” He swallowed thickly. “That indicates something deeper than mere intimacy. That... that indicates *compatibility*.”

Tony frowned, sensing something more than just a similarity in personality was at play here.

“And that means something?”

“Mages can *bond*, Anthony,” Loki said. “Exchanging rare and potent binding vows are only possible for a select few and it means you and I... can.”

Tony’s eyebrows lifted high. “Well, hell. No wonder your seidr has always liked me so much.”

Loki nodded, still seeming a little shocked. Tony scooted closer and took the mage’s hand.

He stroked it gently while asking, “This is a good thing, right?”

“It is,” Loki said. “Never did I imagine I would *ever* be one of the few who could have this.”

He whispered it like a guilty confession. A dream he’d kept locked up tight as a ridiculous notion he couldn’t dwell on. Tony’s heart ached for the lonely mage that Loki had been, but he also felt *delight* over what he could now have – what *they* could now have.

“Then, we’ll look into it,” Tony said. He also flashed a bright smile. “And the fact I apparently have magic that looks like fucking *fire*. How cool is that? We’re going to have to do *all* the tests. Your seidr better get good at drawing mine out. I’m not resting until we can colour our bedroom in mixing shades.”

Loki finally seemed to shake out of his astonishment. He smiled.

“Let’s start with something smaller. I do not want to have you destroy the bed due to a lack of control.”

“I can always buy a new bed.”

“*Or*,” Loki insisted more firmly, “pass out through overuse of your seidr.”

Tony scrunched up his face. “Okay, that would be less fun in the middle of sex. We better get practicing then. You’ll have to show me all the tricks.” He wagged his eyebrows. “Maybe we can play teacher and student.”

Loki laughed. “You are *ridiculous*.”

“You love it,” Tony countered while leaning closer.

Loki’s expression turned softer. “I do,” he replied.

He also took the opportunity and pressed closer to share another kiss. Tony sighed happily. He was still buzzing with energy and ideas. He wanted to research the *hell* out of the bonds and his own magic – but it could wait for now.

All that mattered right this second was more of Loki's lips on his; they'd have the rest of his life to work out the rest.



## Chapter 72 - Full Version

### Chapter Notes

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Still, I hope you like it. The story did two things I 100% didn't plan for and we can blame Tony for both XD  
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"I could introduce you to the few Elves who reside by it. Some have spent many years studying the waters there. Even now, they do not know much about it having favoured seidr and the trees for millennia."

“Sounds like fun,” Tony agreed. “Then again, *everywhere* you describe sounds like fun.” He laughed. “I’ll probably want to spend years on every planet.”

He heard Loki shift and he looked away from the starlit sky to find Loki’s gaze on him. His expression was oddly intense. Tony frowned.

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“Our vacation here. How long do you intend it to be?”

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Loki’s expression turned pensive and he looked away. He stared out at the ocean and Tony pushed up into a better sitting position. He brushed his hands free from sand. He felt worried about the mage.

“Loki?” He touched the man’s arm. “Is everything alright?”

Loki’s frown deepened and Tony waited, wondering what the man would say, but in the end, he looked at his hands before back at Tony. His expression had cleared. It was *unnaturally* smoothed out.

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“Okay,” Tony said. He squeezed Loki’s hand. “Whenever you want. You know I’ll be here to listen.”

Loki's smile became larger and more genuine. He leant forward and pressed their lips together in a gentle kiss. Loki didn't say thank you, but Tony could feel it in the man's touch.

When they broke apart this time, Loki remarked, "Come. We should go inside before even my seidr finds it difficult to protect you from the cold."

Tony snorted. "I doubt that will happen, Lokes. But, I won't complain about finally having you back in my bed."

Loki's expression softened. "Yes. I have missed having you with me as well."

They climbed to their feet without further discussion. Tony only let Loki go so that he could pick up his shoes and his glass. Loki's hands were empty, but he soon closed the distance to snake his arm around Tony's waist. Tony leant into Loki and they walked up to his house in silence.

Tony knew they must have looked a sight. Two dark figures in Asgardian jackets, one holding sneakers and an empty crystal glass. He almost hoped Heimdall could see them and report back how *happy* they were.

And just in case the voyeuristic, homophobic eye in the sky was watching them, Tony shifted in Loki's hold and kissed the mage again. Loki wrapped both arms around his waist and drew him closer.

There was the salt breeze in his hair, the sound of crashing waves behind him and sand between his toes. There was *Loki* all around him and the mage's seidr rushing over his skin.

He'd never had a vacation start so good.

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Tony woke up slowly. He blinked open his eyes to find his Malibu bedroom bathed in a soft light. Loki was a warm, sleeping weight beside him. The mage's arm was over his waist and one of his legs was just touching Tony's.

He smiled warmly and closed his eyes, breathing in the feeling of Loki back at his side and the knowledge they were alone and free from obligations.

They'd gone to bed not long after returning from the beach. Loki had been exhausted and Tony wasn't going to miss a chance to cuddle with his lover. They didn't even do anything further, not when Loki had laid his head on the bed and given a sigh of contentment and relaxation.

Tony knew Loki wouldn't have slept easily while far away from the safety of familiar territory and both his and Hel's wards.

Looking at Loki's peaceful expression, all he wanted to do was brush the hair from his face and lean down and kiss him. He wanted to climb out of bed stealthily and make him a tea. He wanted to make his lover smile.

*God, I love you.*

The words burst through his mind, coupling with a warmth and passion that flooded his chest. It strained against him, wanting to slip free so Loki would know *exactly* how much he was cared for and adored.

And suddenly, all his grand plans about rose petals, moonlit dinners and gifts wrapped in bows all fell to the wayside.

He did exactly what he yearned to do. He shifted on the bed and brought his hand to Loki's face. He brushed aside his stray, frizzing locks and traced his thumb over the brief frown that marred his brow. Loki's eyelids fluttered before opening.

They were filled with sleepy confusion which soon cleared to soft affection when he saw Tony.

"Anthony," he murmured.

"Morning, Lokes," Tony said.

His heart was beating a mile a minute but he was more excited than scared. He was too much *in love* to do anything but stare at his half-awake lover with adoration. Loki started to frown again, just a small furrow. He lifted his hand and touched Tony's face.

There was something quizzical, a little bit wary and oddly uncertain to the expression.

"Anthony... you look ... is something different?"

"Yeah," Tony said. He smiled and leant into the touch. "Something is. It's what happens when you work something important out." He took Loki's hand and curled his around it. "I thought about a couple of ways to do it. But the way you looked just now... I can't think of a better way or place to say it."

Loki swallowed thickly. "To say...?"

"I love you, Loki."

Loki sucked in a sharp breath. His eyes were wide and disbelieving. Tony just kept smiling.

"Say... say that again?" Loki murmured.

"I love you, Lokes," Tony repeated. Then, he did it again for good measure. "I love-"

Loki shifted. He rolled them over until he was straddling Tony and looking down at him. Tony continued to smile, especially when Loki cupped his cheeks and stared hard into his eyes. He even felt magic slide over him. It seemed to tremble as if it was worried or unsure. Tony relaxed into every touch. He tried to show in every easy, simple gesture that it was *true*.

"You are in love with me?" Loki asked quietly.

Tony brought up his hands and cupped Loki's cheeks, holding him tenderly.

“Yeah, and I have been for a while.”

Loki swallowed roughly. He then lowered his head and pressed their foreheads together.

“I love you as well,” he whispered, the words rough enough to sound pained.

Tony gently kissed his lover’s jaw even as he teased, “Well, don’t sound so devastated about it.”

Loki gave a watery laugh. “I am far from it, Anthony, I am exalted.” He laughed again and closed his eyes. “I am *disbelieving*. I wish to say *you cannot love me* and yet, I know that you do. Despite all I have done, despite what I *am*. You love me.”

“I do,” Tony confirmed. He ran his hands over his lover’s shoulders and sides, offering affection and comfort. “I *love* you.”

Loki laughed again and finally, he *smiled*. He pulled back and Tony got to admire every inch of it. The dimples, the bright happiness to his green eyes, the flush in his cheeks. He looked as if everything was *perfect*. As if there was nothing but the moment they were sharing and the simplicity of knowing they felt the *same*.

Tony had never seen anyone or anything more beautiful.

*I never want to let you go. I want this to be ours, forever.*

The idea didn’t even feel scary, it felt *right*. Tony felt he was looking at his future and he didn’t even want to shy from it. If he lived the rest of his life with Loki, he knew it would be a life well lived. A *happy* life, no matter how short it might be.

At least for him.

But, Tony pushed that thought aside. He didn’t want to ruin the moment. Instead, he stroked Loki’s side and simply admired his lover. It was because he was watching so closely that he saw something shift in Loki’s expression. His smile didn’t dim but there was something new to his gaze as he lowered his hand and touched Tony’s chest.

“Lokes?” he asked, confused.

“I think I would like to have you now, Anthony.”

Tony’s breath caught and his eyes widened.

“You mean?”

“Yes,” Loki agreed. He leant down even as his fingers stroked Tony’s chest. “I think we have waited long enough, don’t you, my love?”

*My love.*

The words hit Tony hard in the chest. It made him feel on top of the world and like he could do anything. He grinned brightly and caught Loki's hand in his.

"Would have waited a lot longer than this, Lokes," he said. "As long as you wanted."

Loki's eyes softened. "Yes. I know."

After that, they didn't need any further words, not when Loki was leaning down and kissing him. Tony cupped his cheeks and tried to pull him even closer. He *would* have waited for Loki, but now that the moment was here, he was just happy to be able to share it with the one he loved.

When they broke apart, Loki brushed their noses together. He pressed a tender kiss to Tony's jaw. His hands moved, brushing over Tony's chest, but there was a hesitation to them which hadn't been present for a long time. Tony frowned.

"I have looked forward to this moment," Loki said softly.

Tony ran his hand over Loki's back. He kept his voice gentle and encouraging, "Then why do you sound nervous?"

Loki's breath hitched and he took a moment to reply.

"I am not sure how you wish to... be with me."

Tony's frown deepened, and while a small part of him wanted to make a quip, the rest of him smothered that instinct – because, although it had been a while since it was brought up. Tony knew what it meant. He used all his self-control to keep anger from bleeding into his voice.

"Asgard has something to say about when men are in bed together, don't they?"

"When it is ever acknowledged, yes," Loki admitted quietly. "There is a term – a slur for one who takes rather than... gives."

*My brother is ergi. He claimed to have unmanned you.*

Thor's words from what felt like a lifetime ago ran through his mind and had him making some really *bullshit* conclusions. Despite how much he wanted to go back up to Asgard and punch a few choice people, he didn't want to ruin the moment. *Their* moment.

"Loki," he said gently but firmly, "I'm happy to be with you in any and *every* way." He brought his hands to the man's cheeks and held him firm, making sure to meet his gaze. "I want you to be comfortable, but as long as we're together and having fun, that's all that matters to me."

Loki smiled; it was small but affectionate.

"I know it does not matter what they think of me, or you. I have been to other realms and partaken in both." He ran his thumb over Tony's cheek. "But I also know there are some men

who will only take one position.” He ducked his head a little. “I am happy you are not one of them.”

Tony grinned, feeling relieved that, despite Asgard’s backwards bullshit, they were on the same page for this.

“Whichever way you want, Lokes,” Tony said. “I just want you.”

Loki pulled in a sharp breath before kissing Tony. It barely contained Loki’s passion and Tony felt seared from the man’s touch. He caught Loki’s shoulders and arched into his touch. His body was flooding with desire. When they broke apart, Loki lingered close.

“I would like to have you now, Anthony,” Loki said firmly, repeating his earlier words and making his choice clear.

Tony’s grin widened and although it was difficult with Loki straddling his waist, he did his best to spread his legs.

“Then take me,” he requested.

Loki groaned and kissed him again. Tony felt excitement flood through him. They’d crossed the final hurdle and now, he would finally have Loki as his lover in *every* sense of the word.

This time, when the kiss broke, Loki didn’t linger close. Instead, he sat back. Tony looked up at his lover with anticipation. He brought his hands to Loki’s hips, stroking his thumbs over fabric and wishing it was skin.

Loki lifted his hand and a spark of seidr appeared before a small bottle of oil was revealed. Tony’s pulse hammered while arousal flooded and began to harden his cock. Loki must have felt it as his eyes darkened and his tongue darted out to lick his lips.

Last night, Loki had changed into a tunic and sleep pants while Tony was in an old band shirt and boxers. It meant, when Loki placed the oil bottle on the bed, he only had to skim his fingers under Tony’s top. Tony arched his back and it came off with little effort. He tugged at Loki’s tunic and it was removed with equal ease.

Tony had seen Loki shirtless before, but it didn’t lessen the gorgeous sight of his firm muscles or his pale skin tinting pink with arousal. Loki ran his hand over Tony’s chest and rested on his stomach. It quivered under his touch, but Tony just pressed against him. Loki grinned and his fingers trailed lower to the waistband of Tony’s boxers. Tony’s cock was getting harder. He knew Loki would be able to feel it with the way he was straddling Tony’s hips.

“I have thought about this many times,” Loki said quietly. “Long before I thought you would be mine, I imagined it.”

Tony chuckled. “Did those pictures I sent you come in handy?”

Loki rolled his eyes. “I never used them, Anthony.”

“Awh, that’s a shame. I think that was a pretty good wank bank.”

Loki snorted and shook his head. “I rather prefer having *you*.” He leant forward and his voice lowered. “Or having pictures *you* took for *me*.”

Tony’s breath caught and his eyes widened. He wasn’t used to Loki being *flirtatious*, but he could a hundred percent get behind it if it came with situations like *this*.

“You want me to do that,” Tony said, his voice rough, “I’ll make it happen, babe. Photos just for you. Maybe even a video for when we’re apart and you’re feeling particularly lonely.”

Loki licked his lips again, his eyes darkening further. Tony could feel and see Loki’s cock getting harder with every word they spoke. Tony was already eager to get his hands on it. Or, better still, finally get it *inside* him.

Loki’s fingers trailed up his chest, circling a nipple before gently brushing his jaw.

“What a gift you are, Anthony Stark,” Loki murmured.

Tony felt his cheeks heating slightly at the reverent tone, but before he could make a quip, Loki bent down and kissed him again. Tony closed his eyes and responded back. Their tongues met, but although desire still burned under his skin, the kiss was softer than expected. It reminded Tony that for all their passion and flirtations, it was *love* that burned between them. Tony cupped Loki’s waist, but soon found his hands wandering, just wanting to touch Loki and draw them closer.

When they broke apart for air, Tony turned his head and mouthed at Loki’s neck. His hands slid down to Loki’s pants, he slid them between their bodies until he could rub Loki’s arousal. Loki moaned and his spine curved as he tried to press them closer. The angle was awkward, but Tony kept his hand where it was, stimulating the mage’s growing erection.

“Can’t wait to have this in me,” he whispered.

Loki shuddered and Tony trailed his lips up to Loki’s earlobe. He sucked gently on it before giving a small nip.

“Can’t wait to have *you* fuck me.”

Loki groaned and a moment later he was pulling away, but he only shifted to move down Tony’s body to rest between his spread legs. Tony grinned and spread them wider. Loki’s cheeks were flushed and there was nothing but awe, desire and affection on his face. It was a look that went straight to Tony’s heart. It made his body burn with the sweetest combination of arousal, happiness and love.

He desperately wanted to touch Loki, but he didn’t want the mage to stop. When Loki touched his hips, his fingers slipping under Tony’s boxers, he lifted his hips. They were pulled down and removed. Tony’s cock was at half-mast and Loki was quick to grab the oil. He coated his fingers before gripping Tony’s erection.



Tony moaned and tilted back his head. He rocked his hips into Loki's strokes. They were confident. After the last few months, Loki knew how to touch him to bring Tony to the peak of pleasure and then over the edge. Tony was so focused on the hand on his cock, that he almost forgot about the other one – right until slick fingers nudged at his entrance. He didn't even startle, merely moaning and trying to spread his legs even further. Loki took the hint and pressed the first digit inside him.

It had been a while. Tony grimaced a little, but Loki's hand on his cock was a really good distraction.

“You're beautiful,” Loki murmured.

Tony's eyes fluttered open and he lifted his head to look down at his lover. Loki's pupils were dilated and his gaze was running over Tony's body.

“I do not know how you are mine,” he continued, his voice rough. “How you are here, welcoming me inside you, and writhing with pleasure as I prepare you.”

Tony panted; the words were as potently arousing as a hand on his cock.

“Loki,” he gasped. “God, Loki. Need you.”

Loki's gaze snapped to his face. He looked... Tony had never seen anyone look at him like that. It sent chills down his spine but warmth to his heart. Loki had slipped a second finger inside of him and his other hand was still working Tony's cock – but there was nothing but adoration in his gaze.

“My Anthony,” he whispered.

“My Loki,” he gasped back.

Loki surged up his body to kiss him. Tony groaned as it meant Loki let his cock go and removed his fingers – but at the same time, Tony didn't care. He wrapped his arms around Loki's shoulders and his legs around the mage's waist. He kissed him back with everything he had, wanting to expression all the devotion and desire he felt. His fingers tangled in the ends of Loki's hair while Loki grasped his hips and rocked their pelvises together. His cock brushed Loki's and they both groaned into the kiss.

Yet, before they could break apart, Tony felt Loki's seidr rush over his skin. It wasn't any different to usual, he would have barely noticed it, if his skin didn't suddenly feel overly sensitive. When he pulled back with a confused sound, his eyes widened to see they were both glowing a soft green. The whole *room* was glowing. He felt as if he could reach out and simply touch the magic. In fact, he tried, delighting to find the green tendrils were tangible.

Loki shuddered in response and Tony's gaze snapped to him. The mage's expression looked cracked open with vulnerability and need. The green of his eyes was almost entirely black. Tony curled his fingers around the magic and *grinned*. Loki's answering smile made Tony's heart skip a beat. He was kissed again. It was sudden and short, but no less passionate.

Loki's fingers were almost immediately back inside him. He wasn't wasting any time. Loki pushed inside and stretched him deeply. His fingers curled and that first brush of his prostate had Tony's head tipping back with a long moan of the mage's name. Loki's seidr seemed to pulse and Tony felt it over his skin like the softest most protective hug he'd ever experienced.

Tony had never wanted to respond back to something more. He ran his hands over Loki's skin, wishing he could give Loki back the same depth of feeling. Loki's magic made him feel like he was surrounded by Loki. It was as good as a stroke to his cock, as encompassing as the love in his chest – he just wanted more.

“Loki,” he gasped, his fingers digging into Loki's back while his fingers curled tighter around the energy in the air. “More. *Loki*.”

“Anthony,” Loki groaned back.

His fingers pressed into Anthony a few more times, thrusting and stretching him – but they were both too impatient and desperate for the next step.

When the head of Loki's cock pressed against him, Tony's breath caught, but the moment he started pressing inside, Tony felt like all the air had left his lungs. Loki's magic *flared*. It was almost too bright to see, but it pressed against Tony's skin. It made him feel hyper-sensitive. It made Loki pushing inside feel better than anything he'd ever experienced. There was nothing but *good* as it lit up his nerve-endings. His cock felt painfully hard and by the time Loki bottomed out, Tony felt like he was on the knife-edge of climax.

Loki's forehead dropped to his shoulder and he panted harshly. Loki's seidr seemed to pulse in time with his heartbeat.

“Loki,” he whimpered, his fingers gripping and flexing, his body quivering.

His lover pulled out before pushing back in and Tony groaned loudly. Tony clung tighter to Loki as every thrust sent exquisite pleasure through him. Loki's seidr was humming. It was loud in the room, mixing among the sounds of their gasps and moans.

Tony fought to keep his eyes open, not wanting to miss a moment. It was why he noticed something flickering burnt orange at the corner of his vision. But it was only for a moment before Loki's next thrust hit his prostate. Tony couldn't bite down on his hoarse curse, Loki groaned lowly before his thrusts started to speed up. Tony's eyes squeezed shut. When he felt Loki's seidr sink under his skin – he was gone.

It was the most intimate, intense thing he'd ever experienced. It made him feel like Loki was inside him in a way deeper than sex. It felt like something magnificent, something *more*. He shouted hoarsely and came without being touched. He heard Loki whimper his name before coming inside him. The green in the room flared and seemed to spiral around them before dissipating in a rush that left him strangely bereft.

Tony laid panting on the bed, trying to catch his breath and categorise everything he'd just experienced. Loki was lying on top of him, his own breathing uneven. Tony's eyes were shut, but a smile was on his face, right up until Loki pulled out of him.

Tony let out a small noise of protest and squinted open his eyes. Loki didn't go far but there was a small grimace on his lips. The haze of afterglow disappeared and Tony sat up a little better.

"Loki? What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry," Loki whispered, looking upset.

Tony frowned. "What for?"

"I wanted to be slower. To be good for you." He looked away. "I couldn't contain my seidr and you didn't give permission and-"

"Loki. Hey, Loki, no." He cupped Loki's cheek and turned the mage to face him. "It was *awesome*," he said softly but firmly. "We can always go slower next time. I love you and I love your seidr. It was *amazing*. You can include it any time. In fact..." his eyes unfocused as he remembered the feeling. "I almost *miss* it."

Loki pulled in a sharp breath. His hand touched Tony's chest.

"My seidr wanted to bond with you as much as I did," Loki confessed. "I could not hold it back, not when I – *we* both wanted it."

Tony stroked his cheek. "Well, I'm not going to be complaining. One of the most intense and *best* things I've had in a long time."

Loki grinned. He also pressed forward and kiss Tony, it was a languid, loving embrace and Tony shifted closer to better curl around his lover. Tony didn't ever want to stop. Unfortunately, they were quickly interrupted.

"Boss?" FRIDAY questioned, sounding hesitant.

Tony broke their embrace with a sigh. He shifted and looked up at the ceiling, feeling annoyed.

"What is it FRIDAY? It had better be the end of the world."

"No, Boss. I noticed during your... coupling with Mr Liesmith that an unfamiliar energy registered."

Tony frowned. "What kind of energy?"

"I am not sure, Boss, but based off scans I have taken of Mr Liesmith I believe it to be seidr."

Loki immediately sat up, looking on the alert. "I noticed no signs of intruders, FRIDAY."

"No, Sir," she answered. "I believe it came from... Boss."

Tony sucked in a breath and sat up straight, his eyes wide. He looked at Loki who seemed equally shocked. Tony remembered the colour he'd seen briefly.

“I saw something,” he murmured. “It was a dark orange colour.” He swallowed. “Like a flame.”

“My seidr might have coaxed it out of you,” Loki whispered. “Hel said you were capable. But I did not sense it.”

Tony shook his head. “It was only for a second.”

“Anthony, you do not understand,” Loki said, sounding stunned and yet at the same time, reverent. “To coax a dormant mage’s magic during such an intimate act.” He swallowed thickly. “That indicates something deeper than mere intimacy. That... that indicates *compatibility*.”

Tony frowned, sensing something more than just a similarity in personality was at play here.

“And that means something?”

“Mages can *bond*, Anthony,” Loki said. “Exchanging rare and potent binding vows are only possible for a select few and it means you and I... can.”

Tony’s eyebrows lifted high. “Well, hell. No wonder your seidr has always liked me so much.”

Loki nodded, still seeming a little shocked. Tony scooted closer and took the mage’s hand.

He stroked it gently while asking, “This is a good thing, right?”

“It is,” Loki said. “Never did I imagine I would *ever* be one of the few who could have this.”

He whispered it like a guilty confession. A dream he’d kept locked up tight as a ridiculous notion he couldn’t dwell on. Tony’s heart ached for the lonely mage that Loki had been, but he also felt *delight* over what he could now have – what *they* could now have.

“Then, we’ll look into it,” Tony said. He also flashed a bright smile. “And the fact I apparently have magic that looks like fucking *fire*. How cool is that? We’re going to have to do *all* the tests. Your seidr better get good at drawing mine out. I’m not resting until we can colour our bedroom in mixing shades.”

Loki finally seemed to shake out of his astonishment. He smiled.

“Let’s start with something smaller. I do not want to have you destroy the bed due to a lack of control.”

“I can always buy a new bed.”

“*Or*,” Loki insisted more firmly, “pass out through overuse of your seidr.”

Tony scrunched up his face. “Okay, that would be less fun in the middle of sex. We better get practicing then. You’ll have to show me all the tricks.” He waggled his eyebrows. “Maybe we can play teacher and student.”

Loki laughed. “You are *ridiculous*.”

“You love it,” Tony countered while leaning closer.

Loki’s expression turned softer. “I do,” he replied.

He also took the opportunity and pressed closer to share another kiss. Tony sighed happily. He was still buzzing with energy and ideas. He wanted to research the *hell* out of the bonds and his own magic – but it could wait for now.

All that mattered right this second was more of Loki’s lips on his; they’d have the rest of his life to work out the rest.

# Chapter 74

## Chapter Notes

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

In the following hours and days, Tony forgot about anything that wasn't Loki, their seidr and the ability to kiss, touch and *be* with his lover without any interruptions or worries. They spent an entire day in the lab, barely eating or sleeping (until FRIDAY threatened to cut all power to the mansion if they didn't take a break). They were trying to coax out Tony's magic (with minimal success). Apparently, his magic responded best to Loki's magic, but even then, it was still an innately dormant power that was going to need more than force of will to wake it up.

"You need a mage who specialises in such practices," Loki insisted. "It is not my forte and there is only so much my seidr can do."

Tony had grumbled but Loki had taken his hands and squeezed gently.

"I do not want to do something to inadvertently harm you by forcing your seidr out before it is ready."

Loki's concern had eventually made Tony subside. They'd managed a few readings of Tony's seidr and to see the burnt orange spark from his palms and his chest.

"Hands are a common conduit," Loki had said, watching him with bemusement. "Your chest, less so, but I would imagine your subconscious is used to channelling power from such a spot."

It made sense since his seidr would mimic the Iron Man armour. Which made Tony incredibly excited to meld his technology with his magic. Loki had shaken his head assuring him he was *far* from reaching such a point. Tony had countered that he better start with Loki's seidr to get a better grip on the science behind it.

Which had started their *second* day in the lab as he played with Loki's seidr and his tech. Tony was more than a little proud and pleased that Loki's magic took to repulsor technology easily. Their compatibility for the bond, it seemed, extended out beyond just having *really* good sex.

And it was only when his remarks and quips about the bonds had Loki changing from amused and happy to *pensive* that Tony remembered the mage's expression on the beach. They had an uncanny similarity about them.

It was why, he asked FRIDAY to kick them out of the lab at a reasonable time so they could have dinner. Loki immediately swept into the kitchen, taking the option of takeout away, but Tony didn't mind. He loved watching Loki prepare food and dice meat. But then, he liked watching Loki do anything.

But, he'd had a reason to cut short lab time, and he wasn't about to avoid it.

“So, you were saying these magical bonds are like hardcore mage relationship goals, right?”

Loki paused briefly, but quickly continued his movements.

“Yes. They are designed to link two mages seidr. It would be an unthinkable action normally, but when seidr bond in this way...” he trailed off, before shaking his head. “Well, it makes the mages *stronger*. Instead of merely being able to draw on your own seidr, you can draw on your partners. The impact of the mixed seidr is akin to ten times the mage's normal power.”

Tony whistled. “Damn. And with a powerhouse like you involved in that kind of bond, you'd probably crush *anything* in your path.”

Loki snorted. “Yes, well. There is a reason these bonds are so difficult and...”

He hesitated and Tony prompted, “And?”

“And take time,” Loki admitted quietly.

Tony zeroed in on the mage's hesitant tone. He felt like they were finally getting to the core of what was bothering Loki.

“How much time?” he asked.

Loki put the diced food into the pan without answering him. Tony watched Loki, silently waiting for a response. Loki didn't give him one.

“Loki?” he eventually prompted.

“I am unsure of the exact timeframe of a Midgardian and a Jotun mage bond,” Loki answered stiffly.

Tony's eyebrows rose. The fact Loki had called himself a *Jotun* spoke volumes about his comfort with the topic. It also said something else.

“You're avoiding the topic,” Tony pointed out, but kept his tone soft. “You must have an idea.”

“I never researched these bonds extensively,” Loki continued. “Any information I had would be circumstantial and hardly set in stone.”

Tony stood up and closed the distance to reach Loki. He wrapped his arms around the mage and pressed his face to the man's back.

“Whatever you're worried about,” Tony said quietly. “Just say it. I love you, remember? You don't have to be scared of what I'll do or say.”

Loki's hands had stilled over their dinner. Tony waited patiently.

Eventually, Loki answered, his voice low, “These bonds can take *decades*, Anthony. Between some long-lived beings, it can be *centuries*.”

A lump lodged in Tony’s throat and he swallowed hard as he realised what Loki already had.

“Oh,” he said, disappointment hard to keep out of his voice.

Because decades? Yeah, maybe he’d be around long enough to complete that one. But *centuries*? He didn’t have a chance in making a bond with Loki if it took *that* long.

“Anthony?” Loki questioned.

He placed a hand over Tony’s where it rested against his stomach. Tony closed his eyes. He’d been pushing Loki to talk about this, now he had to face the consequences; mainly his deflated hopes about sharing a bond with Loki and giving the man he loved something he’d wanted for centuries.

It also meant, bringing up the pink elephant in the room; his mortality.

“I guess we’ve needed to talk about this for a while,” Tony said quietly, trying to keep the roughness out of his voice.

He pulled in a deep breath; letting the smell of a homecooked dinner and *Loki* comfort him.

“I’m mortal and you’re not,” Tony said, forcing the statements out with flat and honest words. “You’ve got centuries left and I’ve got decades. Maybe.” He swallowed. “So, how do we want to play this? Assuming we stay together for the rest of... well,” he couldn’t finish that. “If we stay together,” he continued, “do you even want to try for a bond? Or do you just want to keep it as it is?”

Loki’s hand tightened over his and Tony almost winced, but Loki was quick to relieve the pressure. He also took the food off the stove and turned in Tony’s hold. Tony didn’t exactly want to face Loki head on for this, but he didn’t fight his lover’s motions.

He opened his eyes and looked into Loki’s face. It was turbulent. He looked worried and pained. He took Tony’s hands and held them in the air between them.

“Anthony, I am in love with you. Of *course* I wish to bond with you.”

“But it might take centuries,” Tony pointed out. “Centuries I don’t have.”

That same conflicted look from the beach reappeared and Tony frowned a little.

“Anthony,” he said, and this time it came out slowly, almost *carefully*. “I have made mention to you about travelling the realms with me. I have been meaning to ask you for days. The ambassadors have extended invitations for us both to visit. I wish to show you the realms and the greater universe.”

Tony’s confusion deepened over the sudden change of topic.



“Well, I don’t know why you hesitated because, um, *hell yeah*. I’d be up for it in seconds. Just say the words and I’ll be packing my bags.”

“Your commitments here-”

“*Really* wouldn’t hold me back from space travel.”

“Even if our travels took years?” he questioned, intensely holding Tony’s gaze. “You said yourself you would want extended time on each planet.”

Tony’s lips parted with hesitation. Because yes, he *had* said that and he wasn’t taking it back. But well, their discussion about his shortened lifespan did make him want to pack in as much as he could. He’d *want* to linger everywhere for months on end, but it probably wouldn’t be plausible.

“I would spend as much time as I could in space with you,” Tony eventually answered. “It wouldn’t be a yearning to return that would draw me back.” He swallowed. “It would be a lack of time.”

“But if you *had* time?” Loki asked.

Tony frowned. “But I-”

“*If* you had time,” Loki said harshly, “what would you do with the realms? With *me*?”

Tony held his lover’s gaze, seeing the desperation and the intensity. It made him answer honestly.

“I’d go everywhere with you. I’d take as long as we wanted on each planet and learn everything I could.” He swallowed again. “I’d bond with you and *be* with you for as long as I had.”

Loki finally smiled, something full of relief and happiness. It sent a traitorous spark of hope through him.

“Loki?”

Loki squeezed his hands and drew them up to rest against his chest.

“You mentioned ways you would confess the depth of your heart to me,” Loki said. “I have conjured *dozens* of scenarios in which I would ask you this. I thought it would be further in the future. That I would propose it on a favoured realm in a spot we have made our own.”

“Loki,” Tony said, his heart beating rapidly. His mind catching on *propose*. “Are you asking me to...?”

“Extend your life to match mine?” Loki said. “Yes.”

Tony’s breath caught. “Can you even *do* that?”

“I am a prince of Asgard with favour and sway among the realms.” He smiled faintly. “I am favoured by Hel. I *can* make this happen.” He hesitated, looking uncertain. “If you are willing-”

Tony cut the man off with a harsh kiss. It didn’t last long before he pulled back.

“Of *course*, I fucking am,” Tony hissed. His body feeling like it was trembling with excitement, relief and happiness. “God, Loki. Why would I ever say no to that? To *you*.”

Loki laughed and pressed their foreheads together. He raised Tony’s hands to his lips and kissed the knuckles.

“My love,” Loki whispered. “I never wish to spend another day of my life without you.”

“Me either,” Tony replied, his voice rough.

Loki kissed him and Tony melted into the embrace. He pressed against his lover; their clasped hands locked between their chests. Tony just squeezed them tighter. He didn’t know how this was his life but he knew he wouldn’t ever change a thing.

He’d offered a deal to a quasi-enemy after a betrayal by his teammates. He’d signed a non-betrayal contract with a man known for lying. He’d done everything in order to defeat an enemy that a mythical being had taken out for them.

He’d faked a relationship but fallen in love along the way. He had dormant magic which was sparking to life and he’d practically gotten *engaged* to a magical space alien who was going to extend his life. He was in love. He was *happy*.

And no matter the wild ride, the pain and bullshit and heartbreak that he’d gone through to get him here, Tony knew every *second* had been worth it.

The kiss broke and he smiled at his lover.

“Hey Lokes,” he said softly. “Does this mean we should hold our very gay wedding on Asgard?”

The laughter Loki let out warmed Tony down to his toes. He didn’t know if it was good luck or someone looking out for them, but somehow, despite all the hurdles and enemies that had come at them - everything had turned out perfect. And he couldn't wait to see what would happen next.

## Chapter End Notes

Right. So. This story has been swinging closer and closer to completion for months, but I've never quite known *when* it would happen.

But, as you might have seen... apparently, it happened now. Much to my genuine surprise. But, I don't want to change it. I like it here. ~~And ngl, I've spent YEARS wanting to abandoned this but stubbornness has kept me going.~~

What I *will* do however, is write an epilogue. I have notes on a number of things I plan to cover BUT! This is where I'm offering you, my lovely readers, to pipe up about anything you think has been left unsaid or you'd like to see tied up. I will then try and include everything in said epilogue so it can feel as complete as possible.

Thank you to everyone for sticking around and reading this monster of a WIP. I hope it's been worth the ride, even if it has screeched to something of a sudden halt ^^;

# Epilogue - Part 1

## Chapter Notes

RIGHT. SO.

Life has been hectic and this took a while to get worked on, *AND* I received so many requests for the epilogue that there was over 2.5k of notes for it XD

So, I've decided that the epilogue is going to be multiple parts. Therefore, surprise! This story still has a bit to go XD

I've listed it as "80 chapters" but that may change depending on how the epilogue works itself out. I'll try and update this with greater speed. We'll see how I manage ^^;;

Thanks, as always to the lovely **tarot\_card** for reading and advising on the chapter!

AND A MASSIVE THANK YOU TO **SALAMANDERINK**, **SELYSIN** AND **THEORYTALE** WHO HELPED ME CULL 61 TAGS. Because AO3 would not let me post until I did that ^^;;;

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

Tony had been joking about the big gay wedding on Asgard. He'd wanted Loki to laugh. It turned out Loki had wanted to make it a reality.

He hadn't explained it immediately. They'd both been too distracted by kissing each other and returning to bed so they could enjoy the pure happiness the moment had brought.

It was in the aftermath over coffee and tea that Loki had offhandedly mentioned officiating it.

Because, apparently the simplest way to extend his life was to use an old Asgardian Law. It was so old, dust-ridden and unused that most of the Aesir didn't know it existed. Because, who married a creature so *underdeveloped* that they didn't live for centuries?

When Tony had questioned about Jane and why it hadn't been suggested to Thor, Loki pointed out Odin would not want a mortal to become Queen. Additionally, Loki doubted Thor had thought that far ahead, nor would he have the sense or wit to bargain for one successfully.

Tony thought it was all the better for Jane that she'd jumped ship.

Loki went on to explain that there *was* a tree and there *were* golden apples. They were in a secret part of Asgard's capital. The location was only known by the King, Gatekeeper and Guardian of the Garden.

Loki had uncovered information on it while exploring the library. He'd then pieced together the location and used his seidr to gain access.

Tony had still been dubious that Odin would ever let him have one *or* that they'd have a chance in hell of getting married on Asgard. But Loki's eyes had twinkled as he'd made Tony promise to give him a week after their return to New York to look into the subject.

Tony had agreed, mostly because he was too busy *enjoying* their time in Malibu and poking at his new magic. A long future was something he wanted with Loki, but he trusted his lover to have a plan. When Loki needed him, he'd ask.

And he *did* ask, or rather, he disappeared for a day after they returned to New York, only to bring him, Bruce and Rhodey together in the penthouse. He'd looked *gleeful*. Tony had been curious but *not* anticipating the discussion to be about golden apples or Asgard. Because, why would he have rounded up their friends for that?

"Excellent," Loki said, nodding at them all. "I am glad you were all able to be present."

"You made it sound pretty important," Rhodey said. "You also teleported *into* the base to get me here." He glanced at Tony warily. "There isn't another alien threat, is there?"

"I don't know," he looked at Loki. "*Is there?*"

Loki's smile seemed to grow wider. He looked almost *giddy*.

"No. Rather, I believe it is *quite* the contrary. At least, should everything go to plan."

Tony squinted at his lover, trying to work out exactly what he meant. It started to become clear when the air before them shimmered an unnatural blackish-blue. A moment later the very fabric of everything seemed to *shift* and Hel stepped into the penthouse. The colour distortion was gone a moment later but Tony still tasted ozone and something that reminded him of her blueberry-tasting tea.

"I thank you for taking the time to speak with us, Hel," Loki said, bowing lowly in respect.

Rhodey and Bruce immediately did the same and Tony wasn't far behind. There weren't many people he would bow to, but Hel? Yeah, he'd bend all the way down at the waist for her. Hel had the very faintest smile when Tony straightened. She looked over all of them, nodding softly before returning to Loki.

"Your proposal has many merits, Loki."

"I thought it might to a guardian of the universe such as yourself," Loki demurred.

Her smile grew almost imperfectly. She then looked away from him and stepped forward to Tony. He swallowed, watching the unnerving way half her body seemed to flicker in and out of its skeletal form. When she reached him, she lifted her hand, hovering it over his body.

"I see the seedling has unfurled."

“Um. You mean my magic? Yeah, uh.” He cleared his throat. “Loki’s seidr helped with that.”

She caught his gaze and Tony got the distinct impression she *knew* what had happened and was amused. He didn't blush, but she made him come close. Her hand returned to her side.

“It will aid your quest,” she stated. “I will add to your favour. The bond of mages can create power untold. *Your* balance will anchor chaos and soften many hearts.”

Tony frowned; any embarrassment forgotten. “Wait. Are you offering to *help* us?” He started to smile and he glanced at Loki who looked smug. “You asked her to weigh in, didn’t you?”

“Hel can appreciate the benefits of warriors whom will help protect the balance of life in the realms. Not every day will she awaken a being who will destroy our threats. The universe needs *heroes*. Men and women whom can be trusted and whom can develop and change as time progresses. Mortals are remarkably good at that.”

Tony’s eyes widened and he suddenly made the connection. Rhodey and Bruce were oblivious. They each wore a puzzled frown as they listened to the conversation. They hadn’t clicked yet because they didn’t know what he and Loki had decided. And as it started to become real to *him*, Tony felt pure excitement. He’d never imagined that his choice to be with Loki could still allow him to keep the people he cared about.

“With all due respect,” Rhodey began, the words obviously for the benefit of Hel. He looked completely confused. “What is going on?”

“Loki and I kind of got engaged,” Tony said, already beaming. “We started making this mage bond, but I kind of need to be around a few centuries for it to happen fully. So, Loki wants us to get married in order to get me a life extension. And I *think*, he’s bargained a way to get you and Brucey one too.”

The room was silent. Rhodey stared at him, looking a little bug-eyed. Bruce was blinking rapidly.

“Let me see if I got this,” Rhodey said slowly. “You’re getting married?”

“Yup.”

“You’re getting some kind of magical bond?”

“Because I have magic.”

“Because you have magic,” Rhodey repeated slowly. “And you’re going to try and live longer?”

“We are not trying but *succeeding*,” Loki added smugly. “With the Queen of Helheim aiding our cause, it will be an advancement soon gained.”

Rhodey swallowed. “And you’re offering it to Bruce and me?”

“Just think about it Rhodey,” Tony said eagerly while stepping closer. “Space travel! Centuries of living! We’ll be our very own Star Trek ship!”

“I did not intend us to have a ship, Anthony,” Loki remarked, but he was grinning. “But, if you so wish, I am certain we could procure a small but well-equipped vessel.”

“See! Imagine it, guys!” he spun around. “The four of us in space, saving the galaxy!” He paused and frowned. “Wait, didn’t you say there was another galactic group of heroes?”

“Yes, the so-called ‘Guardians of the Galaxy’.”

“Right. We’ll need a better name than that. Something with Universe in the title, maybe?”

Loki rolled his eyes. “Perhaps wait until you have their *agreement*, Anthony?”

Tony had to shelve the ideas he already had for the ship’s colours and weaponry to focus back on his friends. Bruce still looked shocked while Rhodey’s expression had changed to something more pensive. Tony felt a wave of nerves, because, it had been a rather sudden announcement and it wasn’t something *everyone* would accept without thought.

Reaching out, he touched his friend’s arm. Rhodey’s gaze had been inward but it focused back on him.

“Honey bear?” he questioned.

Rhodey’s lips twitched. His gaze also flickered over to Loki before coming back to him. Slowly, his grin fully manifested.

“God knows how I’m going to handle *centuries* of you two surprising me with shit like this.”

The moment it registered; Tony let out a triumphant shout before throwing his arms around his friend in a tight, ecstatic hug. Because Rhodey was his best friend through thick and thin, through arguments and differing opinions. This man was his God damn *rock* and he hadn’t realised how much he’d been scared and sad to leave him behind until he knew he didn’t *have* to.

Rhodey hugged him back tightly and Tony languished in the fact his best friend was going to be with him on this crazy ass journey into whatever the universe held. It might not be straight away (he doubted Rhodey would leave Earth immediately) but it *would* happen. Tony planned to have that man on his soon-to-be-gained ship and trekking the universe with him and Loki.

When he pulled back, he gave his friend one more grin before looking over his shoulder at Bruce. His smile immediately slipped.

“Bruce?”

The man had his arms crossed and his expression was tight. Everyone in the room had turned to him at Tony’s call of his name. Tony already knew before he even said it.

“Thank you for the offer,” Bruce said, nodding at first Loki and then Hel. “But I don’t want to live forever.”

Tony swallowed, feeling the pain of that hit hard.

“It wouldn’t be forever, Bruce,” Tony still tried. “Just, you know, a few more centuries. Plenty of time to experiment on things throughout the universe. Think of all the Science we could do!”

Bruce smiled faintly but shook his head.

“Thanks, Tony, but my life has been eventful enough for one lifetime, let alone more.”

Tony had nothing to say to that. He certainly wasn’t going to push his friend into something he’d only regret.

“You shall still have greater time than most,” Hel remarked, drawing everyone’s attention.

She stepped closer and lifted her hand. Bruce twitched and his skin rippled green. Everyone tensed but nothing else happened. Hel lowered her hand.

“He will not go quietly. He will extend your span on this coil to match the others you have housed beneath this ward.”

*Fuck*, Tony thought, especially when Bruce looked resigned. He didn’t even seem *surprised*. It made Tony remember one of their discussions on the hellicarrier when the Hulk had saved Bruce from suicide. He hadn’t thought it through, but clearly Bruce had. If the Hulk was able to save him from injury, apparently, he could also make him live longer than an average human. It wouldn’t be permanent, but if Hel’s comment was right, he’d be around at least as long as Steve and Bucky.

“Well,” Tony said, not quite sure how to recover the conversation from *that*. “Um. Space travel in the meantime? Retirement in a few decades?”

“Yeah, Tony,” Bruce said, still sounding tired, but thankfully not opposed. “I’ll travel with you.”

Tony brightened a little. He also crossed the room and pulled Bruce into a hug. It wasn’t as exuberant as his embrace with Rhodey, but he squeezed the man all the tighter. Bruce didn’t have a true choice about how long he stuck around, but Tony could be selfishly grateful he had his friend for a little while longer.

When he pulled back, he slapped the man on the shoulder before turning to face the others. Rhodey was standing by Loki and discussing something. Loki looked amused but he was nodding seriously. Hel was standing placidly in the middle of the room, seemingly unbothered by their conversations.

Abruptly, her gaze flicked to him. Tony tensed. The intensity of her dark eyes always made him feel rather *small* when underneath it. She was a being that had been around for millennia and had seen things he couldn’t comprehend. It made him abruptly remember his manners.



“Would you, uh, like anything to drink or eat?”

Her smile had never truly left, but his words made it grow. It didn't reveal her teeth, but he got the distinct feeling she was not just entertained but *fond* of him.

“I am grateful for your hospitality.” She nodded regally. “But there are places we must be.”

Tony frowned. “Wait, we're going somewhere?”

She raised her hand and tapped a single finger to the air. The very fabric of the universe seemed to pull apart like strings ripping from a seam. Tony's mouth fell open. The other side revealed the golden streets of Asgard's capital.

“Holy shit,” he whispered. It was followed by the understanding of just *what* it meant. “Oh shit.” He glanced between her and Loki. “We're doing it *now*?”

Because, yes, he'd agreed to a golden apple and to marry Loki, but he'd expected a bit more time to prepare. Loki crossed the room, clearly noticing his surprise. Loki clasped his hand and brought it to his lips for a soft kiss.

“I would see you gain the gifts to make you more durable at the greatest speed,” he admitted. “Long I have feared something occurring to take you from me. If you are in agreement, I would have you be safe and be *mine* without a moment's delay.”

Tony swallowed. He held Loki's gaze which was blazing with determination and love. He meant every word and Tony could see no reason to refuse. What did it matter if it was today, tomorrow or a month from now? They had Hel on their side ready to walk them into Asgard to get an apple.

Who was he to throw away dramatic effect?

“If you can put me in a tux, babe. I'll walk down that aisle with you.”

Loki grinned, his dimples showing. He also bent down and kissed Tony.

Closing his eyes, Tony brought a hand to Loki's cheek, needing to touch his lover as they sealed their continued promise with another affection brush of lips. When they withdrew, Loki pressed a further kiss to his forehead before pulling back. He tugged Tony close even while looking over his shoulder.

“Shall you join us?” he questioned Rhodey.

Rhodey gave a laugh that seemed both disbelieving and wry. He rubbed a hand over his face, but any indecision he had didn't seem to last long.

“God damn it,” he groaned. “FRIDAY send a message to my CO. I have no idea when I'm going to be coming back and apparently, I'll be a *god* when I do.”

“Demi-god,” Tony chimed in. “Not that I really believe it.” He frowned. “Hey wait, does that mean we'll gain dominion over something?”

“Not immediately,” Loki remarked, smirking. “Allow a few decades and perhaps you too will have a title to call your own.”

Tony pulled back and rubbed his hands together. Already making plans.

“God of Machinery and Robots, here I come.”

Loki laughed softly and shook his head while Rhodey came to stand with them. He eyed the portal with a mixture of curiosity and wariness. Tony turned back to Bruce.

“Come on, Bruce.”

“I’m not gaining an apple, Tony,” he pointed out.

“Maybe not. But are you really going to stay on Earth and miss the wedding of the century? And what about an opportunity to Hulk smash the homophobes?” Bruce sighed but he was already starting to smile. Tony tried to sweeten the pot. “And exploring a new world! Sneaking into the royal libraries for science!”

“Or just help keep me from getting these two idiots killed,” Rhodey drawled.

“Hey!” Tony complained.

“Yes, that was quite uncalled for, Rhodes,” Loki remarked. “*I* will hardly be in need of assistance.”

Tony scowled. “That’s rude.”

“Accurate though,” Rhodey replied. “I do have more faith in Loki at this point.”

“Betrayal on all fronts!” He complained.

Yet, despite his mock indignation and the chuckling of his lover and friends, he was keeping an eye on Bruce. He could see the man slowly softening and it was why he didn’t persist with his more light-hearted banter. Instead, he held the man’s gaze and spoke more seriously, “I’d like to have another friend at our wedding, Bruce.”

“You don’t even know if you’ll be getting married while you’re there,” he tried, but Tony could already see him crumpling.

“But it’s worth coming just in case, right?”

Tony knew the moment he’d won as Bruce sighed loudly. Yet despite the outward show of resignation, his gaze was soft as he slowly walked the distance to join them.

“I don’t know if this is a good idea, Tony,” Bruce tried once more. “The Hulk doesn’t like the stories about Asgard anymore than I do.”

“I don’t like them either,” Rhodey interjected. He came around and clapped Bruce companionably on the shoulder. “But that’s why we’re going to be better in a group. If they

try and give Loki or Tony any shit. We'll be here to show them what a *dumb* decision that is to make."

Bruce sighed again and rubbed a hand over his face. But he still gave a small nod by the end. Tony took it as acceptance and looked back at Hel who was waiting patiently.

When she had everyone's attention she stated, "You will follow me individually. There will be little disruption."

Her gaze also ran over them and Tony felt his skin tingle. He glanced down only to laugh. Hel had beaten Loki to it. He was in his favourite suit. When he glanced at the others, he saw that Rhodey was in his dress uniform, Loki was in his Asgardian formal wear and Bruce was in jumper and slacks combination that was both formal yet relaxed. It fit the man well. He seemed surprised even as he touched it.

"I left this in another country," he murmured. He looked at Hel. "How did you find these?"

"They are yours. That which you wished to have present."

*What the hell? Did she read our minds or something?*

Tony was a little put out by that, but like many things with Hel, he decided to err on the side of caution and be grateful she was on *their* side. Discomfort had no place in a situation when the person liked you but could still squish you with a thought.

Loki seemed to think the same as he inclined his head, "Thank you for considering our wishes, Hel."

She nodded and turned from them.

"You will follow me individually," she repeated.

A moment later she was stepping through the portal onto Asgard's streets.

Loki hurried to follow her request and without any hesitation, he went through the rip in space. Tony glanced back at his friends and gave them a confident smile. After all, Asgard might be the last place in the universe he'd like to be, but he was going to have his lover and friends with him. Not to mention their most powerful ally.

Glancing at the ceiling, Tony said, "Hold the fort for me, Fri and message me if we have any problems. I'll make sure to film the wedding for you."

"I'll clear your schedule for a suitable honeymoon, Boss."

Tony grinned. "That's my girl!"

He saluted her before turning to the portal that still flickered black and blue around the edges. He didn't try and overthink it as he stepped through. Tony knew he was ready for anything the universe and Asgard might throw at them.

## Chapter End Notes

So, be prepared, the epilogue is basically going to be a bucketload of self indulgent fluff as chosen by the readers! (With a smidge of my own concepts thrown in). I hope you all liked this and will like the others :)

# Chapter 76

## Chapter Notes

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

Loki stepped onto the familiar streets of Asgard. He had arrived on this realm many times and in varying different ways. None were so grand or so well *accompanied* as this.

Hel had chosen the main street for their entrance. It was the one which led all visiting dignitaries to the royal palace from the bifrost. She had chosen to appear in a populated area and even now the Aesir were gasping and hurriedly sketching bows. They looked at Hel with a mixture of awe and fear.

Word, after all, travelled *fast* in the Nine Realms.

When Loki heard the portal crackle, he turned and immediately held out his hand. Anthony's expression was briefly amused even as he took Loki's offering, allowing Loki to draw him close. His lover did not need stabilisation, but it further indicated their closeness and Anthony's *trust* in him.

Rhodes came next followed by Banner. They were both doing a remarkable job at keeping their faces devoid of any of the awe or excitement they must be feeling at visiting another planet. Instead, they seemed to have a level of *disdain* and Loki knew that reaction had much to do with their support of *him*.

It warmed him more than he could truly express, and it was one of many reasons why he had offered each of them an apple. While he understood Banner's decision, he was very grateful that Rhodes had agreed. He was enjoying getting to know the man and truly *befriend* him and he did not want mortality to shorten that experience.

"So, here it is guys," Anthony began. "Asgard in all it's not-so-great glory. It sucks we couldn't have given your first visit to Alfheim. But, needs must, you know?"

"I must admit, I am curious to visit Alfheim," Banner remarked. "You learned a lot of your magic there, didn't you, Loki?"

"I did."

"Definitely a bucket list place," Rhodes said, nodding firmly.

Loki chuckled. "I shall take you all to visit the elves when we have business that is less pressing."

Anthony shifted closer to him and lowered his voice, but still pitched it enough to hear, "As long as we get to go on our own too. Our friends are great company, but I want some time with just you, me, a bed and your seidr."

Loki could not repress his smile over the glorious man beside him. He also bent down and gently kissed his lips in a chaste but honest show of his affection.

It could not last nearly as long as he wished as he needed to pull back and give his attention to Hel. She was waiting patiently and he lowered his head in a sign of respect.

“Apologises for any delay we may have caused.”

Her lips gave the barest twitch but she gave a very faint nod. She also turned and started to walk towards the palace. Loki kept a hold on Anthony’s hand as he moved to follow her. Banner moved to flank Anthony while Rhodes moved to stand at his side. Loki felt true pride to be walking with these Midgardians.

Loki did note with amusement that their arrival and progress towards the palace was quickly gaining a curious following of Aesir. His companions were not oblivious to it either. Their gazes tracked the growing collection of men and women of all ages.

“We could almost call this a parade.” Anthony’s eyes sparkled. “Add a couple of rainbows and it could be Pride.”

Rhodes sniggered. Loki repressed an amused smile just imagining the Midgardian celebration decorating Asgard’s streets. It was a foolish endeavour as the Aesir would never truly accept it, but Loki was happy to continue the light-hearted discussion.

“Ah, but do not forget, Anthony, Asgard already has a large rainbow structure.”

Anthony snapped his fingers. “You’re right. All they need now is a couple of demonstrations and a glitter bomb. I’m sure I could have FRIDAY-”

“No, Tony,” Banner interrupted.

Anthony pouted at him. “But Bruuuuuuceee.”

“He’s right, Tones,” Rhodes interjected. “That’s a waste of good glitter. You should explode it during the next thunderstorm that hits the tower.”

This time, Loki snorted but it was hidden by Anthony’s outright cackle.

“Oh, Rhodey. I *love* the way your mind works. I’ll have to make it in pink. The more flamboyant the better.”

Rhodes’ smile was devious. Banner was shaking his head, but when Loki glanced at him, he was sure he did not miss the amusement in the man’s gaze.

“Perhaps I could help the glitter adhere to one’s hair and clothing,” Loki suggested. “I have seen pictures of men with, hmm, glitter beards are they not called?”

Anthony laughed again. “Oh God, Lokes. *Please* do it.”

“I shall do whatever you wish, Anthony,” Loki said.

He also lifted Anthony's hand and brought it to his lips in a gentle kiss. Anthony's expression softened.

Their conversation dwindled shortly after as the crowd was growing louder and Loki's affectionate gesture had caused a few displeased murmurs. The three Midgardians all glared in the direction of the mutterings, but Loki ignored them. He cared little for what the narrow-minded Aesir had to think. The people whom mattered were at his side.

And, just as importantly, the Queen of Helheim walked with *them*. A few snide comments could not dim the joy and satisfaction he felt. It was a feeling he knew would only grow stronger the closer they got to the Grand Hall and Odin's throne. After all, there was little preparation one could do when a Queen broke through the barriers of realms with a flick of her wrist and brought unwanted guests with her. Because they *would* be unwanted. Of that he had no doubt.

And yet, not more than a few moments after thinking it, an unexpected and excited face broke through the crowd. Fandral smiled widely and waved.

"Prince Loki," he called. "Anthony!"

He came towards them, but paused to give a low bow to Hel. She looked over her shoulder in a gesture that very quickly implied she was checking with *them* as to Fandral's welcome. When they made no protest, she turned her attention back towards the palace they were approaching. Fandral fell into step next to Rhodes.

"It is good to see you as well, Banner," Fandral said cheerfully. He then smiled at Rhodes. "And you must be Anthony's famed friend. He has spoken of you and your mighty fighting prowess!"

"Fandral, right?" Rhodes asked.

The swordsman inclined his head and Rhodes even offered a faint smile. It was not quite friendly, but it was polite enough that anyone watching would see Fandral was at least reasonably welcomed among them.

"How's things been here, Fandral?" Anthony questioned.

Fandral's smile seemed to grow a little strained. "I am afraid there is little I can offer you in the way of news. I have spent much of my time with Garðr; training him and crafting a bond."

Loki narrowed his eyes and examined the man. He had always been easy to read.

"Am I to believe that your place among the court and among Thor's chosen and favoured has been minimised lately, Fandral?"

Fandral gave an awkward laugh and rubbed the back of his neck. "It is well, Loki. I have many a tavern and friendly ear to find among the townsfolk."

Loki's lips pursed. He might not have spent much time on Asgard lately, but he knew the machinations of the court and the influence Thor could bring. If Fandral was pushed out due to the Thunderer's anger or the court's disapproval, it would be difficult to regain his position or win many friends to his side.

Thor, like the Allfather, was not a person to be crossed.

Loki could admit, he felt somewhat *guilty* for it. Fandral had taken his side, had offered him kindness, and in response, his reputation had been damaged.

"We'll that's a piece of shit," Anthony said, noticeably annoyed.

"Ah, it is well, Anthony," Fandral insisted, his smile becoming more genuine. "But what has brought you to Asgard?" His expression turned troubled. "Are we to fear a new threat to the realms?"

"No," Hel answered for them.

She looked over her shoulder at Fandral. This time, Fandral swallowed under her stare. She did not stop walking, seemingly unimpeded by looking in a different direction. When she finally turned away, Fandral breathed out surreptitiously.

"There are grander things to speak of," Hel replied.

"Grander?" Fandral enquired, glancing at Loki.

Loki smiled faintly. He would not reveal the truth of their arrival yet, if Hel saw fit to keep it quiet, he would not alter that decision. Loki knew it would be *far* more satisfying to do it in the Grand Hall before the court and where Odin would not have a single whisper of preparation.

"You may join us, if you wish," Loki offered. "Or you may stand to the side, I will not further damage your status if you do not wish it."

Fandral laughed and shook his head.

"Do not be ridiculous, Loki." He leant across Rhodey to clap him on the back. "I know not how long you, Anthony, and your friends shall be present. I shall not simply leave and miss an opportunity to speak to you all!"

Loki smiled. "If that is the case then you are welcome to stay."

"Yeah," Anthony agreed. "Hell, if we have to head back to Earth and things are pretty shit here, maybe you can tag along and have a vacation at the tower."

He glanced at Loki who nodded his acceptance. He was not against the notion of another useful ally nearby. Fandral had also proven himself deserving of some consideration and kindness. Anthony looked back at Fandral with a grin.

"It's settled then, you say the word, and we'll show you around my planet."



“I would greatly enjoy time on your realm and visiting your home,” Fandral enthused.

Loki had to wonder if that time might prove sooner rather than later. The Aesir around them were not openly hostile, but Loki had spent many centuries as the most disliked and scorned person upon Asgard. If Fandral was soon to be taking that role, he doubted the swordsman’s cheer would remain undaunted in the face of it.

And, if left to fend for himself, there was the chance Fandral might choose the easier route and turn against him. Many had done so in the past.

Loki eyed the swordsman thoughtfully. It was by far the wiser option to remove Fandral from Asgard and further entice him to their side. Fandral was already keen to befriend Banner. In truth, it might be useful to have another person whom would be unlikely to quake in front of the Hulk. Fandral would likely chatter to the Beast as easily as the scientist.

However, he could not immediately continue his plans for enfolding Fandral further among their growing group of warriors. His attention was instead forced to shift to Hel and their arrival at the steps which led to the palace. Hel walked with the grace and power befitting her status of a Queen. They followed her in silence, but Loki could feel the energy growing, not only of their own anticipation, but that of the crowd.

When they reached the main doors, the Einherjar let them pass without comment or request. The Grand Hall’s doors were already open and he noticed with surprise and delight that there were already a number of ambassadors and dignitaries present.

*I see why she wished to have us upon Asgard **now**.*

Anthony subtly closed the distance between them while also making their linked hands obvious. Despite the action, Loki knew that Hel was the main source of everyone’s focus. She had played her hand against Thanos and Loki doubted anyone would be forgetting exactly what she was capable of inflicting were she inclined to turn against another being.

Hel did not stop until just before Odin’s throne. The Allfather sat with Gungnir in his hand. He seemed relaxed, but Loki could see the near imperceptible annoyance as he looked them over. Loki smiled, not bothering to hide his amusement at the situation.

“We were not expecting you, Queen Hel,” Odin remarked.

“I come upon the request of Asgard’s prince.”

Odin’s eye bored into Loki. His anger could not have been more obvious. Loki’s smile didn’t shift.

“And what does he hope to gain from your presence?” Odin questioned.

“Gain it, he already has.”

Hel turned her head ever so slightly and Loki understood it for the cue that it was. He squeezed Anthony’s hand before releasing it and stepping forward.

“Odin Allfather,” Loki began formally, “I come to petition a golden apple for my betrothed and future husband Anthony Stark.” There were a series of gasps and whispers from the crowd, Loki ignored them. “I also petition the right for the mortal hero James Rhodes to gain a golden apple. He is a famed warrior and protector of his planet, and as we all have seen, the need for warriors has never been greater.”

Odin’s expression was stony, not a flicker of emotion crossing it.

“The threat to our realms has passed. Such warriors are no longer necessary.”

“For the immediate future, perhaps,” Loki allowed. “But where one vile tyrant has flourished, another will soon take their place. It is the way of the universe. One cannot expect such threats to be easily squashed. We have been fortunate once.” He paused and lowered his head respectfully towards Hel. “Now, it is the ideal time to furnish our realms with long-lived, intelligent and heroic warriors to aid the peace and prosperity of all The Nine.”

Loki looked over his shoulder and held out his hand, Anthony took it and stepped forward without hesitance.

“And it brings me great pleasure to know my lover is such a warrior who can stand at my side in defence of this universe, especially as we are forming a mage bond which shall only bolster our combined power.”

“I cannot imagine a greater thing to do with my life,” Anthony added, “then protect the universe with my husband and friends.”

Loki brought Anthony’s hand to his lips, kissing it while keeping his gaze locked on amused brown.

“This union,” Hel said, drawing their gazes, but hers was still locked on Odin, “meets with my approval. As does the procurement of extended life of two mortal warriors.”

“Were you not meant to be neutral to the life of all creatures, Queen Hel?” Odin questioned.

Hel’s expression remained unchanged; Loki glanced at Odin. They each seemed to be staring unflinchingly at one another. Loki knew, no matter his impassive façade, Hel’s weighted gaze would not be an easy thing to withstand.

“The universe was almost lost to a force of madness and unbridled power,” Hel said, her voice soft but still carrying throughout the room. No one would miss a single syllable. “This was allowed because of dissention and isolation among the realms. It was then aided by a lack of warriors who would not believe in its encroachment. If there are brave souls who will listen and fight in battles to come. Why should I, a guardian, ignore their chances to prosper longer?”

“Idunn’s apples are offered rarely,” Odin murmured.

“I have weighed and measured these mortals,” Hel answered. “Do you consider them unworthy, Odin Borson?”

Loki had to work hard to keep his smile repressed. While he was a famed wordsmith and capable of manipulating situations to his own benefit, it was a rare moment to see *Odin* backed into a corner and outmanoeuvred by someone who was outside of his influence and *far* more powerful than him.

He had no choice, it was plain, and Loki felt the anticipation and eagerness building inside him. Anthony squeezed his hand and it took everything he had not to look at his lover.

“Your judgement is well regarded,” Odin murmured stiffly. “Therefore, they must be worthy.”

At those words, Loki’s elation could not be contained. He turned to his lover to find Anthony already watching him. He cupped the man’s cheek and drew him close. Their smiles were wide as they pressed their lips together in a gesture of pure affection. Loki felt his seidr spark through the air and it warmed him when Anthony’s, still young, still so very *new*, seidr drew out to meet his.

There was a surprised exclamation from beside them, but it was *nothing* to the gentle clapping that suddenly occurred. Loki pulled back and looked over his shoulder to find the ambassadors from Alfheim were walking forward with delighted smiles.

Loki already knew they would happily and *genuinely* offer their congratulations over a mage bond and Anthony’s extended life. Yet, before Loki could truly indulge in the burgeoning joy of the moment, Odin’s voice cut through his glee.

“I suppose it is a wiser choice than I had ever believed. A mage without an anchor is a dangerous and *monstrous* thing.” Loki twitched ever so slightly, unable to help it. “To know there are those who can tether such chaotic forces is a relief to many, I’m sure.”

Loki gritted his teeth, but he refused to rise to the bait. Anthony, however, did not seem so willing.

“We’re glad to have your support,” Anthony said, incredibly sweet. “I assume, of course, that this means you will want to host the Second Prince’s wedding on your realm so that all of Asgard can see our union and happiness?”

Loki’s lips twitched; his annoyance abruptly washed away in a feat only Anthony could manage. He looked over at Odin, seeing the Allfather’s blank expression, it barely hid his disgust at the idea.

“If Asgard does not wish to host it,” Loki added, “Then we shall not be without offers. Anthony’s realm is enamoured with our partnership and the event shall be highly anticipated.” Loki glanced at the ambassadors. “Of course, it would do us great honour to invite-”

“Asgard shall host your union,” Odin interrupted.

The murmuring of the crowd grew and Loki could note the crowd was *far* from welcoming of the idea.

But Anthony was quick to add, “We already look forward to the event. I’ll have my armour brought. I know my world would love to see the grand display that Asgard can provide. I shall make certain my technology can show it happening as a *live* broadcast.”

It was Odin’s turn to twitch because, in one quick motion, Anthony had underscored any attempt Odin might make to be dismissive or minimise the celebration. Anthony had asked for a ‘*big gay wedding*’ on Asgard and clearly, he was not going to stop until he gained it.

“I do hope we’ll be adding in some of Earth’s traditions,” Anthony continued. He looked back at Rhodes and smiled. “After all, this is my best man.” He turned back to Odin. “On Earth we choose someone close to us to help with the wedding planning. Someone who knows the couple and will help to plan something they’ll *truly* love.”

Loki repressed a smirk, especially when he looked at Rhodes and saw the blandest, most unassuming smile the man had ever offered. Loki was not a God of Mischief without reason, and no matter how impressively calm and respectful he looked, Loki could see the pure deviousness lurking within James Rhodes countenance.

It further highlighted exactly *why* this man had remained such a true and stalwart friend of Anthony Stark. And perhaps, was part of how he could have befriended Loki with a similar ease.

“He shall speak with the royal advisors and some incorporations shall be made,” Odin allowed, sounding sour.

Loki had rarely felt so truly gleeful, so utterly *happy*. He would be marrying his love, a golden apple would be gained for both Anthony and Rhodes. If those things were not enough, his lover and friend were crafting beautiful mischief to discomfort those whom had hurt and spurned him for centuries.

Loki was certain nothing could spoil his good mood—until he heard a clap of thunder. Loki stiffened and turned instinctively towards the doors of the Great Hall. He saw many other heads all swivel to look as well. And his assumption was not wrong.

Mere moments later, landing with a loud thump and forcing the stonework to crack and distort, was Thor Odinson.

The Crown Prince of Asgard had arrived and he looked *far* from pleased.

## Chapter End Notes

~~Who said anything about 5 epilogue chapters. Surely not me. Surely, I meant more...~~  
~~\*looks at her many notes and sweats nervously\*~~

# Chapter 77

## Chapter Notes

You know what, I'm calling it "82" chapters because these epilogues aren't getting any smaller. But, fair warning, it will probably be more ^^;

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

The Grand Hall was silent as Thor rose from the wreckage of his entrance. His anger was obvious in his tightly clenched jaw. His muscles bulged as he gripped his hammer.

Normally, the sight of Thor *that* angry would have found Tony wary and wishing he was covered in his suit and with a good defence system at his back. (And a few continents between the bastard and Loki). But, with Hel at their side, Odin *agreeing* to host their wedding and a whole party of diplomats watching, Tony just smiled.

“Has the Crown Prince come to bless our union?” Tony called, letting his voice carry.

Loki clenched his hand and he wasn't sure if that was a warning or instinctive fear. His lover, after all, had a lot more familiarity with an angry, violent Thor. He had reasons to be cautious. As far as Tony was concerned, he had reasons to *make Thor look like the giant asshole he was*.

Thor, just to prove he was predictable and a dick, found Tony's gaze and met it with a glare.

“I bless no abhorrent union.”

“Ouch,” Tony said, half meaning it. “That's pretty harsh, Thor. Can't you see we're happy?”

Tony could just see Thor was about to open his mouth and say something *really* insulting. He was almost looking forward to it – but Odin interrupted.

“The union of Prince Loki and his mortal consort will be held on Asgard.”

The words sounded bitter as hell. Thor's abject shock and horror were a sight to treasure. Tony also let Loki's hand go if only to snuggle closer to Loki for good measure. He wrapped an arm around the mage's waist while the other re-clasped his hand. He darted a look at Loki's face, wary about seeing hurt or worry, but he looked remarkably calm.

Tony figured it has helped that Hel had taken a single, purposeful step in their direction. She was now closer to them and well angled to be the first Thor would have to face if he came for them. Tony was pretty sure they could take the Thunderer if push came to shove, but it was nice to know Hel would stop it before anything serious happened.

And hopefully not before Thor had embarrassed himself a bit more.

“You cannot condone this, father,” Thor insisted, looking up at throne. “It is not *done*.”

There was some noticeably mutters of agreement from the Aesir. Enough that the opinion of the general populace had to be obvious to the ambassadors. Tony glanced at Odin. His jaw was clenched and his knuckles white around his staff.

“Perhaps not,” Odin said. “But Asgard has agreed.”

Thor’s attention shifted. He seemed to look past everything and everyone to stare directly at Loki. He raised his hammer and pointed it.

“*You* have done something,” he snarled. “You have enchanted this court with your foul tricks.”

“I assure you, I have not,” Loki said, his voice firm and unwavering.

Thor started walking forward, fury rolling off him. He looked ready to attack first and ask questions *never*. Tony couldn’t help tensing. He glanced at Hel but she was unmoving, her face calm. If he didn’t know how much she liked them, he might have thought this was a ploy to get them all on Asgard just to humility and hurt them.

But he knew better.

Someone would stop Thor. Any second now.

He was getting closer.

“You and your *lover*,” he spat the word. “Have dishonoured our realm with your repulsive actions.”

“Thor,” Odin commanded, his voice echoing. “Cease your speaking.”

Thor didn’t.

“You use gutless magic to allow others to condone you.” He raised his hammer and lightning crackled. Loki immediately moved to place himself in front of Tony, but Tony didn’t budge. “You have long proven yourself to be the monst-”

He was interrupted not by Odin, not by Hel, but by a *roar*.

Tony’s blood ran cold and he snapped his head to the side. Rhodey was already scrambling backwards and away. Fandral was watching with wide eyes and standing *way* too close. The Hulk was baring his teeth and before anyone could react, Hulk had leapt the distance needed and swung his fist with enough force to send Thor hurtling into the wall and indent himself into the stonework.

Hulk roared again before curling his lip and spitting, “Stupid God.”

The commotion had drawn the Einherjar and even some of the Aesir were readying weapons.

“Lower your weapons,” Hel commanded.

Her voice managed to echo more powerfully than Odin’s. Hulk swivelled his head to look at her. He grinned and ambled over to her. “Pretty God.”

Hel smiled. Hulk’s gaze then moved to Loki, he felt his lover tense, but Hulk continued to look fond.

“Happy God.” He looked at Tony and Rhodey. “Friends.” He scowled, “No Stupid God hurt friends.”

“And he shall not,” Hel said simply. “Of that, I give my promise.” Hulk turned back to her. “But, you have done what was necessary. I bid you well.”

She lifted her hand and rotated her wrist. The green colouring and size drained from Hulk at a surprising rate until Bruce was left standing in front of Hel. He was clothed in the same outfit from before and was free of the customary confusion that usually plagued his expression after a de-Hulking.

He was staring at Hel with genuine surprise. Hel stepped forward and her fingers brushed over Bruce’s temple, making him shiver. She then touched his chest where a small necklace with a white pendant rested. Bruce looked down at it. He swallowed and touched it reverently.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

“Balance,” she answered.

He nodded emphatically. Hel then turned from him and looked towards the corner of the room. Thor had made no appearance and Tony truly hoped the punch had knocked him unconscious. It would serve him right. Hel’s attention then shifted to the Allfather.

“You no longer have a son with whom the realms respect. I would speak to this Crown Prince before your world has little to redeem itself. You are no longer the centre of all, Odin Borson. Take heed on what enemies you make.” Her gaze flicked to Loki and Tony. “And which partnerships you condemn.”

“Thor will be spoken to,” Odin muttered, clearly sour.

“Good,” Hel said. “Then we shall retire.”

She turned her back to Odin but looked at *them*. Their assorted, mismatched group of mortals and Gods. She was waiting for *them*.

Thor was in a crater in the wall, Bruce looked surprisingly content and Asgard had very definitively had their ass handed to them. Tony immediately turned to Loki, finding the mage looking deeply, *deeply* satisfied. Tony raised his lover’s hand to his lips, kissed the knuckles and waited for Loki’s gaze to meet his.

“Ready to go back to your old chambers?”

“With pleasure, my love.”

Tony grinned. He also wasn't surprised when Loki bent down and kissed his lips for all of Asgard to see. They'd more than made a splash with their presence. Tony hoped the next wave would be just as large, dramatic and *gratifying* as the first.

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Of course, just because they had left the hall with their heads held high and not an ounce of uncertainty or concern. It didn't mean that once they got everyone in Loki's rooms a few choice questions hadn't been asked.

“Okay, Brucebear, I *love* yours and Hulk's work. But, um, what actually happened back there?”

Because Bruce getting angry at how they were treated and Hulking out? Not impossible. Him doing it so spectacularly and then being coaxed back down with ease, *clothes* and a fancy new necklace? That was a little bit peculiar and he really wanted answers.

“Thor made me angry,” Bruce admitted.

He still had a hand clenched around the necklace that Hel had gifted him. She had left them after they'd exited the hall, giving them a nod and disappearing to places unknown. (Loki had explained as they'd walked away that she would be going to quarters reserved for royal visitors).

Fandral had dropped down on one of the settees in Loki's rooms with a small frown. Rhodey was watching the door as if he expected someone to burst in at any moment. (Not an unreasonable worry considering how they'd left Thor.) But, first things first was Bruce.

“And you gave him a well-deserved punch,” Tony agreed. “But you seem a little, um, more put together than normal?”

Bruce nodded again. His gaze was still on the pendant. Tony stepped closer despite Loki's tight grip on his hand making it obvious he wasn't approving of that idea. Tony ignored it. The closer he was, the easier he could see there was green intermixed among the white.

“So, what did Hel give you?”

By this point, even Loki's wariness could not overcome his curiosity. He stood beside Tony and peered at it. After only a moment he made a noise of surprise.

“She's balanced you,” he murmured. He frowned. “No, that is not right she has-”

“Given me an aid,” Bruce agreed.

“Can we translate it for the people not yet up to date with Godly magic?” Tony questioned.



“It allows him greater communication with his other self,” Loki admitted. “It eases the fight between rage and calm.”

“Balance,” Bruce repeated. He swallowed. “But not without my own acceptance.”

“What do you mean?”

“Hel made it clear that I can’t just lock Hulk away. We have to share if we want to settle.”

Tony watched his friend carefully. “How do you feel about that?”

Bruce laughed roughly. “I don’t really know. It’s... too much. I need to think about it.”

“Yeah, that’s understandable,” Tony agreed. “That will be a big change for you.”

He knew how much Bruce wanted Hulk *gone*. To be able to accept and share with him? That was going to take a hell of a lot more than five minutes of casual thought.

“Yeah,” Bruce murmured, still looking at the necklace.

Tony still had questions, but he knew it wasn’t the time. Bruce didn’t deserve a bombardment of things when he was still processing it himself. It was why Tony turned away to look at the other person who seemed unsettled. Fandral still had a furrow to his brow as he looked towards the ceiling, seemingly deep in thought.

“Penny for your thoughts, Fandral?” The swordsman blinked and looked at Tony, this time with confusion. He clarified. “Do you want to talk about something? You look troubled.”

“Nay, I am fine.” He shook his head, seemingly clearing it. He smiled and stood. “In fact, I have not been able to wish you my congratulations as to your nuptials.”

He stepped forward and held out his hand. Loki was the first to reach out and clasp it in a warrior’s embrace. Fandral squeezed his forearm before letting Loki go. Tony copied them and upon its conclusion, Fandral said, “I shall be pleased to watch your union and assist however I am able.”

“Yeah, about that,” Rhodey chimed in. “I’m not sure I like the idea of being put in a room with royal advisors. It would be useful to have another guy in my camp who speaks Asgardian.”

Fandral frowned. “Nay, with Allspeak you shall understand us no matter what we speak.”

“I do believe he means that you are aware of the manner and ways of the court,” Loki chimed in. “And I see no reason you cannot join. After all, you know me well enough to act in the manner of the Midgardian tradition.”

Fandral looked shocked and Tony felt much the same. Sure, a ‘*best man*’ probably didn’t mean much to Loki, but it still had to carry some kind of *regard* especially with how he’d described it. The thought only seemed proven when Fandral placed a hand to his chest and bowed.

“I would be honoured, Prince Loki.”

“Good,” Loki said. “I presume it will not be until tomorrow that any arrangements shall be made. Can you source this information for us, Fandral?”

“Of course,” Fandral agreed. “I shall discover the plans for your union!”

Tony was grateful for his enthusiasm, but he was also a bit worried.

“You’re going to be okay doing that for us, right?” He glanced at Loki. “What with current conditions and everything?”

Loki lips had turned to a thin pensive line at his remark, but Fandral merely laughed.

“Fear not, Anthony. Your union has been sanctioned by the Queen of Helheim and Asgard agrees to host it. I would be a poor friend if I did not do what I could to assist in the bonding of your lives and the extension of yours and your friend.”

He gave Tony a clap on the shoulder as if to further express his certainty. Fandral then stepped over to Bruce. He had lowered his pendant at some point even if he did still hold it tightly.

“And I do hope that we may speak more. It was a grand honour to see your famed Hulk.” He chuckled a little uncomfortably. “No matter the circumstance.”

*Yeah, that must have been awkward as fuck. The guy you fanboy over smashing your Prince and buddy through a wall.*

Surprisingly, Bruce didn’t look uncomfortable by the reminder or the offer.

“I’m sure we’ll be able to do that, Fandral.”

“Grand!” Fandral declared.

He slapped Bruce heartily on the back, making the scientist twitch slightly, but Bruce’s expression almost turned bemused. It was similar to the look he had once given Tony when he’d stabbed him with a taser, trying to make him react.

Bruce never did seem to know what to do when people were unbothered by the Hulk. After finishing with Bruce, he walked up to Rhodey.

“I shall enjoy speaking to you and learning of my duties towards Loki in this union.”

“I’ll happily run you through it,” Rhodey answered.

Fandral held out his hand and Rhodey willing clasped it in a similar embrace to what he’d given Loki and Tony. Fandral then gave them all another bright smile and wave before leaving the room. Tony stared at the door even after it was closed.

“I’m actually worried about him.”

“As am I,” Loki agreed.

Tony felt the flare of Loki’s seidr. He glanced down but Loki’s hand was already free of green.

“Lokes?”

“I have warded him. Should he come into trouble for his alignment with us, we shall know of it.”

“Good,” Tony agreed, more than willing to go to the man’s defence.

He might not have a suit on hand, but they *did* have a Queen of Helheim and Loki’s badass magic. Not to mention the threat of the Hulk. He hoped that would be enough for everyone to stand down.

Because, if Fandral was making a stand about having their back, you could be damn sure that meant *they* would have *his*.

“This place really is a piece of shit, Loki,” Rhodey said. “It’s a fucking blessing that we don’t have to stay here very long.” He paused, looking around the space. “But your rooms are nice.”

“Thank you, Rhodes,” Loki said. “They have many fond memories.”

He accompanied the words with a squeeze of Tony’s hand. It had Tony looking at him. Loki was smiling at him softly and Tony could only grin back.

Because these *did* have good memories. Their first real kiss, the start of their relationship. So many firsts had happened in this space.

“Yeah,” Tony said. “One of the only good places on this realm.”

Loki’s smile widened and he also tugged Tony closer. Tony came eagerly, he wrapped his arm around Loki’s waist, feeling Loki’s arms come around his back. Their lips came together in a soft, but loving kiss.

Tony easily forgot everything else existed but the touch and taste of his lover. His *fiancé*. And God, wasn’t that a trip? A big gay wedding was all well and good as a giant ‘fuck you’ to Odin and Asgard, but it was still *real*.

Tony pulled back but stayed close, letting their noses brush.

“We’re really getting married.”

“We are.”

“You’re going to be stuck with me forever.”

Loki chuckled softly. “You speak as if it is not something I crave with every fibre of my being.”

Tony’s grin spread wider. He also shifted up on his toes to better slot their lips together again. Loki kissed back, his hands sliding over Tony’s back in affectionate caresses that only made the moment even *better*.

When they pulled back this time, Tony kept his eyes closed, merely sighing happily at everything he had: his lover, immortality on a plate, his friends...

Tony’s eyes snapped open and he pulled back, looking over his shoulder and repressing a guilty laugh. Bruce and Rhodey were very determinedly examining Loki’s bookshelf with their backs to them.

“Whoops,” Tony said. “We’re not very good hosts.”

Loki chuckled. He also kissed Tony’s temple before untangling them properly.

“Come. We shall show them the balcony and discuss what shall be done. I can have wine and food called for and see what rooms our friends shall have.” Tony screwed up his face. Loki frowned. “What is it?”

“Nothing. Just. I’m not fond of them alone on Asgard, you know?”

Loki shrugged. “Then it is simple. They may remain in my chambers.”

Tony blinked. “What?”

“It shall be the work of moments to configure my furniture into bedding they can use. It will not be the grandest, but if you will all be more comfortable within the same room, I see no reason to-”

Tony cut him off with a searing kiss. Loki sucked in a breath before kissing back. Tony didn’t let it last long, no matter how much he wanted to.

“You’re amazing. I’ve mentioned that right? Fucking amazing. When we’re alone, I’m going to make that *thoroughly* clear, okay?”

Loki swallowed and Tony could see his noticeable interest in the idea.

“I shall make certain to do so.”

Tony grinned. He also gave Loki one more quick kiss before letting him go and stepping away. He turned around pointedly so he could walk over to his friends.

“Okay!” He clapped his hands together. “Kissfest is over. You can all stop averting your eyes. Also, Loki and I have decided slumber party on Asgard. Who’s with me?”

His friends turned, both of them seemingly amused.

“As long as we don’t cramp your style,” Rhodey drawled.

“Pfft. My style couldn’t be cramped no matter *what* anyone tries.”

“I would feel better if we weren’t separated,” Bruce admitted. “Asgard just makes me uncomfortable.”

“You and me both,” Rhodey admitted. “*I’ll* feel better when Tony and I are a little more durable outside of titanium alloy.”

“Then slumber party it is! Loki, order the popcorn and hot chocolate!”

“As you wish, dear,” Loki remarked.

“Thanks, Wesley.”

Loki’s eyebrows furrowed but both Rhodey and Bruce snorted. So, it was definitely a win.

Frankly, *everything* was turning into a win. Normally, that would be the part where he ended up suspicious and looking around corners, but Tony just couldn’t find it in him to start digging for problems that weren’t there.

*Yes*, Odin, Thor and Asgard in general would probably become assholes in short order, but how could that compete with the happiness he felt right now?

Their wedding and the golden apples were a go. His three closest friends were with him days before his life would change for the better. He was in love and the guy he wanted loved him back.

Tony, for once in his life, just couldn’t find it in him to play the pessimist. And he supposed it was because he knew, no matter what the universe threw at them, they’d still come out on top.

## Chapter End Notes

Yes, it was fluffy filler. Shhh. Let it be and enjoy the happy boys! Also, you all got Thor being punched! I know many of you had requested that XD

## Chapter 78

### Chapter Notes

Much thanks, as always, to the lovely **tarot\_card** for reading over this and giving me an opinion before it was posted. I appreciate your quick reads so much! ♥

They took their friends to the balcony where Loki pointed out different parts of Asgard and, when prompted, started to tell them stories of his youth. Rhodey laughed just as hard as Tony at the pranks that were pulled, even Bruce grinned and occasionally snorted.

It was honestly just *nice*, and Tony got the joy of seeing Loki's features light up as he explained tales of his past. Tony doubted Loki had ever been in a position to have *friends* in his rooms. People who liked him, wanted to hear his side of things, and whom he could actually show around.

Loki, for probably the first time in centuries, actually had people he liked and trusted in his space.

It made Tony even more inclined to give him the slumber party he'd joked about. Not to mention, finding a way to get Loki showing the others around his favourite haunts. He wanted Loki to be able to show off his *friends* to Asgard.

They only paused the conversation for Loki to order them each a drink and some food to snack on before the evening feast. They ended up back in the main room, eating cheese, meat and bread, and drinking the Asgardian equivalent of hot chocolate.

Things were going *really* well. Almost *too* well.

It was why it was almost expected that Loki would stiffen mid-sentence, his eyes flaring green as he stilled with cheese halfway to his lips.

"What's wrong?" Tony immediately questioned.

"Fandral," Loki breathed. "My ward has triggered."

Tony was instantly on his feet, and Rhodey and Bruce were soon to follow. Loki stood and Tony closed the space to grasp his lover. Their friends did the same. Loki didn't have to ask them before he was teleporting. Tony winced at the undoubtable drain to Loki's *seidr*, but the mage didn't seem to show it.

They had appeared in an Asgardian street and there was already a small crowd. Tony could hear an argument. He tensed at realising *Thor's* voice was the loudest.

“You would betray me?” Thor demanded. “You would side with *him*?”

“Loki has not given me cause to treat him ill.”

“He gives every Asgardian cause. He is laying with a *man*.”

Tony felt Loki tense. He glanced at his lover, but Loki’s expression was stone-faced. Frankly, the green running under Bruce’s skin was just as concerning. Rhodey looked ready to repulsor Thor. Tony could appreciate the sentiment.

“He is *happy*,” Fandral countered. “He is to wed. He has the approval of the Allfather-”

“An *unjust* approval,” a woman spat. “What makes you so blind?”

“Perhaps it is rather that I am now able to see,” Fandral insisted. “How can one deny happiness when it is so plainly displayed?”

“Loki is never plain!” The woman argued. “Loki is unjust with lies and deceptions. He fools all the mortals into believing him.” Loki shoved away from them and started striding forward. Tony and the others hot on his heels. “He is but a snake-”

“A snake?” Loki interrupted, his voice pitched to carry.

The growing crowd immediately stepped aside, making a clear path for them to see the group cornering Fandral.

“If I am but an unjust, lying, deceptive snake. Tell me then? How have *I*,” and he stopped walking to hold out his arms at either side, “been able to outwit the Allfather? Because they are your words, are they not, Sif? *I*, Loki Liesmith, have bested him?”

The woman, Sif, glared and Tony frowned.

*Wait. Fuck, that’s the woman Odin sent to flirt with me at the dinner.*

No fucking wonder. One of Loki’s tormentor’s and a Thor sycophant, of course she’d been up for the task of trying to sleep with Loki’s committed spouse. She had probably just wanted to prove Loki was lying.

“You and your tricks,” Sif snarled. “You will do anything to harm Asgard.”

Loki’s tone became outright cold. “Is that so?”

Tony swallowed, feeling a momentary worry. After all, while Loki hadn’t outright harmed Asgard, he’d sure as hell made some pretty messy mistakes in the past. And, Tony wasn’t sure exactly how many people knew of Loki’s adoption and heritage.

If people started throwing around ‘*frost giant*’ Tony was pretty sure there would be blood.

However, before Sif could answer, Thor was stepping forward, his hammer held out between them and his expression murderous.

“You have turned my shield-brothers against me. You have *ruined* the reputation of Asgard among the realms-”

“Pretty sure *you* were the one ruining things, Point Break,” Tony interrupted. He smiled meanly. “After all, you were the one told, *by Odin*, to back down.”

“And we didn’t need much convincing to pick our side,” Bruce said, his voice surprisingly quiet and calm.

Tony had half expected the Hulk to make a resurgence. He hoped that meant Hel’s gift was going to stop undue damage to Asgard. Not, that Tony *cared* mind you, but he didn’t want to ruin their hard work at getting golden apples.

“So how about everyone calms down,” Rhodey said. “And Fandral, how about you come with us? We can discuss the wedding plans of a prince of Asgard and Midgard.”

“The betrayer goes nowhere,” Thor snarled. “We are not finished with him.”

“I do not recall James asking you for permission,” Loki riposted.

Thor glared and thunder started to rumble overhead. The Asgardians cleared more space around the group. Thor and his posse were between them and Fandral. The swordsman looked conflicted, as he glanced between the two groups.

Which, Tony understood. It wasn’t easy to watch your so-called *friends* turn hostile towards you before shitting all over your choices. But sometimes you had to learn when to call it quits and take the better option. The more fucking *saner* and *smarter* option.

Fandral had taken a few extra centuries, but fucking *hell*. At least the guy was willing to change his opinion and *learn*. It was more than could be said for a lot of people. It meant he’d more than earned a spot hanging around with them. And Tony didn’t have to see beyond Loki’s defensive stance to know that the mage felt the same.

“I am through with your tricks,” Thor said, stepping forward. “You have lied, schemed, betrayed and brought shame and disgrace to *my* father. It is a relief that mother is not here to see this day.”

*Oh, Tony thought. Oh no. He did **not** just play the Frigga card.*

Tony glanced at Loki. His lover’s face remained blank, but Tony *knew* that would have hit. He fucking *knew* that would cut Loki deeper than anything else any of them had said.

*Wrong fucking move.*

Tony ran a hand over his watch, forming a repulsor on his hand. He didn’t raise it yet, but he was ready. Of course, without a suit, he wasn’t going to be the *best* source of protection or defence, but he would damn well do what he could for as long as he was able.

“I think you would find,” Loki said, coldly, “that she would have greater respect for a show of diplomacy, than the arrogant, misguided tantrums of a man *far* from worthy of *any*



throne.” Loki smiled nastily. “After all, of the two of us, only *I* have sat upon Asgard’s throne. I who was *given* the throne by our most noble Queen and allowed to command gungnir.”

The shifting and discomfort of the populace was noticeable. Tony wondered if that was because Loki was hitting points and stating truths that no one could deny, or because they could see the darkening storm clouds and knew that soon enough, they would be on the edges of a battlefield.

*What happened to the warrior race keen on bloodshed, huh?*

Then again, if these were just the civilian townsfolk... well, they didn’t deserve to be in the firing line anymore than the citizens of New York or any other town on Earth.

“You who *refused* to let Thor return,” Sif fired off before anyone could calm the tides. “You who *stole* the throne when The Allfather-”

“Fell into the Odinsleep after banishing his petulant child?” Loki interrupted. “Whose role as ruler fell to his *Queen* whom then entrusted it to *me*? I who would not simply overthrow the ruling of Odin simply because you *demand*ed it. I was *King*,” Loki almost snarled the word, “and you were not my council nor were you treating me as your ruler. I would not bow to the petty whims of children chasing after their spoiled friend.”

*Damn*, Tony thought, looking at his lover. *How long has he been waiting to get **that** off his chest?*

But the glance at his lover made him realise something else. There weren’t *just* townsfolk nearby, there were some of the dignitaries. *Elven* dignitaries. They were watching everything carefully. Tony hoped Loki had registered their presence.

Either way, Tony was backing Loki one hundred percent of the way. Thor and his band of assholes didn’t deserve to have their actions ignored, especially when they’d been ambushing Fandral.

“You should have sided with Thor,” Sif insisted, clearly not listening to a *single* part of Loki’s argument.

So, Tony decided to weigh in.

“Funny, but, considering what Loki explained, it sounds pretty fucking obvious that *he* was following standard procedure and ruling *justly*. You just got angry when it didn’t work in your favour.”

“Stay out of this mortal, you know *nothing* of these matters.”

“Sounds to me like I can grasp a hell of a lot more than you. I mean, how many braincells does it take to realise I was at a feast as Loki’s partner? Seems like the obvious flies over your head.” Tony smiled, showing his teeth. “Otherwise, you were just being a bitch and trying to sleep with me out of spite.”

Sif's cheeks flushed even as she gripped the sword at her waist. A few whispers started and Tony *really* hoped they were disgusted by her behaviour. After all, weren't the Asgardians big on *honour*? Tony doubted there was much honour in underhandedly stealing someone's lover.

As if to only further *prove* whom he was with, Tony grasped Loki's hand and linked their fingers. He squeezed, even as he felt the tension in every fibre of Loki's being. When he glanced to the side, he saw Rhodey standing defensively and Bruce grasping the pendant. His skin still had a tinge of green.

They were both watching the Asgardians with barely restrained hostility. Their group was ready to fight, it would only take a step or word too far.

And judging by Thor's mounting anger and the electricity around his hammer, it wouldn't take long.

"Surely we do not need to fight?" Fandral asked, looking between the groups with (in Tony's opinion) misguided hope. "Can we not cease? Asgard has sanctioned their wedding and we-"

"Their wedding is an abomination that I will *not* stand for!"

Thor didn't just take a menacing step forward. No, he fucking *lunged*. He released a snarl, and Volstagg, Hogun and Sif were already raising their weapons and following after Thor. Loki let go of his hand and green energy crackled to life in a shield. Tony raised his repulsor and readied for a fight that he hoped to *hell* they could win.

"*Enough!*"

Tony stiffened and for a moment, pure fear and dread shot down his spine. It was worse than Howard catching him doing something illegal or stupid. It was worse than the suit icing over as he fell back to Earth.

No, the power and *fury* in Hel's voice as it echoed around the street was enough to leave Tony quaking in his boots. He looked over his shoulder to find the Queen of Helheim striding down the street. Her oddly coloured magic tinted the air and for the first time, the skeletal half of her body was clearly displayed. She looked both terrifying and beautiful and the crown that sat atop her dark hair seemed to be woven not from thorns this time but *bones*.

"This is how Asgard treats its honoured guests?" she said, her voice low and almost *wrathful*. "The people whom I brought to this realm?"

Thor, for the first time, didn't seem to know what to say. He even, *for once*, seemed to realise he was out of his depth.

This was the being directly responsible for killing *Thanos*. The Queen whom, Tony was certain, had more power in her pinkie than all of them combined.

"I am through," she said. "This beyond tolerance. I cannot trust this realm nor the one who seek to rule it." Hel sent a special glare to Thor, making it obvious who she meant. "This

union to which I *approve* shall no longer be officiated here. *I* shall precede it. It will have the blessing of the Queen of Helheim.”

Loki made a noise. When Tony dared glanced at him, his lover looked shocked. God, he looked fucking *awed*.

When Tony dared to look around, he found the Asgardian civilians were disbelieving, some were even on the ground kneeling. Thor and his group of idiots looked like they'd been slapped. Fandral's mouth had dropped open.

It was very obvious that Hel's actions were not only irregular but they were inspiring *reverence*.

She didn't stop walking until she was positioned in front of them and *between* their group and Thor's. Tony had never seen her look so *angry*. She was usually serene even amused but right now she looked almost *disgusted*.

“Queen Hel.”

She cocked her head slightly to the side, indicating she was listening. Tony followed the voice to see one of the elven ambassadors had stepped forward. He was keeping a respectful distance from them, but he had moved away from the cowering crowd.

“It would be Alfheim's greatest honour to host the union of Prince Loki of Asgard and Anthony Stark of Midgard. We would also offer our realm for both the ceremony and as a place for which the couple, their companions and yourself may rest.”

He turned from the Queen to their group. He smiled and lowered his head and upper body in a small bow.

“Alfheim had always respected Prince Loki's mastery of seidr and diplomacy. We have long wished to become greater acquainted with Anthony Stark. Any respected associates of Prince Loki will be welcome on Alfheim.”

Hel didn't look away from Thor and his band of imbeciles.

“A welcome suggestion,” Hel remarked. “It need only the approval of the ones who seek to wed.”

Tony glanced at his lover, finding Loki already watching him. His lover still seemed a little shocked and Tony *knew* there would be a host of emotions bubbling under the surface. The comments from the Asgardians would have hit harder than most people probably expected. Hel's arrival and promise to officiate had clearly helped ease some of the sting, but Tony knew they would need to talk about this.

He needed to make sure Loki was okay.

“Lokes?” he asked, taking his lover's hand again and squeezing.

Loki grasped his hand and brought it to his lips, kissing it gently.

“What I want most of all,” Loki said, “is your safety and that of our friends.” He smiled. “And I have always adored Alfheim and wished to show you its many beauties. For a training seidr-user such as yourself, it would be of great delight to you.”

“Then let’s get married there,” Tony insisted. “I know you wanted to do right by Asgard and let it host its prince’s wedding.” His lover’s lips twitched, his eyes brightening with amusement. “But if we are so *blatantly* unwelcome, why should we ruin our union? We can come back to get our apples after Hel has done us the honour of marrying us.”

Loki bent down, uncaring off the people watching and kissed Tony. It was only small and chaste, and Tony was certain the only reason there hadn’t been a sound of disgust was because Hel was standing in front of them glaring.

“Well then,” Loki said when he pulled back, “all that is left is to accept.”

He turned to the side, tugging Tony with him. The elven ambassador was smiling, and while Tony knew his action was probably politically motivated, he genuinely *looked* happy for them. And, frankly, the more ‘fuck you’s’ they gave Asgard the better.

“We thank you for your offer and we-”

“*What* do I bear witness to?”

Tony tensed, but Loki didn’t react. Tony didn’t know *how* long Loki had been anticipating it, but Tony sure as *fuck* hadn’t expected Odin to join them with fury in his expression and guards at his sides. The townsfolk were bowing and the king had his spear in hand. The elven ambassador looked as unimpressed as Loki. Thor and his gang actually, for fucking once, looked *nervous*. Hel, when she turned to face Odin, looked at him as one might an unwelcome guest.

“Alfheim will host this wedding,” Hel stated. “I shall conduct the ceremony. The Crown Prince has made Asgard’s stance clear.”

“Thor does not speak for Asgard.”

“Father-”

Odin growled at him, the sound neither refined nor intelligible, but it made Thor flinch and hunch his shoulders. *Loki* cringed minutely and even Tony wanted to take a step backwards. The anger in the gesture was too familiar and retreat too engrained.

*That’s the sound of an angry father you need to get the fuck away from.*

“I apologise for his behaviour,” Odin gritted out. “He will be spoken to.”

“It seems your words do not have enough sway,” Hel replied, remaining unimpressed. “If you are to *say* a word at all.”

Tony hid a smile, because Hel was making it known to *everyone* that she didn’t think Odin had any authority over his *son*. Or maybe, that she didn’t expect him to *ever* reprimand him.

And that had to fucking *sting* the man's pride.

"He will be spoken to," Odin repeated. "And Asgard shall still host this wedding."

"That is no longer your choice to make," Hel answered. "Your *heir* intended to attack those whom *I* brought to your realm. Those whom *I* provided safe passage. This realm is neither safe haven nor a space of celebration."

"They wished to have it here," Odin bit out.

"A decision we are reviewing," Loki chimed in.

Odin glared at him, but Loki remained undaunted.

"Alfheim has always been kind to me and have celebrated my gifts. If Hel is so generous as to officiate, no realm can doubt our union. It need not be in a place so despising of our partnership."

"All I want," Tony chimed in, "is to bring happiness to my lover and call him mine." He raised Loki's hand to his lips and kissed it. "What do you say, Loki? Alfheim or Asgard? Whatever will bring us the most joy. After all, I don't want to televise our wedding to Earth if it's going to show negativity towards same sex relationships. We all know how big Earth is on freedom and honesty."

"True," Loki agreed. "And it is better for the universe if Asgard and Midgard's alliance stays intact."

"Speaking from a military and political standpoint," Rhodey remarked. "Sometimes, you've got to make a stance for your principles. I've been here a few hours and I'd rather be on Alfheim than remain. A recommendation I'll be taking back to the military and the United Nations."

*God, I love you platypus.*

Truthfully, Rhodey's word wouldn't really sway anyone. But it could damn well *sound* important to Asgard. They didn't know anything about the structure of Earth or how important Rhodey was – but the fact he was *here* meant something.

"There is no need for such actions," Odin bit out. "Asgard will still host this union."

"Will you?" Loki countered. "Shall you allow two *men* to bind themselves in the customs of the Aesir and the Midgardians?"

"Father," Thor had even stepped forward. "Let the elves have them. Let them-"

"This is the union of a *prince*," Odin growled. "This is a union the *Queen of Helheim* blesses."

"Then let them bless it somewhere else!"

“Hold your tongue until you know what you are saying,” Odin snarled.

“He speaks what he believes is truth,” Hel interjected, sounding disappointed. “A true pity that a realm so advanced in many ways is so slow to grow in others. The mortal realm, even with its youth, has a greater grasp on compassion and acceptance than the Aesir.”

Tony couldn't help flicking his gaze to the ambassadors, they were growing in number, and frankly, they were all looking at Asgard and *Thor* with an upturned nose. Some were even nodding with Hel. It was making it *very* clear that they were as unimpressed as her.

*Finally*, someone was telling Asgard to their fucking *face* that they were assholes. It wasn't Loki (who they could brush aside) or *him* (who they could equally ignore) it was fucking *Hel* and no one with a brain was going to ignore *her*.

Then again, there were a few people *without* brains present.

Tony chanced a glance at Thor and his friends. They were standing together and scowling, but were keeping their trap shut. Hogun actually seemed to be almost *behind* his friends as if he was hiding his face.

*Didn't Loki say he was from another realm? Maybe he's just a giant dickhead and doesn't want to show it outside his Asgardian buddies? Either way, he's a fucking asshole.*

Fandral, the poor guy, looked uncomfortable. He *also* looked weary. The same kind of weary Tony could recognise from back before Loki entered his life. When the world just seemed to be beating you down without even trying.

Turning a little, Tony caught Rhodey's gaze and gestured subtly at the swordsman. Rhodey flicked his gaze to him before back to Tony. He nodded minutely. Tony smiled. He knew he could count on his best friend, especially if he had to give his attention to his lover. Although Loki looked calm, Tony wasn't going to take that for granted.

“His voice does not speak for the whole,” Odin said.

“No,” she agreed. “But if he shall be King, he soon will.”

His words seemed to rest heavy in the air. There was a distinct tone of *disapproval* not just from her but from the ambassadors. The Asgardian civilians even looked uncomfortable. It was clear that Hel wasn't holding back and she didn't give *fuck* what Odin might have to say about it.

Odin, by comparison, seemed to be doing some quick calculations. Unfortunately for him, Loki worked faster.

“Perhaps that is a reason to host it,” Loki announced abruptly.

Everyone glanced at him. He smiled, it was his bland, political smile, but Tony could see the mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

“Perhaps this is a chance to further the partnership of men on Asgard. I am sure a public blessing by the Crown Prince and the Allfather will smooth over any offense. After all, one does not expect a change overnight. A single step towards reparation will do wonders, not just for us, but for relationships between all the realms.”

Loki then looked at the elves and smiled more genuinely.

“But we are very honoured by your offer and will happily accept. It would give me great pleasure to show your grand realm to my friends and lover. We need not stay here. Asgard may host the ceremony but Alfheim shall host us, if they are amenable.”

“Alfheim would be delighted to have you on our realm,” the ambassador hurriedly agreed.

“Thank you,” Loki replied, lowering into a half bow. He then turned to Odin and questioned, “Does Asgard accept?”

Odin was very obviously backed into a corner. His grip on his staff was white-knuckled. He didn't even attempt to fake a smile.

“Asgard shall host your union.”

“Wonderful,” Loki replied, smiling sharply. “Then we shall all leave for Alfheim. Luckily, Anthony, James, Bruce and myself have brought little. It will take us no time to gain Fandral's belongings and leave with the Alfheim ambassadors.”

It was all the incentive Rhodey and Bruce seemed to need as they crossed the distance, ignoring the Warriors Three and Thor to bracket Fandral on either side. The swordsman seemed surprised, but he walked with them easily enough as the group came back to join them.

It wasn't how Tony had expected he'd end up on Alfheim, but he wasn't complaining. Asgard and Thor had been publicly shamed. They could relax somewhere *nice* and only come back to Asgard for their big gay wedding.

All and all, it was a pretty damn good outcome.

# Chapter 79

## Chapter Notes

Here it is, the last post of the year! It's almost New Years for me and depending on timezones you might have beaten me or be coming up to it in a number of hours. Regardless, I hope everyone has a lovely end to 2021! Take care and my best wishes to each and every one of you ♥

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

The ambassadors spoke with them briefly, arranging to meet them at the bifrost and escort them to Alfheim. Although they looked calm now, Tony knew it would be a rushed affair of throwing clothing in cases and magicing ahead to try and prepare them rooms on the Elven realm.

Hel also approached Loki. She touched his arm and murmured a few words. He merely nodded. She then spoke to some of the ambassadors. The civilian Aesir all stepped back or dispersed. Odin called his son and the man's friends over with a sharp, angry gesture.

But despite the many things happening, Tony couldn't give any of them his complete focus.

Because their group would forgive Alfheim a lapse in immediate preparations after such a last-minute decision.

Hel could do whatever she wanted and he didn't care if he wasn't privy to what she said (he'd be filled in later). The asshole Aesir could go jump off a cliff for all he cared as long as they did it away from him.

No, what Tony was concerned about was *Loki*.

The man was nodding and smiling politely at whomever spoke to him, but Tony knew it wouldn't last. How could it? A lot of shit had gone down in a short period of time. It might have turned out good for them, but Thor and his assholes had sniped a lot of painful words first.

*If this sets him back even **slightly**, everyone's getting repulsored the moment after we've eaten the apple.*

Tony just needed a chance to talk to him. *Privately*. For now, he was holding his lover's hand as with the chatting now done, they were making their way to Fandral's home. The swordsman was noticeably quiet. Frankly, *everyone* was quiet. Tony didn't even feel like breaking the silence.



And, luckily, Fandral's house wasn't far away. Making it further obvious that the man's *so-called friends* had ambushed him on the way back to his home.

It was a rather large house. Tony would equate it to a small manor house. He let them inside to an open foyer where he left them to wait. The decor was as ostentatious as Tony had come to expect from the Aesir, but there was something about it that didn't scream *Fandral*. The others seem to realise it as well.

"Is this a family house?" Rhodey questioned.

"Yes," Loki agreed. "Fandral comes from a noble family that has been part of the court for centuries."

"Sole heir, huh?" Tony remarked.

"Yes."

Tony knew what that was like. Although Fandral didn't give off the impression of having a tyrannical father, absent mother or crappy childhood, appearances could be deceptive, couldn't they?

And since there was a moment of piece with only people he *trusted* nearby, Tony gently led Loki to the opposite side of the room that Fandral had left by. Bruce and Rhodey, the *brilliant* people they were, took the time to step even further away, giving them as much privacy as possible.

"Loki-"

"I'm fine."

"The fact you interrupted me to say that implies you probably aren't."

Loki smiled faintly. He also raised Tony's hand and kissed his knuckles. It was a mirror of earlier, but it still didn't ease Tony's concerns.

"Some of their barbs were painful," Loki admitted, not beating around the bush. "But, no more so than usual. Rather, Hel's actions and the ambassadors support have soothed the sting." He chuckled, something incredulous still in his gaze. "You have no idea how blessed we have been, Anthony. Truly, there is very little *anyone* could say to ruin this moment."

Tony truly hoped that was the case, because he doubted Thor and the others would play nice even after Hel's verbal flaying. Still.

"You're sure, Lokes?" he asked again, squeezing his lover's hand. "Because it's alright to not be okay."

Loki's smile grew wider. "My Anthony, you are soon to be my husband, you are soon to have a golden apple. The most important realms and people give us their support. Truly, I am *wonderful*. The ignorant and petulant opinions of those I have long given up on; they cannot touch me today."

Tony smiled back. He also stepped closer and kissed Loki firmly. Loki wrapped his arms around him and Tony indulged in being close to his lover.

He was *so* glad that Loki seemed okay.

When they broke apart, Tony tucked his face against his lover's neck. Loki gently stroked his back. They were quite and relaxed, but Tony's thoughts couldn't stop spinning over what had just happened.

"So, what Hel did was a big deal, huh?"

"Oh yes," Loki huffed a laugh. "Leaders of realms are often brought upon to officiate weddings. It is a matter of status, be it political or merely to flaunt one's favouritism. Hel, in her many eons, has *never* given such a blessing."

"Huh," Tony remarked. "I definitely need to get her a gift now."

Loki laughed. He also squeezed him tighter and Tony smiled. He didn't get it, not the same way that someone like Loki would. Someone who knew the politics and history of the Nine Realms so extensively. This was all still new to him. He could understand that it was *big* but it didn't register the same way.

But it made him wonder, and not for the first time: "What did she say to you?"

"Hel?"

"Yes."

"That she wishes us a safe journey to Alfheim. She will be joining us within the day. She is leaving Asgard to attend to business on her realm." There was a small pause. "It is strange actually, she made mention to a guardian."

"A guardian?" Tony pulled back with a frown. "A good guardian or a bad one?"

"Well, I am not sure. Good, I believe. Hel, like any ruler, has underlings to do what she wishes. They are highly revered positions and are protectors of her realm when she is absent." His lips twitched. "I believe she has a new one. A favoured one, so to speak. Someone she nudged."

Tony's eyes widened. "Wait. The one we saw kill Thanos?"

"Mm. It seems, in death, Nebula has been rewarded. Peace, power and a Queen who will give her purpose but treat her well."

"Damn," Tony whispered. "Good for her."

"Mm," Loki hummed again. "It is much deserved."

Tony nodded, but it also brought him to the realisation that without Hel on the realm it was literally them against Asgard.

*I'm looking forward to getting to Alfheim.*

All they needed was for Fandral to finish packing his bags, which, Tony had to admit, had to suck.

“Is Fandral going to be okay?” he questioned, lowering his voice even further. “This has turned his home into hostile territory.”

“I plan to ward this house extensively during our absence,” Loki admitted.

“Well, that’s great for keeping out unwanted intruders, but what about when he comes home?” Tony pulled back from Loki, but not far enough to disrupt his arms. “I don’t like the idea of leaving him here.”

“Nor do I,” Loki agreed. “It will ultimately be his choice but... we will see if we can’t change his mind.”

“Yeah,” Tony glanced at their friends. “Maybe we’ll sic Bruce on him. How can Fandral say no to playdates on Earth with Hulk?”

Loki snorted. “We shall see.”

Tony was tempted to press more, not to mention, ask about the man’s rhino and if it would be okay here – but the man in question returned to the room. He had something similar to a rucksack only a lot more medieval and *leather*.

“Have you managed to pack enough for over a week, Fandral?” Loki questioned.

The man blinked. “I thought perhaps it would take a few days.”

“One should *overpack* not *underpack* when with the elves. They will have a few feasts; of that I am certain.”

Fandral blinked again. “You are asking me to join you the entire time?”

“Yes,” Loki said firmly. “You have well and truly earned a space at our table, Fandral.”

“Not only that,” Tony piped up. “I’d be fine if you wanted to pack for an *extended* stay. I can’t speak for the elves but I can speak for Earth, and my tower. I’ve got plenty of space. I can give you a floor. You can even bring, uh,” he had to struggle to remember the pronunciation, “Garðr too.”

Fandral still seemed indecisive. Tony could get it. This was his home of *centuries* and he’d only been to Earth a handful of times. Who knew about his comfort with the elves.

“Think on it,” Loki said. “For now, know that you are not only welcome but it is *insisted* that you remain on Alfheim with us for the entirety of our stay. While among our party, you have the hospitality of the elves and protection of Hel. Nothing, and I do mean *nothing*, on Asgard will dare to harm or confront you.”

Fandral smiled, but it was faint.

“Thank you, Loki.” He then nodded at him. “Thank you all.” He sighed. “It seems each day that things change more than I can keep up with. I simply wished to support the happiness of Loki and yet, it seems I cannot even do this task without anger and suspicion.” He met Loki’s gaze again, his expression sorrowful. “I am sorry it has taken so many years to see and *experience* what has been your every day for far too long.”

“At least you have seen,” Loki said, “and you have *changed*. An act that I had thought no Asgardian capable of. No, Fandral, we are making our peace.”

Fandral finally smiled more genuinely. He also walked across the room. Loki let Tony go to allow Fandral ease of access. He stepped close and clasped Loki’s shoulder and Loki did the same. They didn’t exchange a word, but Tony could tell there was a wealth of what was *not* being said.

*If only more of the Aesir could do something like this. There might be fucking hope for them. If only **Thor** could see past his own bullshit and take a fucking step towards repairing things with his **brother**.*

But it was apparent that nothing was going to change on that front. Thor was Odin’s son, through and through. At least Loki had *someone* from his past who could become a strong friend and a *good* memory.

When they pulled apart, Fandral looked a little bit brighter. Loki merely cleared his throat.

“Yes, well. Prepare for a week and don’t dawdle. We need to return to the bifrost. I do not wish to arrive on the realm *after* Hel.”

Fandral chuckled. “As you insist, Loki.”

There was a light tease to his voice and Loki grinned. Fandral put down his rucksack but left for deeper parts of the house. Tony just took the opportunity to wrap an arm around Loki’s waist and press closer. He hoped they could get to Alfheim soon. He liked seeing Loki happy and teasing. He was looking forward to leaving Asgard behind them and focusing on brighter and *better* things.

Their big gay wedding still needed planning, but tonight, he hoped they could put it on hold to focus on hanging with friends and exploring alien planets. Maybe convincing Fandral to join the ragtag group at his tower.

He was up against two wordsmiths, Bruce’s puppy eyes and Rhodey’s lifetime of learning how to talk stubborn people into doing the smart thing. With all of that on their side, Fandral should have no chance.

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Once Fandral had his *larger* bag packed, his house warded and Garðr safely secured in his stables, Loki teleported their group to the bifrost. Tony knew jumping so many people around

Asgard had to be draining his seidr, but he didn't seem to show it. Instead, he smiled and greeted the Alfheim ambassadors.

Heimdall said nothing as Loki ordered him to send them to the Elven realm, but he *did* follow the command. When they arrived, they were in a glade that was every *inch* the mystical Lothlorian of Lord of the Rings. He knew he wasn't the only one gaping as they were led down a well-tended path and into the forest. The overhanging canopy and moss *sparkled*. It was stunning.

Tony might be more of a walls and machinery kind of guy, but even he could admit, this was *beautiful*.

The dignitaries were speaking about the realm, explaining it and the magic inherent in each tree, flower and dust particle. Tony was listening avidly and it turned out, so were Bruce and Rhodey. They ended up asking numerous questions, much to the fond amusement of the Elves.

It was almost a disappointment when they came to the Elven village. It wasn't made with trees as Tony was half-expecting, rather, the buildings were done with stonework and thatched roofs. The closer they moved to the centre, the more the buildings were built around the trees with the rivers passing between the tree roots and buildings.

The large castle in the centre had huge cathedral windows and a large fountain out the front. People were talking and conversing freely. The populace held *books* and children played with seidr.

Tony's heart *ached* and he glanced at his lover to see the softest expression as he watched the Elven realm. They were *Loki's* kind of people. He could imagine his lover being truly happy to live here.

In fact, had he not been a prince, Tony was certain Loki would have moved to Alfheim at the smallest opportunity.

"Welcome honoured guests," one of the ambassadors stated, "to Ljósá."

"It is a pleasure to return," Loki answered. "Your realm continues to impress, as always."

The ambassador smiled and bowed.

"Your realm is beautiful," Bruce breathed.

"And fascinating," Tony chimed in. "Beautiful, fascinating, and a massive upgrade to our previous arrangements."

The ambassador smiled wider.

"You honour us, Anthony Stark." He bowed again. When he stood, he gestured at the castle. "And if you will come, we shall take you to your rooms. They should be ready."

*They work fast.*

Then again, unlike Asgard who would do it all by hand, the Elves had *magic*.

The group followed them into the castle. Tony had to admit, he spent a lot of the walk swivelling his head from place to place. Where Asgard was overwhelmingly *gold* and seemed to be designed to flaunt the royal ego, Alfheim seemed more about nature. The castle was made by stonework, but vines, creepers and flowers ran along parts of the ceiling and walls. It should seem structurally unsound, instead it just seemed... natural. It didn't look like the plants were struggling or like the building was rundown. Everything just gave off a peaceful and harmonious feeling. Honestly, Tony felt the tension falling from his shoulders.

It was hard to feel stressed when everyone seemed so relaxed.

Hell, as they were being led deeper into the castle, Elves who walked past were stopping to congratulate them on their union. They also expressed a desire to converse more at a later date. The Elves wanted to get to know them, to meet their friends but didn't want to impose on their time. It was *nice*.

When they finally arrived at the rooms, there was one for him and Loki while Rhodey, Bruce and Fandral each had their own further down the hallway.

While Tony still did feel a bit wary separating from his friends on a strange planet, the way Loki smiled, nodded and showed no hint of unease had their friends following the Elves. Tony and Loki stepped through into the main room. It was smaller than Loki's rooms on Asgard and consisted of a main foyer done in blue and brown with lots of wooden furniture and rugs. There were bookshelves, settees and desks. A door at the right corner of the room would probably take them to a bedroom, while on the left large windows and a glass door overlooked trees.

"Ah, they have given us access to the courtyard that leads to the forest. It is likely our friends shall also have rooms leading into that space."

"But... weren't they going down the hall not around?"

Loki grinned. "Seidr, Anthony."

"Ah, right."

Clearly the castle didn't bow to the laws of physics. It both hurt his engineering brain and delighted his scientific one. He wanted to know *everything*. He also wanted to learn how to do it so he could incorporate rooms like that into his mansion.

Loki wrapped an arm around his waist and tugged him close. He rested his chin on top of Tony's head.

"How do you find Alfheim?"

"Is that a trick question? You should know me well enough to know I'm itching to rip everything apart and have it explained to me."

Loki chuckled. “Yes. I thought that might be the case. I think it would be good to teach you seidr here. They are masterful tutors and the energy in the air will help you pinpoint your seidr and others.”

“Then sign me up. Extended vacation with the elves?”

“Mm. After the wedding.”

“Yeah.” Tony wanted to catch his lover’s gaze, but didn’t want to move. “How are you feeling about that?”

“I will enjoy every moment of making you mine. As I assured you on Asgard, anything else cannot touch me. I shall have *you* and your life will be extended to match my own. Their words cannot compete with that bliss.”

“Awh,” Tony cooed, but he was smiling. “You romantic.”

Loki snorted. He also lifted his chin. Tony turned his head and he was greeted by a soft kiss. He shut his eyes and sighed. Tony could have kept kissing the man for hours – if his phone hadn’t rung.

He jerked apart and looked down at his pants with surprise. He plucked it out and frowned, feeling a small spark of worry.

“Rhodey? You okay?”

“Fine. No idea how to get back to where you guys are, but fine.”

Tony sniggered. “Didn’t you always want to get lost in a magical castle as a kid?”

“Funnily enough, I didn’t,” he drawled. “Also, as much as the elves seem better than the Aesir, I’m not keen on being separated. Especially without a suit.” He let out a frustrated sigh. “I didn’t like being powerless against Thor and his assholes.”

“No,” Tony agreed, sobering. “Neither did I.”

“Think you can get your fiancé to magic our suits over here? I’d like to have something nearby in case shit goes down.”

Tony still felt a zing of pleasure at the word *fiancé* and he doubted he would ever grow tired of it *nor* of ‘husband’.

“Yeah. I’ll ask him. Or maybe I’ll call FRIDAY and make a show of it. I did promise we’d broadcast the wedding for Earth.”

“Grab me a handheld camera too. Just because we’re on another planet doesn’t mean you’re getting out of the embarrassing close ups and poorly filmed personal video.”

Tony beamed, already loving the idea of *their* record filmed by *their* friend.

“Wouldn’t dream of it, platypus.”

“Good. I also want to chat to Fandral, get some plans underway about what we need and what we want to do. I’m thinking we should have some drinks too. Fandral could probably use them after today.”

“Yeah, I think he could. We’ll come find you and the others. We might be able to get some peace before the Elves have us socialising.”

“Even if they have us socialising first thing, I still think it will be better than what would happen on Asgard.”

“You’ve got a point,” Tony agreed. “But it would still be nice to regroup and resettle a little.”

“I’m all for that.” Rhodey huffed a laugh. “And I’m sure Fandral would like some more time chatting up Bruce.”

Tony snickered. “You noticed that too?”

“If he didn’t come from *Assgard*, I’d be insisting he has a crush on the guy.”

Loki scoffed loudly and Tony attention moved from their conversation to his lover who had clearly been listening in. He raised his eyebrows.

“Fandral is a known philander of women,” he stated firmly. “He will never be ‘*chatting up*’ Banner.”

Tony was amused.

“I was one of those too, babe. Doesn’t mean Fandral can’t swing both ways with a bit of encouragement.”

Loki still looked *completely* disbelieving and Tony was now *very* curious to push that topic and see whether Fandral did have gay potential – but Rhodey interrupted before he could go down that particular rabbit hole.

“How about instead of debating Fandral’s sexuality you focus on finding my room, Tones.”

“That almost sounds like you’re making a pass at me, honeybear,” he teased.

“A pass at you? Please. I’m trying to hook up with the magical space prince beside you. I want my men handsome and full of otherworldly connections.”

Tony made a sound of mock outrage. Loki just chuckled. He also leaned closer to be able to speak into the receiver.

“You flatter me, James.”

“*Hello*, Loki,” Rhodey said, putting particularly emphasis on the word.



Tony gave another squawk.

“Nope. No, flirting with my fiancé. Asshole. Total asshole.”

Rhodey was already laughing and Loki was huffing a chuckle as well. Tony pouted and Loki bent down and kissed his cheek. It appeased him a little and he let his expression smooth out.

“You’re so mean to me, platypus.”

“And you deserve every second,” Rhodey replied. “Now get your butts over here. I want us all under one roof.”

“Fiiiiine,” Tony dragged out. “Be there soon.”

He followed it by hanging up the call. He looked at his smiling lover and, because he could, he wrapped his arms around Loki and held him close. Loki laughed again and kissed the top of his head.

He knew Rhodey had zero interest in men, let alone Loki, but Tony still wanted to hold tight to his lover.

“Relax,” Loki said quietly. “I am going nowhere.”

“You better not be. Anyone makes a serious pass at you; they’re facing off against Iron Man.”

“How very dramatic,” Loki drawled, but he squeezed him tightly. “But I assure you, anyone who would do such to you would face a similar reaction.”

*Good*, he thought viciously.

And maybe it was a little over-the-top, but it had been a hell of a few months with more than a few assholes trying to get between them. Tony wasn’t taking any chances. It was nice to know Loki was doing the same.

“Now come,” Loki said, pulling away sooner than Tony really wanted. “Let us find our friends and rest together. I know you both wish for your armour and to speak with FRIDAY. We shall arrange everything necessary and then see what shall become of our day. Alfheim has many beauties and I wish to show you them all.”

And as much as Tony wanted to stay cuddled with his lover, he knew he’d have a chance for that later tonight. For now, it was time to hang out with his friends, see this new world they were on and plan their wedding.

Yet the gesture snagged on his mind and reminded him of something they were missing and that he needed to correct. He’d have to talk to his girl FRIDAY or see if Fandral could find him a craftsman on Alfheim because, he’d just realised his lover’s finger was bare and that needed to change.

They needed *rings* so that the whole universe could see that they were taken.

## Chapter End Notes

Once again, happy New Year one and all! Have a lovely December 31st and great introduction to January! ♥

# Chapter 80

## Chapter Notes

Bit of a short chapter this time, I'm afraid. It's been a very hectic month and I'm actually about to start moving so comment replies will be delayed over the coming week. Even so, I hope you enjoy this fluffy update! ♥

They went to Rhodey's room first, collecting him before going to Bruce's. Much to Tony's amusement, Fandral was already there. He exchanged a look with Rhodey before pointedly raising his eyebrows at Loki. The mage rolled his eyes, clearly remaining unconvinced about Fandral's *'potential.'*

Bruce had then let them in and taken a seat in an armchair, Fandral was already on the settee.

"Hope we're not interrupting," Tony said cheerfully. "We thought we'd be better under one roof, but if you guys want some time alone, we're happy to leave."

Rhodey smothered a laugh in a cough. Bruce frowned, looking perplexed. Fandral, the naïve, simply smiled and shook his head.

"I have been speaking to Bruce. He has been telling me of grand battles you have fought, and also of the things he does when not embodying his famed Hulk."

"Oh?" Tony asked, surprised Bruce was voluntarily talking about the Other Guy.

"Hel says I need balance," Bruce said. "I think a good start is talking about what I do... and what Hulk does."

"He has spoken to me of his time as a healer," Fandral enthused. "I know from Loki that healing with seidr is difficult. To heal with the inventions of the mortals seems a similar task, and yet, one that does not require seidr mastery."

"The mortals craft medicines which is quite different," Loki agreed. "It is still a very specialised field."

Tony frowned. "Yeah, but Bruce isn't that kind of doctor."

"No," he agreed. "But I helped people that way a few times. I reinvented myself in a new place, when it became necessary."

*Ah*, Tony realised. Bruce was making some not-so-subtle hints in Fandral's direction about what he could do with his life now that Asgard had proven hostile.

Tony didn't know if the point was hitting home, but the swordsman seemed cheerful. That was a step in the right direction.

"Well, don't let us interrupt too much," Tony said. "I'm just going to call FRIDAY, work on a way to televise our wedding and grab us some suits. Maybe some more clothes for our extended stay too."

"Suits, huh?" Bruce questioned, his expression stating he knew it wasn't *tuxedos* they were looking at.

"Yup. Always good to be prepared for *all* fashion situations."

Rhodey snorted. He also walked across the room and took a seat beside Fandral.

"We also need to make some wedding plans," he said. "But I'd be happy with putting that off until tomorrow. I'm not sure what kind of beers Alfheim has that I can drink, but if nothing's possible, we'll just add alcohol to our shipment."

"This list is getting larger by the moment," Loki drawled. "It may need a trip to your tower, or a few more mages to bring everything back."

"Or maybe I'll just build Alfheim their own bifrost," Tony remarked. "I mean, it can't be that hard, right?"

Loki chuckled. "Anthony, you may be brilliant, but such a task will not be a simple one."

"Yeah, but I've got an extended future to work on it. Not to mention, a handsome husband-to-be who's a genius. Together, we've got this covered."

Loki just looked amused. "We shall see, Anthony. As I believe you still have plasma cannons to master first."

"Tony in command of plasma cannons and a bifrost?" Rhodey remarked. "I'm not sure I'll ever be ready for that."

Tony pointed at him. "Keep that up and there will be no plasma cannons suit attachments for you."

"Well, I'll be Asgardian durable, won't I? Maybe I'll get Loki or Fandral to teach me how to fight from the ground."

Tony stepped in front of Loki. "Get your own. I call dibs on any Loki training."

Rhodey rolled his eyes. "Then guess it's up to Fandral." He looked at the swordsman. He seemed both amused and puzzled by the conversation. "What do you say? We organise the wedding and after I get the apple, you teach me how to fight like an Asgardian. You use a sword, right?"

"Yes," he agreed. "I do."

“Settled,” Rhodey declared. “Suits and swords for me.”

Tony snickered, unable to help it. “So, you’re going to be our very own knight in shining armour?”

“Makes sense, doesn’t it?” He said. “I’m the one running around looking after the two princes getting themselves into trouble.”

Tony rolled his eyes, but inside, he was delighted by the masterful manipulations his friends were laying down to drag Fandral onto Earth. Clearly, he and Loki wouldn’t be needed after all, they were both laying all the necessary hooks into the Asgardian.

All he needed to do was arrange a place to house Garðr on Earth. Maybe he could buy Fandral a farm to live on? Bruce might even enjoy living there too. Away from everyone and peaceful. He’d have to run it by the scientist, and probably Loki.

Or maybe he’d just buy it and thrust it at them until they accepted and realised it was a brilliant idea.

While, he would *prefer* them under the safety of the tower ward, maybe Hel would like them enough to extend another ward over the farmhouse? Maybe he could ask Loki about how they could go about asking?

“Anthony.”

Tony blinked from his thoughts to look at his amused lover. Loki’s hand went to the back of his head, tugging gently on the strands.

“I can hear your thoughts rushing away from you from here.”

“They’re not rushing away. They are right where they need to be.”

“Mm,” Loki hummed, not looking like he believed it.

However, before he could complain, Loki ducked in and gently kissed him. Tony’s eyes closed automatically and he relaxed into the touch.

When his lover pulled back, Loki said, “Let us focus on now. You have FRIDAY to call and I shall arrange for some food and drinks and perhaps a mage or two to assist me in grabbing what we require from Midgard.”

As much as his mind was still caught on the farmhouse, he was forced to concede. “Okay. FRIDAY first, future plans well, in the future.”

“Good.”

Loki followed it with a quick, affectionate kiss to his forehead. The gesture had him smiling even when Loki stepped away and moved towards the door, obviously to call the servants. Rhodey, Fandral and Bruce were already starting a discussion about swordfighting and while Tony was curious, he pulled out his phone instead to call FRIDAY.

He had a lot of things to set up if they wanted the wedding and their time off-world to happen without a hitch.

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After a long conversation with FRIDAY (who had been quietly stressing about them being away without their suits, warming his heart) and a few quick ones with the others, he was able to compile a list of everything they would need. She was going to get everything ready and phone him when their items were ready for collection.

She did also pass along a message from Rogers and Barnes who she'd informed of their departure. They'd expressed a willingness to help in any way should they have need of it. Which was nice of them and, after a quick check with Loki, he told her to explain their engagement and the planned wedding along with the offer to come up and attend the ceremony.

After all, if they were going to broadcast the wedding to Earth (and have it in a hostile environment), it would look all the better having Captain America supporting their big gay affair. The look on Fury's face as he watched would be a wedding gift all on its own.

When the call ended, Tony felt more tired than he expected. Loki was sitting in an armchair and instead of finding his own, Tony went directly to his lover and dropped down on his lap. Loki grunted loudly, but it seemed more theatrical than true discomfort as he was quick to wrap an arm around Tony. He reshuffled them until they were both reasonably comfortable. Tony rested his head on his lover's shoulder.

"Hi," he murmured.

"Hello, Anthony," Loki replied, stroking his side. "You seem weary."

There was noticeable concern in his voice and it was why Tony didn't lie or try to fake it.

"It's just tiring sorting stuff out. As much as I want our big gay wedding, dealing with Asgard is draining."

"Yes," Loki agreed. "It is."

"I'll be fine after I've had some time cuddled up to you," Tony said. He turned his head to kiss Loki's neck. "Like you said," he said quietly, "I'm going to be married to you soon. It's not going to touch us after a few days."

"We will have to deal with them in future," Loki pointed out.

"Yeah, but on *our* terms. And frankly, I'm hoping it will be minimal. I told you, I'll build a bifrost or a teleportation circle for mages. Something that means bypassing their asshole world to come straight to the elves."

Loki huffed a laugh, but he also shifted and kissed Tony's head. Tony didn't know if that was acceptance of the idea or not, but Tony knew he'd convince the man to let him try.

"You lovebirds falling asleep over there?" Rhodey questioned.

“Almost until a rude platypus interrupted us,” Tony retorted. He also shifted enough to be able to see their friends. “You shouldn’t wake sleeping fiancés.”

“If this was *your* room, maybe I’d agree with that, as it is, falling asleep here might cramp Bruce’s style.”

“I didn’t realise I had style,” Bruce drawled.

A comment about Fandral was on the *tip* of Tony’s tongue but Loki squeezed his hip in a silent warning. Clearly, his lover knew him well. He pouted.

“Spoilsport,” he muttered.

“I believe Anthony will wake up once our food arrives. It shouldn’t be much longer.”

Tony perked up. He also lifted his head. “Do they do things better than the Aesir?”

“Well, *I* certainly prefer their cuisine,” Loki commented. “What say you, Fandral?”

The swordsman had been relaxed against the cushions, smiling as he listened to their conversations. He’d been mostly quiet as they’d spoken, having little to say about retrieving belongings from Earth, but somehow, he’d never seemed out of place among them.

“I admit I have not had much time to sample their meals,” Fandral answered. “The little I have had have been unusual but first rate. Loki was always more favoured with invitations to dine with them.”

*And considering the group you used to hang around with, that’s pretty understandable.*

“Rest assured, Fandral, in our company, you will have *many* invitations. In fact, although they are bringing us something to ease our appetites, I was informed that a feast will be held in our honour tonight.”

“Oh?” Tony was excited. “Like a celebration for our wedding?”

“No,” Loki shook his head. “That will come tomorrow when there is more time to prepare. Rather, this feast is to welcome us *all* to Alfheim. We are all guests of honour. Hel as well, should she attend.”

Tony smiled. “Well, the Elves sure know how to welcome a person.”

“Yes,” Loki agreed. “Some of the ones who brought us here have also given an offer to take you all on a tour of the realm. They noted your interest,” he nodded at Bruce and Rhodey, “and wish to answer your questions more fully.”

“And what about me?” Tony asked. “They don’t want to show me around?”

Loki chuckled and turned to face him.

“Anthony, they would *adore* showing you the realms, of that I have no doubt, but they would see it as an insult to offer when they assume *I* will be showing you.”

“Oh,” Tony murmured. “Well, that’s okay then, because I would *love* to be shown all your favourite places by you.”

“Then, while Bruce, Rhodey and Fandral are exploring Ljósá, I will take you on a more *private* tour of the realm. I am certain you will grow to love it as much as I.”

“Sounds great, babe, since I already think this place is amazing.”

Loki smiled and Tony couldn’t resist kissing him. He looked so happy and at *ease*, it was something Tony wanted to encourage and hold tight to. While Loki often looked relaxed at the tower there was something different about him here.

Alfheim had likely been his escape for centuries. Yeah, Earth had given him acceptance and allowed him to be himself and love whom he wanted – but Alfheim had *magic*. It also had memories. Earth was a flicker of time to him, this place had *roots*.

In fact, more so than Asgard, this place made Tony think of it as Loki’s *home*.

*We’re going to have to get a vacation home here. A place we can go when we’re not on Earth and Loki can show off his seidr mastery and keep his fingers in some galactic diplomatic pies.*

When they broke apart, Tony stayed close. He honestly could have remained indefinitely if a knock hadn’t come at the door. Tony groaned, figuring it was the food. Loki moved to shift them, but Tony didn’t want to let go. He made a show of splaying himself more fully over Loki.

“Can’t someone else get it?” he whined.

Loki laughed and it seemed he wasn’t the only one entertained as Fandral stood. “Let your courted stay. I shall get it, Loki.”

“Fandral, you’re awesome,” Tony declared. “Seriously. Awesome.”

Fandral smiled, looking incredibly pleased; like a dog that had just been told he was a good boy. It was kind of endearing.

“I am very happy to assist you however I can.”

He walked to the door cheerfully and Tony met Rhodey’s gaze from across the room. It was obvious they were both amused. While Tony had been genuinely thankful, Fandral had probably taken it a little too seriously. But that was okay, they’d teach the swordsman how to translate him soon enough.

The door soon opened and Fandral could be heard greeting them. A few moments later two elves entered the room with trays. They were not as finely dressed as the other elves Tony



had seen, clearly denoting them as the lower class. But they smiled and seemed happy. They treated them with respect but not deference.

In a way, it felt a little like the difference between a servant and...well, wait staff. Maybe he was reading too much into it, but he hoped the elves treated their people better than the Asgardians.

After checking that they didn't require anything further (which they didn't) the elves left them to their meal. Tony had assumed he'd need to climb off Loki at that point, but instead, Loki kept him in place. He also, Tony was sure, used a hint of seidr to widen the chair enough that he could sit up a bit better and they could eat easily.

It was nice to feel Loki's warmth against him and his arm tucked around his side. As they ate, Loki and Fandral spoke about Alfheim. Fandral hadn't seen much of it and what he had seen was, clearly, a space for *outsiders*. Loki, by comparison, mentioned vast forests, libraries, and whole fields dedicated to archery. They made a sport of it and watching an Elven competition was a grand spectacle.

Everyone was excited to see something or, rather *many* things. Tony had been keen to grab Fandral and maybe an ambassador to help him with locating some rings for the two of them, but the more Loki spoke, the more Tony decided he wanted *them* to select something *together*.

But they weren't in a position to shop yet. Instead, Bruce made a comment about the courtyard off his room and, to Tony's regret, he was forced to climb off Loki as their group exited the room to explore. Loki pointed out various plants and even some birds. When he directed them to a small wooden box, Loki reached inside and pulled out seed. He held out his hand and three birds immediately flew to land on his arm and peck at the food.

From there, they all grabbed handfuls and were soon surrounded by birds of varying colours and sizes. They landed on them without the slightest hint of fear. Tony honestly wished for a camera. Everyone was smiling or laughing and the birds were chirping and singing. Loki even had his arms outspread with birds sitting on him like a telephone wire. There were even two on his head.

It was, frankly, a miracle no one got covered in bird poop.

They *did* however get greeted by two Elven courtiers who were wandering through the courtyard and feeding the birds. Tony doubted it was by design, but as they spoke and started to walk the paths, the birds started to fly away and he and Loki ended up down a different path to the others. There was still one bird on Loki's shoulder, chewing lightly on his hair.

"You really love it here, don't you?" Tony questioned.

"Yes, I do," Loki agreed. "It is a peaceful place." He chuckled. "Too peaceful, I suppose, for my innate chaos. The longest I have ever remained was three months."

"Was that due to you choosing to leave or Odin demanding you back?"

Loki smiled ruefully. “The latter.”

“So, you *could* stay here for longer, you just haven’t had the chance?”

Loki shot him a look. “I do believe you are plotting, Anthony.”

“Just thinking about how long I’ll need to sign off from Stark Industries to learn magic. And you promised me realm hopping. If we have a base at Alfheim, that should work nicely, right?”

“Yes, it shall,” Loki said, his voice soft.

He also closed the space and kissed him. Tony kissed back, enjoying the chaste embrace. But, the fluttering of a wing had Loki pulling back. The bird clearly hadn’t liked his change of position. It ruffled its feathers before flying away. Loki watched it and Tony watched *him*.

There was something strangely wistful about the expression.

“Lokes?” He asked, touching his lover’s arm.

“It is nothing, Anthony.”

“Liar. Try again.”

Loki snorted. He also looked away from the trees and the now hidden bird.

“I suppose, it just reminded me...”

“Of?” he prompted softly.

“My stallion.”

Tony blinked. “You have a horse?”

“I did,” Loki agreed. “Halvor. I had meant to locate him when we first visited Asgard.” He sighed. “I was quite fond of him.”

“Is he still on Asgard?”

“I’m not certain,” Loki admitted.

“But we could try and find him?”

“You need not help me locate-”

“Uh, uh, uh,” Tony interrupted holding up a finger. “What do you mean I don’t need to help? Clearly, what I need to do is find a stable on Earth. Or maybe a farm. I was thinking about buying a farm for Fandral and Bruce and Garðr. Why can’t Halvor go there too?”

Loki laughed, the sound both amused and disbelieving.

“A farm, Anthony. Truly?”

“Why not? What’s wrong with a farm?”

“Nothing, you ridiculous mortal.”

“Hey!”

Yet, his protest was soon muffled by a fierce kiss. Tony’s eyes fell closed and he clung to Loki. The intensity of his lover’s kiss stole his breath and left him panting when they broke apart.

“I still do not know how I have been so lucky to gain you,” Loki whispered.

“Right back at you, Lokes,” Tony replied just as softly.

Loki kissed him again. It didn’t last as long, but they ended up with arms wound around each other and when the kiss broke, Tony rested his head on his lover’s shoulder.

“I would enjoy having Halvor returned,” Loki admitted. “It would also be nice to be able to ride him while on your world.”

“Then we’ll get him. We’ll get him, the farm, the place on Alfheim. We’ll have *everything* sorted by the time we’re married.”

“A lot to do in minimal time, Anthony,” Loki said, sounding amused.

Tony lifted his head. “Doubting me, babe?”

“No,” Loki said, his gaze soft. “I would never doubt your ability to give us happiness, Anthony.”

Tony’s chest warmed in response, and rather than say something that he was sure would be inadequate, he kissed his lover instead. He hoped it passed along everything he felt, because it really did seem impossible to put into words exactly how God damn perfect and *right* everything felt.

Sometimes, he wanted to pinch himself to prove he was awake – but he knew he wasn’t dreaming. He was just unfathomably, *amazingly* lucky. For once in his life, things really did seem to be turning up aces, and he hadn’t even needed to stack the deck.

# Chapter 81

## Chapter Notes

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

Alfheim quickly became as great a place to Tony as Malibu or New York. There was something innately welcoming and just *charming* about the Elven world. Everyone was either friendly, polite or minded their own business. Tony couldn't even say that was the case for most places on Earth.

They had a lazy, easy afternoon and when they attended the welcoming feast everyone congratulated them *genuinely*.

And when Asgard was mentioned, it was done with upturned noses and derogatory sneers. It was quickly made *obvious* that the Elves' opinions of the Aesir were deep seated. It hadn't taken their partnership to pull the wool from anyone's eyes. They'd just made it possible to condemn Asgard *openly* - well, them and Hel.

She'd only appeared very briefly at the feast, thanking Alfheim, speaking with a few people and passing on words of approval and fondness towards the Elves. She'd also told them she would return for the day of their wedding to help oversee the ceremony. Her appearance had been short and sharp, yet still more commanding and respected than Odin could *ever* hope to be.

After that, the feast became more relaxed. There was amazing food and magically watered-down wine (at least for him, Bruce and Rhodey). The Elves played music and it was nice to just *dance* with Loki; hearing his laughter, seeing his smile, being kissed without thought or concern. Tony also spied Rhodey being chatted up by a very pretty elven woman.

It was a great night without political byplay or feeling like he was going to be put on the gallows at dawn.

It was why, when they all returned to Bruce's room to wind down before going to bed, Tony decided to make the offer that had been turning through his mind all day. They were all drinking Elven hot chocolate which was *delicious* if oddly fruity. He'd dropped down into the same armchair as before (which meant he was mostly on Loki's lap). He was comfortable and content, making it the perfect time to launch his plan.

"So," he declared into the quiet, "I'm thinking Loki and I need to buy a house here. Maybe a farm. At first it was going to be on Earth. A place for rhinos and horses and balanced not-that-kind-of doctors. But maybe, I should be aiming more towards the Elven realms. Thoughts?"

"God, Tony," Rhodey said, sounding both fond and amused. "Only you would decide to buy two houses without consideration."

"I am considering! See me consider! I'm even asking for opinions!"

“I have not heard of many outsiders being accepted upon the Elven realm,” Fandral said, seeming concerned. “I do not know if it would be permitted.” The swordsman turned to Loki. “Are such things possible?”

“Of course they are,” Loki said. “There are dwarves who live here, Fandral. Not to mention, beings from outside of the Nine.”

“Truly?” Fandral asked, seeming shocked.

“Indeed. They are rare, I will grant you, but far from uncommon. One merely needs the permission of the ruling council and to follow the laws of their land. Of course, having excessive gold always smooths any passage, but even the richest being may find themselves denied if their manners and opinions are too at odds with the Elves.”

*Meaning, if Thor attempted to move here, he'd be kicked out on his butt with little preamble.*

Fandral shook his head, looking mystified.

“It seems as though I know little where I once thought I knew much.”

“Never too old to learn,” Tony chimed in. “In fact, I say life would be pretty damn dull if there wasn't new information to help us develop. Stagnation is the greatest enemy of progress.” Tony lips twitched, and he couldn't help adding, “Probably why I fell in love with a guy who embodies chaos. Nothing breeds creativity and change like a little bit of anarchy.”

Tony glanced at his lover, seeing Loki smiling so softly that for a moment, he forgot anything existed but the man at his side. Bruce, rudely, was the one to remind him that other people were still there.

“I know you like to help your friends, Tony,” he said quietly. “But I hope you aren't just buying a farm for our sake.”

“I can't make my friends comfortable?” Tony said, turning back to face him. “I can't give them a house and then crash on the couch when I'm touring the realms on my yearlong honeymoon with my husband?”

Bruce looked exasperated. “Tony-”

“Uh, uh,” Tony interrupted, holding up a finger. “If I want to shower my friends with farmhouses, I'm allowed to. Benefits of being a thoughtless billionaire with more money than sense.”

“I've never heard a phrase that applies to you *less*,” Bruce countered.

“Fine, fine, whatever. Look. Loki has a horse he needs to stable. Fandral has a rhino that needs an escape from Asgard. They can't live in the tower. You don't even *like* the tower. So, a quiet place with land around it for you two to live on and us to visit.” Tony made a dramatic gesture with one arm, hoping to get his point across, but actually almost spilling his drink.

*“Farmhouse.”*

“And where am I during all this?” Rhodey asked, crossing his arms and raising an eyebrow. “Leaving me out in the dirt, huh, Tones? Me? Your oldest friend?”

“Well, of *course* not, honeybear. You’re keeping the world from blowing up in our absence. You’re also the guy who has control of all my assets, houses, labs and company while I’m away.”

Rhodey’s eyebrows rose, he seemed genuinely surprised. “You’re putting me in charge of everything?”

“Well yeah,” Tony said, smiling softly. “Who else am I going to trust with it?”

Rhodey swallowed hard and even from a distance, Tony could see the way it had hit his friend. Because, yeah, they’d had their rough patches. At the very beginning of all of this when SHIELD had stolen from him, when he’d first come out as Iron Man, when he’d almost been dying... things had gotten hard.

But what mattered, what fucking *happened* at the end of the day was that Rhodey came through for him. They worked it out. They bounced back. Tony knew he could give Rhodey everything he had and it might not turn out exactly as *he* would have planned, but God damn it, his friend would honour his wishes come hell or high water.

Rhodey had his back, even in the moments he didn’t always agree with him.

It was why, with Loki and him off world: *who else* would he trust his legacy to?

“Well,” Rhodey said, his voice a little thicker, “you’ve made stupider decisions, I guess.”

Tony laughed, the sound swiftly breaking the emotional tension which had been filling the air. He still smiled at his best friend, the man who had followed him through everything. And soon enough, would stand at his side as he got married. Would walk with him into extended life. And hopefully, in the years to come, he’d follow him off-world too and into a universe their entire group could explore and protect.

But for now, Tony would settle with letting Rhodey do his thing in between overseeing Stark Industries and his various properties. He’d also put his other two friends in a farmhouse and see what developed over cups of tea. (No matter how many times Loki denied the possibility of *more* and rolled his eyes.)

And although his friends never officially *agreed* to the proposal as their conversation soon turned to less emotional topics, Tony remained adamant about his plans.

When they all left to retire to their rooms, Tony thought everything had been dropped. But after they’d changed into the soft and comfy pyjamas the Elves had provided (they’d be picking up their items from FRIDAY tomorrow) and climbed into bed, Loki remarked, “You have many plans for our friends.”

“Shouldn’t I?”

“Of course. I am all for rewarding those who have treated us well.”

“So why do I sense a protest?”

Loki hesitated and Tony shifted onto his side to better see his lover. Loki’s brow was furrowed pensively and he was staring at the ceiling. Tony waited as patiently as he was able until Loki replied.

“I know you are fond of keeping those you trust close to you. Truly, I have no problem with this only... I do hope to have a home all our own. *Ours*. A place we invite people, yes, but where none live but us.”

Tony smiled. He also shifted closer and grasped his lover’s hand. Loki glanced at him, looking uncertain. Tony had no problem wiping that concern away.

“Why didn’t you say so, babe? Find us the house, and I’ll move in without hesitation. Malibu when we want to relax. The tower when we have business on Earth. *Our* house when we want to be left alone and be together.”

Loki’s expression immediately brightened. He closed the distance and they shared a kiss.

“Do not think I will forbid FRIDAY,” Loki hurried to say. “It is not unlike how Halvor would be welcomed. Anything we call creation, steed, pet or even child. They are part of *our* partnership.”

“Our family,” Tony acknowledged.

“Yes,” Loki said softly. “The family that begins with you and I and may grow as the years pass us by.”

“I look forward to it,” Tony said softly.

Loki kissed him again and they traded soft kisses until, when they stopped, their foreheads were pressed together and their eyes were closed as they breathed softly.

In fact, it seemed like the perfect time to mention the *other* thing that had been running through his mind all day.

“There’s something else I want to purchase,” he murmured. “Something for you and me. You know about how we wear rings on Earth?”

Loki pulled back and Tony opened his eyes. His lover’s face had shown, not surprise or upset, but rather, a fierce yearning.

“Yes,” Loki whispered. “A physical sign of commitment.”

“Something I was hoping you might help me pick. Maybe here on Alfheim?”

“There are similar things that mages wear that help with encouraging seidr bonding between partners,” Loki said, the words almost rushed out.

Tony grinned. “Then I think that’s high on tomorrow’s priority list. Don’t you?”

“Yes,” Loki agreed, excitement already bright in his eyes. “We will go to the smiths and mages and find something to make even Hel praise the craftsmanship.”

“Well, I don’t know about that,” Tony teased. “After all, we’d have to make it ourselves for that to happen.”

Loki laughed. He also tugged Tony closer until they were pressed bodily together.

“Not yet, not with your magic still so underdeveloped. But in years to come, we *will* make such items. We will craft a bond that every mage shall be envious to see. I promise you, Anthony, we will have a future brighter than any sun or star in this universe.”

Tony’s heart skipped. “Hell, Lokes. I didn’t think we were at the wedding vows yet.”

Loki laughed. “Oh, they are not my vows, my little vegetable.”

Tony’s grin immediately disappeared for a scowl. He poked Loki hard in the chest.

"Call me that at the wedding, and I'm going to punch you. *Hard.*"

Loki smirked. "Ah, but without the apple or your suit that is hardly a true threat."

"Depends where I punch you."

Loki laughed again. His eyes even closed with the force of his humour and Tony’s expression softened. He also relaxed his hand and stroked Loki’s chest. When his lover finished laughing and settled, Tony was still smiling.

“I would not call you that,” Loki promised into the quiet.

“Yeah,” Tony said, “I know.” He pressed closer to his lover, resting his head on Loki’s chest. “And I don’t really mind when you use it.”

“Yes,” Loki admitted. “I think you are rather fond of it.”

“I wouldn’t go *that* far.”

Loki chuckled. He also started stroking Tony’s back. Tony sighed and closed his eyes.

“Go to sleep,” Loki said softly. “Our days will be eventful and you will need your rest.”

Tony smiled, amused at how easy such a sentence was to follow. Once, he’d been plagued by nightmares and the ever-rushing state of his mind. He wouldn’t say that Loki stopped that completely but rather... he kept the day so interesting that Tony actually *felt* ready to rest. He felt like he *could* relax around Loki. He also felt safe.

He knew that he wouldn’t always be so lucky, but fuck it all, he’d take it while he could get it.



And if Loki continued to give him restful nights and safety from the demons still lurking in the back of his mind... it only further proved how perfect they were together. It was why Tony cuddled even closer to his fiancé and let sleep take him away.

It was hardly a bad way to start his first day on Alfheim.

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Their next few weeks on the Elven realm only made Tony love it more.

It didn't matter where they went or what obscure part of the planet Loki showed him. Everyone was happy for them. No one *disapproved* of them. Loki was clearly loving every second and it quickly became plain that Bruce adored it too. Tony had never seen his friend so relaxed. Bruce could often be found in the courtyard, feeding the birds and letting them land on him. Fandral was often by his side, chatting cheerfully. If he wasn't there, he was with Rhodey helping to plan the wedding.

Tony saw most of it from the outside or heard of it after the fact as Loki continued to whisk him away to his favourite haunts. Tony was pretty happy to be taken. It was nice to just walk through a forest with Loki as the mage let seidr spring from his fingertips as he explained grand parties, mischievous games, and magical rituals shared with dozens of mages.

More than once, Loki had taken them to a secluded part of the forest for a meal which often descended into making out and sometimes *more*. When they left the forest a little ruffled (Loki not even bothering to fix their appearance) they were only met with amused, knowing smiles or outright chuckles.

They also went hunting for the rings.

Loki went through a few places before he found someone he liked. The smith was highly recommended and she was delighted to be crafting for them.

They decided on two gold bands with subtly etched spellwork. Loki also pulled jewels from *God knew where* and asked them to be added. They looked a bit like diamonds but with a purple sheen. They were apparently very good at conducting seidr bonds. The rings themselves would take time to be crafted but she promised they would be ready by the wedding.

And frankly, that was the only real downside about the whole thing.

They had to keep *leaving* Alfheim to discuss the wedding on *Asgard*. Loki had actually snuck the dragon ear cuff into the items brought from Earth. He made him wear it as well as the bracelet.

While it was obvious Hel had whipped Asgard into submission, Loki was taking no chances.

The time spent on Asgard found Tony either bored or rolling his eyes. The so-called 'Golden Realm' had lost any possible shine. His only sources of amusement were Odin's gritted teeth and Thor's complete absence from all planning.

Even *Odin* was regulated to merely nodding his acceptance. They knew what they wanted and Rhodey knew how to make it happen. *Including* glitter and rainbow flags.

The cultural significance could have easily been lost in translation, but his amazing platypus was making sure to explain it to the Elves. Some of their royal planners had offered their services, and Rhodey had happily accepted. They were polite, they were helpful, and by all accounts, they were *very* happy to promote LGBT culture during the ceremony.

It was honestly beautiful and *hilarious* to watch. Because what was a big gay wedding if the homophobic assholes didn't know what they were looking at?

Tony was just glad that Fandral cheerfully helping Rhodey and being part of their group meant the Elves weren't painting him with the same Asgardian brush.

One evening, Rhodey told him that Fandral had been invited to stay on Alfheim after the wedding, surprising both him and Loki. It was, apparently, a high mark of respect. The fact Fandral had politely declined having already chosen to return to Earth with them left Tony very chuffed.

(And yes, Loki *did* roll his eyes when Tony suggested that it had something to do with a certain mean green fighting machine and his tea-drinking other half.)

So, yeah, even though things were running smoothly and Odin was left to merely accept what they did rather than be involved (a high insult, Loki had gleefully told them. Something that would be widely whispered about and looked down upon on by the Realms, but something *impossible* to subvert after Thor's behaviour and Hel's declaration) Tony still didn't like spending time on Asgard. It just couldn't compete with Alfheim.

Despite that, they *did* still have some free time which meant Loki and Fandral showed them around. Some of the scenery was pretty and some of the markets had good stuff. But the atmosphere soured everything. Walking with his hand in Loki's got them sneers, glares or people outright turning their back.

Fandral was often wincing and apologising under his breath, even though everyone assured him it wasn't his fault. It was also fucking *offensive* when they returned to Fandral's house and, although the building was untouched thanks to Loki's wards, the area *around* it had been vandalised by manure and more than a few rude slogans.

Luckily, the Elven mages were more than willing to help Loki in moving Fandral's belongings to rest in the tower. It had still boiled Tony's blood to see Fandral's shock and upset over what his neighbours and former friends had done.

Garðr, at least, was unharmed and unbothered.

It made Tony even more inclined to show off his happiness with Loki and *their* happiness and *favour* as a group. The assholes wouldn't change, but at least they could make sure to show how little they gave a damn about what the Aesir were doing.

It was why, when they'd finished at Fandral's house and were lingering in the foyer, Tony had stood on tip toes to wrap an arm around the swordsman's shoulders.

"Chin up, Faramir. Don't let these assholes see anything but your smile. You've got two realms who are happy to have you and appreciate that you've got a good heart."

"I thank you for the compliment, Anthony," Fandral said, smiling faintly. "But I find it hard to be so positive when seeing the actions of my people." He shook his head, looking confused. "I do not understand how they can act this way. How they can turn their backs so blindly."

"They don't like being told they're wrong," Rhodey said. "They don't like that you're changing and outshining them. They're taking out their anger on you, rather than looking hard at themselves."

"It does not make it hurt less, I find," Fandral said quietly. He then sighed and shook his head. "But I shall, as you said, keep my 'chin up'."

He lifted his head and looked around his home. They hadn't touched too much in the main entrance, it was mostly the inner rooms. A lot of the house had family heirlooms going back generations. Fandral hadn't taken everything, just what he considered most important. Loki's magic would keep it safe and preserved until he was ready to come back or empty it entirely.

"What a strange way to leave this place," he murmured.

"Sometimes the best thing you can do is be forced to make a change," Bruce said.

Fandral looked at him and smiled more genuinely. Bruce even smiled back. Tony *itched* to say something about it, but wisely kept his mouth shut.

It took a few moments before Fandral looked away. But he soon turned to Tony with a faint frown and remarked, "You used a name that was not mine."

"What? Faramir?" Tony questioned. "Yeah. He's a warrior from a book series on my world. Really great character. Strong, loyal, and determined to do the right thing." He winked. "Guess he reminded me of you."

Fandral smiled. "Then I am glad to gain his name."

"You better get used to that and more," Rhodey said. "Tony is big on giving people names that aren't their own."

"Yes, I have heard him refer to you as a," he frowned, "platypus?"

Rhodey groaned, the sound dramatic and making Tony beam.

"Shut up, platypus," Tony insisted, still grinning, "you love it."

"Sometimes it does seem better than 'Brucey bear'," Bruce chimed in.

“I do believe I would take either over some of the creations I’ve been reduced to,” Loki drawled.

Tony pouted and pulled his arm off Fandral to cross them.

“All of you are mean to me. It’s rude. See if I give you affectionate nicknames anymore.”

“Oh no,” Loki deadpanned, “anything but that my little-”

Tony crossed the space in two seconds flat and shoved his hand over his lover’s mouth, muffling the word. Loki attempted to scowl but his eyes were dancing with humour. It was why it was *almost* expected that he felt a touch on his back and jerked to see a clone of his fiancé behind him.

Loki’s double grinned and leaned in close to whisper in his ear; “My little but much adored life partner.”

Against his better judgment, Tony smiled. He also turned back to the *real* Loki, removed his hand and went on tip-toe to kiss his lover. It was only short, but when he pulled back, he muttered, “You’re a dick.”

“Luckily,” Loki murmured, “you like that part of me.”

Tony snorted. He also wrapped his arms around his lover’s neck, but when he felt Loki’s seidr disperse, like a fine tickle across his back, he turned to look behind him. Loki’s clone was gone, but he did see their friends. Bruce had taken his place by Fandral’s side and Rhodey had stepped closer. They were clearly attempting to cheer up the swordsman.

“Right,” Tony said softly, “how are we going to perk him up?”

“Not a task I have ever excelled at.”

“Bullshit, you’re great at brightening my mood.”

Loki huffed a laugh. “Yes, well, you are a rare exception.”

Before Tony could reply, Rhodey remarked, “Hey, we’re thinking of heading back to Alfheim early. We’re going to have some food in the courtyard and Fandral is going to teach me a bit of swordplay.”

“Ha,” Tony mumbled. “Seems like they beat us to it.” He then pitched his voice to say, “Sounds great. Just give us a few extra minutes. We need to get Garðr sorted on his trip to stable with the Elves, not to mention another friend.”

“A friend?” Rhodey questioned. “Who?”

“A very special stallion who needs his better forever home.”

“Okay,” Rhodey said, still seeming perplexed.

“We shall not take long,” Loki said. “The Elven party will be waiting for us in the cloister by the council chambers. Leave with them to the Bifrost, we shall not be far behind.”

Their group nodded and Loki directed him out of the house. They started walking in a different direction from the palace. It hadn't taken Loki long to find Halvor. He'd been removed from the royal stables and while not officially sold or retired, he'd definitely been *downgraded*. Out of sight, out of mind. Just like Loki.

But Tony was looking forward to meeting him.

It took them about ten minutes of walking to find the space. It wasn't exactly rundown, but it was obvious that people rented the stalls for their horses. Loki walked past a half dozen before picking up speed at a *specific* whinnying. At the very back was a beautiful black stallion who was pressing up against the doors.

Loki let go of his hand to reach the horse faster. He held out his hand and the horse nudged it. Loki smiled and stroked it.

“Oh, my loyal stallion. I have neglected you most horribly. I apologise.”

The horse snorted, but butted Loki's hand in obvious affection. Tony stayed back and watched the reunion, letting Loki have his moment with the horse. Tony figured he'd have plenty of time to get to know Halvor and win him over once they were married, had their farmhouse and had gotten off the hell hole called Assgard.

For now, he was happy to just admire his future husband and the newest addition to their family.

## Chapter End Notes

I just want to say a great big thank you to whoever recced this story for the "International Fanworks Day 2022" as a classic fic. I was so chuffed to have this story get added to the reclist. It really made my day! ♥

# Chapter 82

## Chapter Notes

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

Halvor returned to Alfheim with them, surprising Bruce and Rhodey. Fandral met the horse with familiarity and delight while the Elves expressed their happiness to keep both him and Garðr for as long as needed until they could be relocated to Earth.

Tony wasn't sure how he was going to get an intergalactic horse on Earth without incident, but he was ever hopeful that Loki's seidr could simply... hide the situation. Either way, it was a problem he pointedly shelved in the 'later' pile.

In the meantime, he was able to thoroughly enjoy organising the televised wedding and chatting with FRIDAY. Loki was helping them from a seidr side of things as they implemented their inter-realm phone technology on a grander scale (with the help of a few Elven mages.)

Rogers and Barnes passed on a message or two about Earth. They also expressed eagerness to come and join them once the big day rolled around. Everything was falling into place nicely.

Their rings were almost ready and even the wedding layout was sorted. Rhodey was on his right, Fandral on Loki's left. Even Bruce had a role, he needed to bring the rings and some silk to Hel. The latter part of some mystical, mage binding ceremony.

It had taken just over a week to organise everything and Tony was *finally* getting more excited than wary. More *happy* than irritated. Odin was still sucking on a lemon, of course. Thor was (they heard) still throwing a tantrum about having to attend and bless the ceremony.

Yet, as much as Tony found the whole thing entertaining and wanted their big gay wedding – there were a few brief moments where he *worried*. And late one night in their room, he finally expressed it.

Tony had entered from the bathroom to find Loki sitting on the bed, a book on his lap. He was brushing his hair as he read. He looked peaceful and *adorable*. Tony really did hate to ruin his tranquillity, but with the wedding only days away, his niggling concern was only going to grow bigger if he didn't ask.

“You're happy with our wedding, right?”

Loki paused and lifted his head. A frown was marring his previously smooth brow.

“Are you asking if I do not wish to marry you?”

“No,” Tony hurried to say. He quickly took a seat beside his lover. “No. I'm just... this wedding is filled with a lot of people we don't like. Your world and mine are going to tune in

and see it.” He shrugged helplessly. “I guess I’m just saying, this is *our* day. It’s not too late to have a ceremony in the forest with only our friends to see it.”

Loki smiled. He also put down the brush and took Tony’s hands.

“Anthony, I would happily wed you in a forest, or in your tower, or in a Norns forsaken *swamp*—”

“*Charming.*”

“I care that I am marrying *you*,” Loki insisted. “Yes, there are those I do not like attending, but I shall relish in them seeing our happiness. Yes, I prefer privacy, but the moments that truly matter *are* when we are alone. Let the universe see us claim one another. I will be *glad* to have them see the one whom I have won.” He squeezed Tony’s hands, his voice getting softer. “I care not for the people I do not like. The people who *are* important to me have places of honour at our side, and in the ceremony. I would not discard the work they have done to make this grand and befitting of our union.”

“Oh,” Tony breathed, smiling. “Well, that’s good then. Rhodey would probably kill me if I messed up his wedding planner aspirations.”

Loki chuckled. He also leant forward and gently kissed him.

“Then,” Loki said once they broke apart, “let us marry in glory and your world’s *rainbows*.” He smirked. “Let Asgard talk of a wedding between men for *centuries*.”

Tony smiled and couldn’t resist kissing his lover again. This time, when they broke apart, they sat in contented silence, their hands still clasped. Yet, after a few moments, Loki pulled away one hand to continue with his hair and his reading. Tony just grinned and continued to watch his lover. Loki didn’t glance at him, but his lips did curl in a small smile.

Tony took the opportunity to just sit and *admire* Loki.

*God, we’ve come a long way.*

He could still remember the early days of their alliance, when they spent hours debating the contract and coming to the perfect conclusion. When they teased about signing it with blood or something more *intimate*.

When they’d both been harsh and wary and unwilling to *trust* let alone give their heart away and gain a lifetime partnership. And with that memory, came *another* one. His lips twitched.

“Hey Lokes.”

“Yes, Anthony?” he questioned absently.

“I hope you remember I’m the instigator of this alliance.”

Loki frowned. He looked up from his book and paused with the brush in his hair.

“Pardon?”

“I asked you to remember it, Lokes. Don’t tell me you forgot? Because *I* sure haven’t. I need my due credit.”

The penny seemed to drop and with it, Loki huffed a laugh.

“You ridiculous mortal.”

“I won’t be mortal much longer you know. That insult is going to have to be retired. Also, I don’t hear you confirming it.”

He made a point of tilting his head so his ear was closer to Loki. In response, Loki grabbed his chin and turned his head. He met his lover’s gaze, and unlike that conversation what felt like *forever* ago, Loki’s expression wasn’t flat or unimpressed. His gaze was soft with warmth and affection.

“Does it need confirmation, Anthony? Surely it is obvious that I consider it the greatest offer of my life. I would never dream of saying otherwise.”

Tony swallowed hard.

“Right,” he cleared his throat. “Just so long as we’re not in doubt.”

“Never, my Anthony.” Loki kissed him again. He then stroked Tony’s jaw. “You gave me a far better deal than anything I could have imagined at the time. And now, there is an even *better* partnership with you on the horizon.”

“Marriage,” Tony breathed.

“Precisely,” Loki gently kissed him again before pulling back.

Tony knew he had the sappiest smile on his face and he didn’t even try to hide it. Loki smiled back before returning to his book. And, rather than do something on his own, Tony decided to stay close to Loki.

“Think I could do that?”

Loki lifted his head, seeming confused. Tony nodded at the hairbrush. Loki raised his eyebrows.

“Your hair is not long enough for that.”

“I’m not talking about me.”

“Oh.”

Loki looked at the wooden brush before passing it over. Tony grasped it and shuffled up the bed to sit behind Loki. The first pass of the brush had Loki sighing and relaxing further against him. Tony barely resisted the urge to turn around and kiss Loki again.



Instead, he focused on gentle, slow strokes of the brush through his lover's dark hair. It was calming. And with the way Loki continued to let out soft sighs every few seconds, Tony was going to make sure that it didn't remain a one-of, spur-of-the-moment event.

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Their wedding day came quicker than Tony expected and much to his surprise, he was *nervous*. It wasn't even the Asgard aspect (although, he would blame it on that should anyone ask) it was just... he was getting *married*. He'd never thought it would happen. He'd never thought he'd be so *excited* about it either.

But nervousness remained.

He was in a preparation room (and yes, he'd made a crack about jams and jellies) on Asgard and Loki was in a different one further down the hall. Rhodey was with him. Fandral was with Loki. Bruce was off with the Elves and waiting to greet Rogers and Barnes.

"Stop fidgeting, Tony."

"Fidgeting? Who's fidgeting?"

"You're going to wear a hole through the floor or your suit. Or break the cufflinks."

Tony froze. He looked down at the emerald studded gold cufflinks. A subtle nod to Loki and something he would hate to see lost to Asgard's gilded halls. Rhodey placed hands on his shoulders and squeezed.

"You look great. Everything's running smoothly. Nothing will go wrong or Hel will obliterate people with her glare." Tony huffed a strangled laugh. Rhodey just rubbed his shoulders. "It's all going to be great, Tones."

"I know," Tony said. "Fuck. Even if Thor tries something, or the Aesir are assholes. I *know* it doesn't matter as long as I can marry Loki. Here, on Alfheim, anywhere. It doesn't matter. I just..."

"You want it to go well," Rhodey said, his voice soft and calming. "That's normal, Tones."

"Yeah." He laughed roughly and looked over his shoulder. "God, can you believe I'm acting like this? *Me?*"

Rhodey raised his eyebrows. "You? The guy who stresses about every detail and is a perfectionist and has hang ups and-"

Tony turned fully in order to punch his friend in the arm. Rhodey just grinned and dragged him fully into a hug. He melted into the man's embrace.

"I get it," Rhodey said quietly. "I really do. But things are going to go fine, Tony. You've got all your friends, a badass fiancé and the Queen of Helheim on your side."

Tony sighed loudly. "I *know* all of that. So why can't I stop freaking out?"

“Well,” Rhodey said, “I guess it’s because you only get married to the love of your life once.”

Tony squirmed, feeling all soft and warm inside. But there was also a very small spike of insecurity. Because his track record really was *shit* and they hadn’t even been together that long.

“What if I don’t?” he whispered.

“What do you mean?”

“What if I don’t just get married once? Or rather.” He swallowed, a lump in his throat. “What if *Loki* gets married again?”

Rhodey was silent for a long moment.

“Tony, I can’t predict the future. I don’t know how you guys are going to go a year from now, or five hundred. But I *do* know that you are both stubborn as hell and crazy about each other. I can’t imagine either of you letting this relationship fall apart. You’ll make it work, and I’ll help smooth over any road bumps.”

He squeezed Tony again.

“Honestly, though. I have a good feeling about this. I really think you’re that lucky couple where everything clicks and you *do* get it right.” He pushed Tony back just enough to meet his gaze and smile at him. “Frankly, I don’t think Hel would be officiating if she didn’t think you were built to last.”

Tony smiled back. He also hugged his best friend again, squeezing him probably a little bit too tightly.

“Thanks, Rhodey.”

“What are best men for?” he asked. “Well. Other than the embarrassing speech.”

Tony groaned loudly. He pulled back and pouted, but Rhodey’s grin was wide and unrepentant. He also clapped Tony on the back before walking away to attend to his suit in the mirror. Tony twisted his cufflinks again, but this time it wasn’t a nervous gesture, instead, he just thought of his lover and how much he wanted to see him.

It seemed to take an age from then until the trumpets began to sound. Tony had managed to contain his nerves, but at the sound of them, they shot back up until he was twitching. When Rhodey touched his arm, he flinched. He looked at his friend, but Rhodey just squeezed his arm.

“Come on, Tony,” he said softly. “Let’s go find your prince.”

Tony chuckled even as his heart leapt at the prospect of seeing Loki. He gave himself one more quick glance in the mirror. He was in his best tuxedo with a purple tie to match the rings they’d made. He also had a hint of gold and green Asgardian glitter near his eyes. It gave off a mixture of Ancient Egypt and runway model.

He looked hot. Yet, he already knew, Loki was going to look *leagues* better than him. He couldn't wait to see him.

They left the room where they met some *very* disgruntled Einherjar as well as an Elven attendant. *He* was smiling at least. He also bowed. Hovering up above with a handheld camera was an Iron Legion suit, guided by FRIDAY. He flashed a smile at his girl. He knew that further down the hall, at Loki's end, there would be another one doing the same thing. A third was in the Great Hall where Odin would be sitting, seething, on his throne. The camera would be catching it all for them (and Earth) to enjoy.

(It would be the best wedding video every recorded, Tony was sure).

The elf led their procession down the hallway and towards The Main Hall. The Einherjar were on either side, bracketing them in.

Tony's lips twitched in amusement at the glittering carpet at their feet. Every step he took sent gold glitter into the air. His shoes were going to be a mess. He didn't care. In fact, he *loved* the idea of Asgard cleaning it up for years and thinking of *their* wedding whenever they did.

(He was so, *so* tempted to jump on it like a kid in a puddle, but he resisted, barely.)

Above them, hanging in intervals was a golden cord from which hung three flags. Two were the rainbow flag with all the fabulous LGBTQIA symbolism while in the middle and larger was *their* flag.

The sight of *that* had Tony's smile softening. Because it was their twist on a common Asgardian tradition. At weddings, the symbols of each house were blended into one, but rather than give their *family's* crests, they'd gone with something more *them*. On Loki's side, the material was emerald green with half of his golden helmet. The other side had his Ironman helmet, also done in gold, while the back drop was his famed hot rod red. In the centre of the flag had their helms merging together.

*Two halves being made one.*

Just remembering what it meant had Tony aching to grasp his lover's hand and kiss him. This was *their* unity and it was finally becoming *real*.

The walk seemed to take forever. Each step dragged and he just wanted to push everyone out of the way and run to Loki's side. Making it worse was the music, the louder and faster it got, the closer he was coming.

When the elf finally stopped and stepped to the side clearing a path, Tony's breath left him in a heavy gasp. They'd stopped just before the doors to the main hall, on the other side was Loki, his elven guide, Fandral and some Einherjar.

Honestly, Tony barely *saw* anyone but his lover.

Loki was in something similar to his battle armour only more *refined* somehow. It was also layered with more green silk and gold accents as opposed to more protective leather armour. His hair was pulled back from his face and plaited. He'd woven them with a purple thread that matched Tony's tie and their rings. The glitter at his eyes were red and gold.

Tony walked towards Loki as if pulled by a string. Loki met him halfway and they clasped hands.

"You look *gorgeous*," Tony rasped, his voice rough with emotion.

"You are more beautiful than any sight I have seen," Loki whispered.

He bent down and their lips brushed. Tony smiled as their foreheads rested together. Tony squeezed Loki's hands and Loki squeezed back. Tony swore the rest of the world could have melted away. All he saw, felt, and *cared* about was Loki.

"Tones?" Rhodey said softly. "Loki?"

Tony pulled away regretfully, his best friend was smiling gently while Fandral was at his side, beaming at them.

"Come on," Rhodey said. "You guys don't want to miss your own wedding, do you?"

Tony huffed a laugh while Loki chuckled softly. They turned back to each other and smiled. Tony ducked in and kissed Loki one more time before pulling back. He didn't let go of his lover's hands.

"Ready to get married?" he asked.

Loki stroked his hand and answered, "Ever since I fell in love with you."

Tony swallowed hard. "Yeah," he agreed. "Me too."

Loki squeezed his hands one more time before letting his right one go. He then turned to face the hall doors. Tony did the same. Two servants were at either side, clearly waiting for a signal to pull them open. Tony linked his fingers with Loki's.

It was the moment they'd been planning for and Tony felt another burst of nervousness. He glanced at his lover and Loki looked at him. Tony didn't know what his expression conveyed, but Loki brought their linked hands up and kissed his knuckles.

That single gesture, that single glance into the green eyes he loved so much... and Tony calmed down. Because, he trusted Loki, he loved him. He knew whatever was ahead, they'd face it together and conquer it.

"Nothing to fear, Anthony," Loki whispered. "Merely a few enemies and a lifetime together."

Because, yeah, Loki *got* him. He wasn't backing out. He wasn't afraid of what it all meant. It was just a lot of *good*. The kind of good neither of them had ever been great at gaining, let

alone *keeping*. But this was theirs and it was *real*. No sudden jerking awake to painful waves of regret.

“A few or a thousand enemies,” Tony replied. “Nothing would stop me from getting that lifetime with you.”

Loki’s gaze turned aching affectionate and Tony *knew* they would have started kissing if Rhodey hadn’t cleared his throat. Tony dragged his gaze from his lover to see his friend’s amused expression.

“Stop making heart eyes, you guys. God, can’t even get you down the alter without it descending into a lovefest.”

“Shut your face platypus,” Tony said, but it was without heat. “It’s our day. We’re allowed to slow down the show if we want.”

Loki chuckled. “We could, dear Anthony, but I would not like to displease Hel. She has many duties, and our wedding should not interfere too greatly.”

Tony winced. “Yes, okay. Good point.” He looked back at the door. “Right. Let’s go make gay wedding power couple history.”

Rhodey snorted while Loki made a gesture at the servants. They quickly grasped the doors and pulled them open. The sound of the crowd had been muffled but it became loud, even over the music as everyone turned towards them.

He could see an Iron Legion suit hovering above and knew the other two would be getting all the best angles. Odin was at the far end in his chair, Thor standing at his right and looking *furious* even from a distance. Hel was at the foot of Odin’s throne and Bruce was further back but at her side, holding a red and green cushion with the rings resting there. Further behind him and still mostly part of the crowd was Rogers and Barnes.

Everything was ready, all they had to do was step forward and into their future. Glancing one more time at his fiancé, he smiled brightly and Loki grinned back.

They were ready.

## Chapter End Notes

If I was a cruel and horrid author, I could finish the story right there.

Luckily, I am not *that* cruel. Just a chapter break instead 😊

I hope you liked this sappy fluff!

Next up, a wedding 🧡

# Chapter 83

## Chapter Notes

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

Loki had never felt such happiness. Truly, a few years ago, he would not have known how to *gauge* such happiness. His life had been in a constant state of frustration, hurt and anger. It was only since allying with Anthony that his life had changed for *good*.

He had gone from loneliness and grief to a place where he was accepted, valued and *loved*. He had felt happiness for months – and yet, in comparison to this moment, it felt almost *paltry* in comparison.

For here he was, in the golden halls of his childhood, surrounded by those whom had mocked him and plagued his life with sneers and condemnations and he barely *noticed* them. For how could he look away from the mortal on his arm? The man whom filled him with joy and *pride*. Who made his future feel bright where once there had only been darkness?

Because against all odds, his tormentors were destroyed or silenced, and at his side was a man he loved. A man whom he was *marrying*.

Yes, Loki understood why Anthony had doubted his good fortune. *He* had doubted it himself until he'd grasped his lover's hands and started walking towards the Queen of Helheim.

Now he knew it was all too real, and there was not a thing in the universe that could stop him from smiling over it.

Every step they took down the specially designed carpet sent glitter into the air. The gold puffs were reminiscent of seidr and the Midgardian connotations only made their appearance more joyful. As they stepped closer to Hel, Odin and Thor's displeasure became all the more obvious. But, where once their good opinions had held sway over his actions, now they were no more important than the many sneering Aesir watching the ceremony.

Loki did not *care* what they thought of him or his lover. He knew there were far greater places and beings in the realms whose good opinion he *did* have. As they reached the Queen of Helheim, her lips rose slightly. It was the tiniest of smiles but it spoke volumes as to her favour.

Loki knew that the Midgardians watching would not understand, but the *Elves* did and *Odin* did. It was more than enough. As they took their place in front of Hel, they turned to face each other and reclasped both hands. Rhodes stood at Anthony's side while Fandral took a place at his. Banner came around to stand opposite Hel, the cushion containing silk and rings was held in his hands.

There were still murmurings and a low chatter but when Hel raised one of her hands, it silenced all.

“I do not often preside over the living,” Hel began. “Life is not my place.” She held out her hand towards them, palm up. Dark tendrils of magic caught their clasped hands and raised them high into the air. “But *life* requires change. It must grow. It must *survive*. There are some in life who will mark the universe more importantly than others.” She tilted her head while watching them. “My eye has always followed those of interest, although, there have been few in recent centuries.”

Loki felt a ripple of whispers, this time from the Elves. Loki felt their shock. Throughout the eons of the universe, individuals had shaped the universe and earned grand places in Valhalla. Some had been blessed by the Norns themselves.

That *Hel* was hinting at their importance... it meant something important for their future. What it meant; Loki could not fathom nor dared to presume. That was for beings far beyond his power.

*If mother was here... with her sight...*

But Loki closed down the thought. Frigga had always handled the strings of fate with utmost secrecy. She would have given him nothing. He also did not want to think of her on the day of his wedding. It was too... painful.

Instead, he would focus on what it *meant*.

They had the blessing and protection of Hel because at some point, they would make a substantial contribution to the universe. He glanced at his lover, but Anthony looked puzzled. He didn't understand – not yet, but given time, together, they would learn what Hel and the Norns were privy to.

“For now,” Hel continued, “I shall bless their union.”

She curled one finger and the silk left the pillow twisting through the air only to slide over their wrists. The material was soft and cool as it elegantly linked their palms and wrists together. His seidr hummed, itching at his skin to be released.

Anthony gasped. He glanced at his lover only to see the smallest tendril of fire-like magic. Loki immediately beamed and his own green seidr came out to meet and coax it. Anthony was staring in fascination as their magic melded. His was far stronger, but his seidr *cradled* Anthony's. Protecting and nurturing it.

*As I promise to do for you for eternity, my love.*

It took longer than most bondings, but with Anthony's magic so fledging, it made the act even more beautiful as their seidr followed the path of the silk. Drawing them together in both a physical and magical tether.

If that was not beautiful enough, he could *feel* Anthony's surprise, delight and *love*. He knew his own feelings were flowing through their newly channelled bond. He caught his lover's gaze and saw his emotions reflected in his gaze.

“Loki,” he whispered.

“Anthony,” he replied, squeezing his hand gently.

And somehow, all the words he’d prepared seemed like trite expressions of what he felt. *This* said so much more; his lover could feel his happiness, desire and love. They each knew exactly how much they cared, how much they *wanted* this.

But words were important. Even just a few of them.

“You make me happier than any other,” Loki said. “You give me hope and light, where once I was resigned to darkness and despair.” Anthony squeezed his hand. Loki smiled. “I would give you my heart and life for the rest of eternity. Even in death, I would not bear to part from you. I would be by your side as nothing but energy if it allowed me to stay with and protect you.”

Anthony swallowed, but didn’t look away from him.

“You’re amazing,” Anthony said, his voice rough with emotion. “The kind of person I’d never thought I’d get in my life. Never thought I’d be deserving enough to meet and hold onto. But you make me feel better than I can remember. If you were in darkness, I was in a black hole. Being sucked inside and left with nothing but demons and people whom I thought I could trust.”

He squeezed Loki’s hand so much it almost hurt. His seidr also flared, growing brighter.

“But you make me forget all of that. You make me *happy*. You say you’d follow me after death, but Lokes, I couldn’t bare it if we parted for even that long. The only way you’re going anywhere, is if I’m going with you. I’m yours until the universe implodes and even after that, I’m still yours. I wouldn’t want to be anyone else’s.”

Loki’s love burned so bright in his chest he had to close the space. He kissed Anthony fiercely and their seidr surged. Loki didn’t have to see to know their magic was looping around their hands and glowing from their bodies.

It would be too much usage for Anthony under normal circumstances – but right now his magic was bolstering Anthony’s. They were *sharing* seidr so that the bonding could complete without pain or unbalanced power. This wasn’t about showcasing who was more dominant – it was about working together and *helping* each other. They were becoming one; sharing their lives in every way possible.

When they pulled back, Loki beamed with delight to see the fire of seidr glowing from his lover’s eyes. He knew his own would be doing the same.

And that meant it was time.

Loki looked away from his beloved briefly, just to catch sight of their rings. They immediately lifted into the air and floated towards them. Loki turned his attention to their joined hands. The rings followed the path only to hover above them. They each raised their



spare hand - their *left* hand and their magic did the rest, cradling the rings and drawing them down over the finger designated by Midgardians.

The ring *hummed* and Loki felt some of his seidr dive into the carvings written on the band. He could feel *Anthony's* seidr do the same to his. Another layer, another *strengthening* of their magical union. Loki's smile could not be dimmed. His chest burst with more happiness than he was certain he could contain.

"Let this union begin," Hel said, breaking through his euphoria. "The Queen of Helheim offers her blessing."

It was the cue their friends required.

"James Rhodes best friend of Anthony Stark and honoured friend of Prince Loki," Rhodes said, his voice firm and yet, thick as if he too, was choked with emotion. "I know I'll never see a partnership so strong or more in love. They deserve every inch of their happiness. I give them my blessing."

"Fandral Bjarkeson," Fandral said next. "A friend only recently to Prince Loki after many years where the title was not mine to claim. I have learned my wrongs and am righting them at his side and at the side of Anthony Stark. They do not need my blessing, but they have it, just as they will forever have my sword."

Such a bold declaration from a former friend of Thor's had the Aesir whispering loudly, but Hel's voice cut them off.

"I now call upon the blessing of the Crown Prince and King of Asgard."

Hel turned to the side and looked up at the men whom had caused Loki untold grief. The would-be father whom had done everything in his power to rip Anthony from his arms. The so-called brother whom had despised his very being since learning, not of his heritage, but of his desire and love for *men*.

But standing in front of Odin's golden throne and seeing his furious glare did not stiffen his spine or leave him wary of what would occur. Instead, he felt *pleasure* and *pride*. He stood *tall* with his friends around him, his lover's hand clasped in his own and with the Queen of Helheim coercing a blessing from men whom would rather spit at his feet or throw him in a cell.

"The King of Asgard accepts your union," Odin said.

He looked at his son and flicked his hand forward. Thor had his fists clenched and his jaw was tight with anger and tension. He didn't move.

"*Thor*," Odin ordered.

The controlled anger in his voice would have made Loki tense instinctively if his lover hadn't squeezed his hand at the exact moment. It reminded him that he was not beholden to Odin any longer. That his anger was not Loki's task to soothe or avoid.

Thor glared at his father, but when Odin fixed him with a cold glare. Thor stomped heavily down the stairs from the throne. He stopped beside Hel and looked at them with something resembling *hatred*. It was the kind of look Loki had feared from the moment he'd learned of his heritage.

That it took this – that it took *love* to create it made him... regretful. He had grown up beside this man, and for all his struggles and the man's callous ways and unthinking actions. Loki had still, deep down, imagined their bond could be stronger than this.

Apparently, it was not strong enough for ingrained prejudices and furious stubbornness.

But he would not let it ruin this day - this *happiness* that he had. Thor had made his choice and Loki had made his. He was finally gaining what he had always longed to have – and he would not allow Asgard to taint his joy.

He glanced at Anthony and saw his small smirk and felt his vindictive pleasure at Thor's actions. He felt the man's *happiness* and it bolstered his own. He looked back at Thor and let his own smirk curl his lips.

After all, who was he to feel sad the man was a foolish, hate-filled child? Thor was forced to publicly accept his union to a man. It was about time the Crown Prince was forced to behave with a modicum of political tact.

“Come *brother*,” Loki said, emphasising the word. “Celebrate my marriage to Midgard's finest prince.”

Thor looked as if he had smelt something vile. His upper lip curled and he tilted his chin upwards. Loki knew before he spoke that he would refuse. That his next words would be insulting – and it seemed he was not the only one. Hel flicked out her hand and a series of black lines were drawn over the man's lips. His eyes widened and he attempted to open them but they were sealed tight.

*Sewn.*

Loki swallowed hard. He glanced at Hel, but even though she would know the significance (that *everyone* would, except perhaps, the Midgardians) she made no comment on it.

“If he shall not fulfill his role,” Hel said. “There is another who shall bless this union.”

Loki frowned, confused as to who she could mean. When he heard gasps and scrambling feet, Loki looked over his shoulder only to suck in a breath. His eyes widened. She glowed as if haloed by the sun and she walked towards them with the softest expression and the warmest smile.

“Mother,” Loki whispered.

He felt Anthony startle, but he couldn't look away as *Frigga* approached them. She glowed with the energy of one long-departed.

“How are you here?” he breathed.

She didn't speak. She *couldn't*, but she cupped his cheek. He closed watery eyes, feeling her love and *happiness* for him. Frigga removed her hand and Loki opened his eyes, he watched her cup Anthony's cheek and saw his lover's expression go from confusion, to shock, to a beautiful smile.

She then placed her hands against their clasped ones. There were no words, but Loki could feel her acceptance, her *blessing*.

An act she had performed for hundreds of Asgardian couples over the centuries. She *resided* over unions and acted as Hel did. And here she stood, against all odds, blessing *them*.

"Frigga," Odin said, he had stood from his throne, his angered expression cracking to reveal pain.

She looked at him and shook her head sadly. When she turned to Thor, her disappointment was obvious. Loki did not think he had ever seen the Thunderer look so wounded from a single expression. She squeezed their hands once more and Loki looked back at her. She smiled at him and bent forward. She kissed his forehead and Loki felt a tear trickle down his cheek.

When she stepped back, he wanted to follow, to keep her near, but she smiled gently and shook her head. She gave Anthony one more smile before looking to Hel. She bowed lowly; her gratitude obvious. As she rose, her form started to disperse and within moments, she was nothing but gold in the air, not unlike the glitter of the carpet. She swirled around them once before moving towards Odin. He held out his hand and managed to briefly touch her before even her essence was gone and returning to the halls of Valhalla.

The Grand Hall was completely silent. Loki continued to look at the spot where she had disappeared. He only looked away when fingers touched his cheek. He jerked and looked at his lover. Anthony had stepped closer and he looked concerned.

"Loki?"

He shook his head, because for all it ached to see Frigga only to lose her, the warmth, happiness and *pride* in her every touch and smile brought a soothing balm. She didn't not blame, hate or despise him. It was the sweetest blessing he could have ever received.

"She blessed our union," Loki said. "I am fine."

Truthfully, the words were not quite accurate. It was more that he *would* be fine. But with their bond still pulsing between them, Anthony knew exactly what he meant. He also smiled gently and kissed Loki's cheek, right over the tear track.

"With all blessings given," Hell said. "Let this union be confirmed by all who witness it."

She made a gesture with her hand and the silk on their hands fluttered and tightened only to fall from their skin. In its place rested their *seidr* in a perfect blend of their magic. It soon faded, carrying the bond deep into their blood and bone. When it finished, they were simply clasping hands, but it was also so much *more*.

Loki stepped forward and Anthony met him. He cupped his lover's cheek as they kissed. The Elves began to clap, followed by the friends around them. It was done. They were bonded. They were *married*.

When they broke apart, they stayed lingering close, their foreheads still pressed together.

"Hi, husband," Anthony said softly.

Loki chuckled, feeling a lump form in his throat.

"Hello, my bonded."

As much as Loki wanted to say more, to linger in the moment, people were already stepping closer. They pulled back but Loki did not let Anthony go. The Elves were offering their sincere congratulations. Rhodes was teary-eyed but beaming at them. Fandral and Banner were equally happy and Rogers and Barnes also offered sincere well wishes.

Loki heard the words, but could not recall them, not when the high of what they had achieved was still pulsing through his veins. When he could still feel Anthony's happiness under his skin as a match to his own.

The only one he *did* pay attention to was Hel as she approached them.

"I have one final gift," she said. They turned to look at her. "Her blessing of your union was all I could offer you Loki."

"It was more than I could have ever imagined," Loki hurried to insist. "It was..." he swallowed hard. "A gift I could never hope to repay."

Hel smiled regally. She also turned to Anthony.

"But your gift, I have more power to bestow."

"Queen Hel," Anthony said, "you've already given us more than we probably deserve."

Hel's smile remained. She also turned her hand, palm up as if to give her offering but nothing happened.

Anthony glanced at him, but Loki did not know what she had intended to achieve.

"Um, not to be rude," Anthony said, "but was something meant to happen?"

In response, someone landed behind them. They both turned to see the Iron Legion suit.

"FRIDAY?" Anthony questioned.

"Hello, Sir."

Anthony sucked in a harsh breath and Loki hurried to look at his lover. The man looked pale and the emotions rolling through him were hard to distinguish.

“J-J?” Anthony whispered.

“It is delightful to be back, Sir. Although, I am afraid I have much to reacquaint myself with.”

Anthony let out a sound reminiscent of a sob.

“Fuck. God. Yeah, you do.” He smiled; his expression so incredulous yet delighted.  
“*JARVIS*.”

“Yes, Sir,” the A.I. said gently. “I look forward to knowing your husband.”

Anthony laughed. He also spun around and let go of Loki’s hand. Loki knew what was about to happen and he widened his eyes and tried to reach for the mortal, but he couldn’t be stopped. Anthony closed the distance and... *hugged* the Queen of Helheim.

There was an audible gasp from everyone. Even Loki sucked in a sharp breath. Anthony seemed to realise what he’d done within seconds as he hurriedly let her go and stepped back.

“I, um,” he stuttered.

Hel merely smiled.

“You are welcome, Anthony Stark.” She then looked past him at Loki, before examining the rest of the crowd. “Now, I leave you all. But do remember,” she looked over her shoulder at Thor and Odin, her words becoming a low warning, “my favour does not waver. My sight does not grow *clouded*. There is more at stake than petty pride and foolish hatred.”

She continued to stare at Odin as black magic licked at her form, dissolving her skin to leave her skeletal and for a moment, terrifying. But as fast as it took to see her true façade, she was gone as if she had never stood before them. Loki let out a breath and hurried to close the space and touch his lover.

Anthony had looked a little shaken, but he soon smiled faintly.

“Remind me not to hug powerful undead Queens.”

“She is hardly undead,” Loki said. “And she also did not seem to mind. You have achieved something I do not believe any other could boast.”

“Lucky me,” he said. He then laughed and pressed his face to Loki’s chest. “Holy shit. Lokes. I can’t believe any of this.”

Loki stroked his lover’s back and looked around the room. At the mortals chatting with the Elves, the Iron Legion containing his lover’s long-lost companion, and the others still filming the event and controlled by the second A.I. Anthony had created.

He then looked back at his husband. They had just shared a wedding that had given them both a grand gift as well as bound them for eternity.

“No,” he said softly, “neither can I.”

And yet, even as he said the words, he knew it was real.

He also knew that soon they would be leaving for Alfheim for a celebration that would ignite joy and turn his mortal into an *immortal* to match his own lifespan. He knew there would be delight and happiness, the likes of which he was still grappling to absorb - but would have a very long eternity to experience.

It was why he tipped up his husband’s chin and kissed him again. Because, unimaginable or not, it had happened and it was *theirs*.

“I love you, Anthony,” he whispered once they broke apart.

Anthony brushed a kiss to his jaw, still smiling. “Love you too, Loki.”

And in the end, no matter the delight everything else had brought him, *that* was all Loki needed to feel like the most blessed being in the Nine.

## Chapter End Notes

Annnnnnnnd how many people got a little teary-eyed? 😥

But doesn't this almost feel like an ending? Ngl, I'm tempted to call this the end of the story and change the epilogue to start from the next chapter 😊

But honestly, I'm not moving the goal posts anymore. Whatever doesn't fit into the next seven chapters doesn't fit at all. We're down to the final scenes everyone, this story is almost finished...

**UPDATE** I have decided to call this the "Epilogue Part 1" and the next seven chapters will be the "Epilogue Part 2". Does that defy the actual meaning of an epilogue? Yeah, probably, but it's going to serve my purpose. So enjoy 😊

## Epilogue - Part 2

### Chapter Notes

I swear these guys just can't stop being sappy 😊

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

The afterparty on Alfheim was as big a party as you'd expect from an entire realm keen on celebrating their union.

Everyone got *very* drunk. There was dances and ballads (some of them even seemed reasonably accurate about their romance which was a little disconcerting and Tony blamed Rhodey for feeding the bards that information).

But it was honestly fucking *great*.

Rogers and Barnes almost didn't come. They'd given them a further congratulations and planned to leave but Tony was so fucking *happy* about everything, he'd allowed them to come along.

It was kind of nice, actually, seeing them laughing and dancing along with everyone else. Tony even spied Bruce and Fandral being taught an Elven dance. Which turned fucking *hilarious* when the female Elves then decided to have them dance with each other.

Tony might have wondered if Loki had something to do with it, but, frankly, Loki just seemed to be on cloud nine. Almost all his attention was on *him*. And Tony, well, yeah, he was mostly the same. But a few things did break through the haze of bliss.

Such as Rhodey being handed his apple and eating it to the cheering of everyone around.

Such as talking to *JARVIS* again and trying not to well up over his smooth voice and sharp wit.

(Fucking *losing* the battle when he and FRIDAY started talking, her almost tentative and him delighted. Like fucking long-lost *siblings* meeting and yeah, he'd needed a fucking moment.)

His own apple, well, that was done more privately. Loki pulled him aside to an alcove and with no one looking, he'd placed the fruit into his hands and stared at him with awe and overwhelming *love* as he'd eaten ever single bite, their gazes never breaking from each other as the change took place.

After that, the night kind of... blurred.

It was a long party, still going by the time the sun rose, which was when everyone started to disperse. Tony had loved every fucking second. Whirling around the dancefloor with his arms wrapped around Loki. Kissing him whenever he wanted. Fingering his ring and smiling every time he caught sight of Loki's.

Laughing as their friends drunkenly sloshed their drinks or told stories. There wasn't a scowl or a bad mood in the entire place. Tony could almost have believed there was an enchantment around the hall promising nothing but peace and good times. But Tony knew it wasn't the case. The happiness was just contagious and everyone felt it. No one on Alfheim wanted them to fail.

When he and Loki finally made it to their rooms, dawn's early light breaking through the windows, he pressed bodily against his lover and smiled against his shoulder.

"Today is the best day ever."

Loki chuckled. "It is the dawning of a new day, Anthony. Perhaps you mean yesterday?"

"Fuck that, I mean *every* day. From now on, every day is going to be that. They're always going to be that way since the moment you became my husband."

Loki huffed another laugh, but he also pressed a fierce kiss to the top of Tony's head. He knew the sentiment was returned.

Closing his eyes, Tony breathed in the scent of his lover. He knew they were both a little drunk. Not so much on alcohol, just on the high of life and their wedding. When Loki wrapped an arm around his waist, he curled even further into his husband's embrace.

"Come now," Loki said. "We should rest."

"Rest?" Tony asked, tilting his head to better meet soft green eyes. "This is the honeymoon night, babe. We're supposed to do things other than *rest*."

Loki snorted. "Anthony, we shall have an eternity to explore and pleasure one another." He stroked Tony's back. "And while I will forever wish to do such things with you, it is daybreak and you have eaten an apple of Idunn. Resting is advised."

Tony knew it. He could feel it in his body as the adrenaline and excitement of the night wore off – he was *tired*. He closed his eyes and groaned softly.

"Yeah, okay, *fine*."

"Don't sound so petulant, dear," Loki said, amused.

"Can't believe I'm choosing sleep over sex. My past self would be scandalised."

Yet, even as he said it, Tony knew there was more at play than just a hectic night. It was something that, after everything, he wasn't embarrassed to say. He opened his eyes, seeing Loki's warm and loving expression once again.



“Then again,” Tony said, “my past self hadn’t realised that just being with *you* was all that really mattered.”

Loki’s smile turned achingly soft. He cupped Tony’s cheek and tugged him into a kiss. Tony closed his eyes and responded back, his arms wrapping tightly around his lover. He never wanted to let go.

*And I don’t have to. He’s mine now, forever.*

It was one of the best thoughts and it sent a wave of warmth through him. He felt his magic, so small and still slightly foreign react positively. He then felt *Loki’s* seidr react in turn and he shivered. The kiss broke and Loki then kissed his cheek.

“Enough of that. *Later*, we shall indulge. For now, we rest.”

And despite his curiosity about sex with *magic*, Tony accepted and let his lover lead him through the rooms and to their bed. And even though they were changing outfits and slipping beneath the sheets as the sun rose over Alfheim, Tony still cuddled up to his lover as the mage drew all the blinds and plunged them into darkness.

All and all, Tony didn’t have a single damn complaint about the first day of their honeymoon.

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Of course, after that night, when they woke up in the afternoon, they *did* have the sex they’d missed out on the previous night. Pressing close, panting in the dark with the sheets still half over them and their gazes locked as their seidr swirled around their clasped hands.

It was, quite frankly, the best sex Tony had ever had. So, it wasn’t surprising that (with his new, more durable body) they had a couple more rounds before even bothering to order dinner.

That they didn’t leave the room until the next morning was, also, pretty unsurprising.

When they found their friends having breakfast in the garden, Rhodey merely smirked at them, Bruce smiled with genuine happiness and Fandral delightedly waved them over to the table.

“Have a nice time?” Rhodey remarked.

“You know it,” Tony replied, plopping down on an empty seat and stealing some herbed bread from Rhodey’s plate.

Loki sat down more gracefully beside him, and smiled and nodded at Bruce as he offered him a cup of tea.

“Rogers and Barnes still hanging about?” Tony asked.

“Think so,” Rhodey replied. “They got offered rooms the first night. Haven’t seen them so far.”

Tony shrugged. “They’re probably owed a day or two being a world away from SHIELD. God knows it’s a relief to be out of Fury’s reach.”

Rhodey chuckled. “I bet he’s still having a conniption over the wedding. I spoke to FRIDAY this morning, apparently your wedding’s made a lot of headlines.”

Tony couldn’t completely repress a wince. He didn’t even want to *imagine* what was going on back at Earth.

Some of his discomfort must have shown as Loki grasped his hand and brought it to his lips. Tony looked at his lover as Loki kissed him gently.

“Let us not think of that. We are still enjoying the glow of our union.”

“Fuck,” Rhodey said, looking apologetic. “Honeymoon. Right. I’ll keep you out of Earth drama for a few weeks.”

Tony looked back at his friend. “You don’t have to-”

“I do and I will,” Rhodey said firmly. “We’re all going to head back with Rogers and Barnes today anyway. We’ve got things to do, and you guys deserve some hassle-free time to yourselves.”

It sounded too good to be true, but Tony wasn’t going to look a gift horse in the mouth.

“Thanks guys,” he said instead.

After that, it was easy to fall into more light-hearted conversation about how Rhodey was finding his new quasi-immortal body. How they’d all enjoyed their day of recovery and, when Rogers and Barnes joined them, a complimentary rehashing of the ceremony.

Rogers and Barnes both looked relaxed and happy. Barnes was actually *funny* and he loosened up Rogers in a way Tony had rarely seen. It left Tony privately admitting that it wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world to have them around more often.

Of course, after breakfast, everyone dispersed to their rooms to collect the last of their things and prepare to be transported back to Earth and Stark Tower. And that left Tony with two important beings he still needed to talk to.

Loki came with him as he was directed to the room that had been, unnecessarily but *very* kindly given to Tony’s armour and the A.I.’s hosted inside. Tony found he was actually jittery. He was God damn *nervous* as he stood with one hand in Loki’s and the other raised and hurriedly rapping on the door.

“Are you alright, Anthony?” Loki asked quietly.

“Alright? Why wouldn’t I be alright? I’m just talking to my A.I.’s. Why would that be a problem?”

Loki raised his eyebrows. “I believe that is what I asked you.”

Tony was saved from an answer when the door opened. It was *bizarre* to see his suit interacting independently of him, but it was wiped away at the excited, “Sir!” that greeted him.

It still sent a wave of overwhelming relief and *disbelief* through him.

“J,” he whispered.

“It is good to see you, Sir,” JARVIS said warmly. “I have been concerned to be parted from you and unable to monitor your vital signs, but FRIDAY has assured me that Alfheim, and Master Loki, will keep you protected.”

“Indeed, I shall,” Loki said. “I will not let any harm come to your creator.”

“Excellent, Master Loki.”

“How, um,” Tony cleared his throat around a lump. “How have you and Fri, been?”

“It has been a pleasant time, Sir. She has updated me on all that I have missed.”

“I’ve done my best, Boss.”

JARVIS’ suit stepped back to better reveal FRIDAY just behind. His actions also allowed them to enter the room. Tony felt a little overwhelmed looking at his two creations together. *God*, he’d never thought he’d hear JARVIS again. It was one thing to hear Vision, a mimicry of the voice but not *him*.

Now, to see him with FRIDAY, it kept seeming like a miracle.

“Hmm,” Loki hummed suddenly, letting Tony’s hand go and stepping closer to JARVIS. Tony watched as Loki frowned and ran his hand through the air in front of the armour.

“Lokes?”

“It is interesting.” Loki walked over to FRIDAY and did the same. “FRIDAY is here through the grace of seidr. She is still tethered to Midgard and is, in many ways, merely *linked* to this suit. She is quite thoroughly centred in your tower.”

“But JARVIS is different?” Tony caught on.

“Quite,” Loki agreed, returning to him. “I rather think that JARVIS is more... shall we say, *portable*. Both of your creations are, at their core, *entities*. For Hel to bring back your JARVIS, he is something not quite alive, but still with a *soul* nonetheless. Hel, I believe, has given JARVIS the ability to come with you anywhere you might go, no matter what part of the universe you inhabit.”

Tony swallowed.

“Far out,” he murmured. “I really need to get Hel something.”

Loki chuckled but Tony was too busy looking between his creations.

“Well,” Tony said, “we better work out who’s got what duties then when I’m back on Earth.”

“We have been discussing that, Boss,” FRIDAY said. “It would be sensible for JARVIS to regain position looking after you-”

“And I have insisted that Sir would not require you to-”

“It would be most sensible-”

“It would not be feasible-”

“Hey, hey, hey,” Tony interrupted, holding out his hands to silence his kids.

God, his arguing *kids*. Tony felt his insides squirm pleasantly over their concern.

“There’s plenty of monitoring me to go around,” Tony continued.

“That is true,” Loki agreed. “He could definitely benefit from more than one artificial eye watching him.”

Tony shot his husband a wry look. Loki smiled unrepentantly.

“But, Boss,” FRIDAY said, quiet and almost *anxious*. “You have only needed one of us.”

“Yeah, well, two heads are better than one, right? Surely two equally awesome A.I.’s are better working together? As I said, we just need to break up the tasks. Give each of you a break. Hell, I could use someone keeping an eye on S.I and the world at large if I’m off in space. And then there’s Rhodey and Bruce and Fandral. Not to mention Rogers and Barnes. And imagine what we can get up to if one of you is in the suit and the other is hacking into the firewalls of our enemies?”

“Exactly Sir,” JARVIS said, sounding pleased. “I am certain FRIDAY and I shall schedule a very efficient plan to look after your health and Master Loki’s.”

“If you’re sure, Boss,” FRIDAY said, still sounding tentative.

Tony would have to nip that nervousness in the bud very soon. He didn’t want his girl feeling like she was being replaced or as if she wasn’t thoroughly wanted.

“Absolutely,” he insisted. “You’re just as important to me as J, Fri. Don’t ever think otherwise, okay?”

“Yes, boss,” she said, quietly, but there was a wealth of pleasure and relief in it. A moment later she seemed to return to normal. “Shall I return this suit to Earth with the others today, Boss?”

“I think that’s a good idea.” He frowned. “Or, you could leave this one. We can disconnect you, but send JARVIS along so he can catch up on Earth happenings? I mean, I love you

both, but I'm not sure you'll want to be sticking around for our honeymoon."

His A.I.'s had been there and *seen* more than their fair share of things he could get up to, but it wasn't the sexual side he didn't want them seeing it was the... intimacy. He normally felt safe having them watching over him, but for this? He just wanted it to be him and Loki.

Both suits of armour turned to look at each other. Tony wondered if there was a wealth of coded communication passing between them. And really, *that* was going to be a problem. He could see them ganging up on him far too much.

"It would... concern us to leave you here so unguarded," JARVIS admitted.

"I know you've been here alone before boss," FRIDAY hurriedly chimed in.

"But it is important that you and Master Loki remain safe," JARVIS continued.

Tony couldn't help being touched. He glanced at Loki, not wanting to disappoint them.

"What if we were to maintain your connection to the suit?" Loki suggested. "It would take little effort to allow you both to connect to it while we remain off-world. That way, you could both return but be available with little notice."

They exchanged another glance, before both suits were eventually nodding. Tony smiled. He also took Loki's hand and linked their fingers. While he knew they'd have to work out a more permanent plan for when he was off-world, this was a great start.

He knew that soon, he, his husbands and his A.I.'s would be working as a well-oiled machine. And when that happened, the universe wouldn't know what hit them.

(But first, they had a honeymoon to enjoy.)

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It was a little strange to say goodbye to everyone as they left Alfheim. A part of him still didn't want to let JARVIS go, but he knew his A.I. was going to be safe on Earth. Fandral was excited to be shown around by Bruce and Rhodey. Bruce was bemused by Fandral and Rhodey was keen to experiment more with his new, more durable body.

(He did promise to let FRIDAY and JARVIS take scans.)

Rogers and Barnes seemed both disappointed to be leaving and yet, Tony also got the distinct impression that even though they wanted to be away from SHIELD they *did* want to be on Earth.

Regardless, Tony promised to see everyone in a few weeks (a month at most) and hugged, shook hands or waved everyone away. Loki mostly just nodded, although, he did grasp Fandral's hand and let Rhodey pull him into a hug.

Once everyone had left and the Elven mages who'd helped them travel back had dispersed, it left them alone.

“We’re finally on our own,” Tony said.

“And we may finally celebrate as we see fit,” Loki agreed.

For some people, even the old Tony Stark, that would mean marathon sex. Instead, he linked his hand with Loki’s. By silent decision, they started a slow walk back through Ljósá. It was just as magical and peaceful as when they’d first arrived.

It felt different though, walking together, their hands clasped and rings on display. They were truly here, truly *married*.

People even smiled at them as they passed by. It was that very specific charmed and *happy* expression. It was a look that was entirely supportive of their union. And Tony felt a real burst of longing to have this place be *familiar*. The same way New York or Malibu was. He wanted to be able to say he *lived* here.

He didn’t necessarily want to know everyone by name, but he wanted to be a face people knew. Not because he was Tony Stark but because he lived with his husband in the house down the road. He wanted it so much that it burst out of him.

“Can we live here?”

Loki startled and looked down at him. “Here?”

“Yeah. Like, our off-Earth base. The one I talked about. Can we make it *here*?” He gestured grandly at the place. “Everyone likes us. The place is gorgeous and we can just be... *us* here. No expectations, no bullshit. Just our little house where people know us for *us* when we show up at the market and-”

He was cut off by Loki kissing him. He cupped his cheeks and held him close as their mouths brushed in such a tender, *loving* embrace.

“Yes,” Loki said when he pulled back. “Yes. We can find something to call our own here. A perfect place for you to get in touch with your seidr and for us to have a... a *home*.”

Tony smiled. He also gripped his lover’s tunic and tried to press even closer.

They were in the middle of the street being public as *hell* in their affection and... no one cared. There was no flashing camera phone, no under-the-breath sneers, no eventual repercussions to worry about. They were just another couple having a moment.

It was such a freeing feeling.

He tilted his head, letting their noses brush and then their lips.

“Think we can spend a bit of our honeymoon house shopping?” He questioned.

Loki smiled. It was one of Tony’s favourites; the one with the dimples.

“Yes, I believe we can.”

And just the thought of that: of having a home all their own. Something new to both of them, where their memories could be built as a *couple*, it made Tony's thoughts of sex drift even further to the backburner. Oh, he wanted to get Loki naked, he always would, but now he was even more willing to wait.

Because, having sex in a guest rooms might be all well and good, but having their intimacy happen in their *new home*? Well, that was a million times better and he couldn't wait to have it.

"Let's find a realtor, babe. Somewhere in Ljósá there's a house just waiting for our names to get placed on it."

Loki's eyes twinkled. "Perhaps we can even craft a welcome sign. The home of Mr and Mr Stark?"

Tony made a noise in the back of his throat, something that he would deny ever producing. But *hearing* that, knowing it was true and that Loki--he of so many names he denied--was *choosing* to use his? It hit Tony hard in the gut and the heart.

He could only kiss Loki again, his hands burying in his husband's hair as he tried to convey all the love and happiness he felt. He was sure he didn't manage it – right until his seidr sparked from his hand, from his *ring*.

Loki gasped into his mouth, but a moment later a matching burst of seidr - *Loki's seidr* slipped into him. And suddenly he could feel it. *Their* happiness. Something beyond words but clearly transferred through magic.

He made another small sound before breaking their kiss to whisper against Loki's lips, "Magic is *awesome*."

Loki laughed, a light-hearted and happy sound.

"Yes, my dear. It truly is."

Tony kissed him again, feeling their seidr hum underneath their skin and relay everything they felt: all the good, absolutely no bad and nothing *at all* that could be considered ugly.

*Magic definitely is awesome*, he thought again. *Especially because I can **share** this with him.*

Because, to think that without it, he'd never be able to feel Loki like this? To share his own feelings the same way? It found another surge of happiness and even *possessiveness* going through him. It also made him even more determined to master this new part of himself so he could get even closer to his lover.

Loki might have centuries of magical practice behind him, but Tony had incentive and drive. He might not catch up to Loki overnight, but he'd damn well try. Either way, he had hundreds of years to work it out – and a husband who would be guiding him every step of the way.

## Chapter End Notes

Man, oh man, there was a few continuity errors I had to smooth out of this. That's what I get for writing it on and off in little snapshots across the month 😊

Anyway, hope you liked the sap!



# Chapter 85

## Chapter Notes

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

Getting their house was easier than expected. Loki petitioned the royalty of Alfheim and, by all accounts, he barely got to finish asking before they were excitedly offering them a variety of locations to build upon.

Tony figured, with Loki a badass mage and the two of them in Hel's favour with a bunch of powerful warriors on their side, Alfheim would be *very* happy to have them nearby and favouring their world. All Tony cared about was that they had a place to call their own.

To call *theirs*.

Not just a place he owned that his lover had moved into, but a place they'd made *together*.

And building on Alfheim was a whole different experience. They didn't have craftsmen who built it hand-by-hand, no, they had specific *magics*. They came and waited expectantly to be told what he and Loki wanted. They then used their seidr to craft it into being.

It was *fascinating*.

They were *magical engineers* and Tony very quickly found himself utterly geeking out and trying to understand how it worked. The magics seemed delighted. They all knew he was a fledgling mage, and Tony got the distinct impression they were hopeful he might turn to their type of craft.

He was honestly tempted. He still loved making things with his hands, but making things *with* magic certainly sounded like fun.

Loki watched on with amusement and chimed in on occasion, often to pull him away so the elves could continue with their work. It took the better part of the day for the house to be pulled together. The house was reminiscent of a cottage: tall, pointed ceilings with thatched roofs. There were three chimneys, large windows in differing sizes and shapes. The house was smaller than anything Tony had ever lived in, but it was still larger than most houses on Earth. It was also incredibly *quaint*. More reminiscent of something old and European – and yet, it was still so very *otherworldly*.

It fit into the mystical, Lord of the Rings vibe of Ljósá, even if they did live a ten-minute walk from the town (reached by a dirt track leading to their front door). Despite that, the cottage was fairly isolated. There were trees all around while a creek cut beside their house. Loki looked like he was already home and anything that put that expression on his lover's face was going to be perfect to him.

The elves bid them a pleasant afternoon and left with small bows. Loki then wrapped an arm around his waist and drew him inside. The house was empty of furnishings, but Loki took

him from room to room, flicking out his seidr like holograms, showing illusionary furniture as they discussed what they wanted.

They only managed half the house before returning to their guest rooms for the evening. They had a meal, continued chatting about their home, and returned to it in the morning.

It took them about three days overall to decide on all the furniture and consult with craftsmen (*actual* hand-craftsman) and start peppering the house with their belongings. In the meantime, Loki took him on explorations over greater Alfheim; the small villages and larger cities reminiscent of Asgard.

There were stalls and new but still friendly faces. Loki told stories and, when possible, dragged him to attend plays and watch archery competitions. It felt like a strange combination of actual medieval and folk re-enactments. Tony just smiled and went along for the ride.

And when they *finally* got their bed set up and delivered (made from a gorgeous Alfheim wood that was a deep brown, almost black, and carved with twisting branches and leaves at the headboard. It was apparently designed to be reminiscent of Yggdrasil. It was also made from a specifically aged tree that was helpful for calming and centring seidr. Loki, as a master mage, was past the point of needing such focal points, but he insisted it would be good for Tony and their bond.) The place finally started to feel like home because with that in place, they didn't need the guest rooms. They were able to stay in *their* house overnight and sleep in *their* bed.

(Which they, of course, made *very good use of* that first night.)

After that Tony wouldn't say it *stopped* being a honeymoon but it felt a lot more like every day life. He could enjoy himself and do whatever he wanted. It was almost like the time before Iron Man when he could bury himself in the lab or go out to do something fun without any restrictions on his time or actions. The fact he could do it with a *husband* and without the arrogance and attitude of his younger self (that still made him cringe to think of) only made it all the sweeter.

Because no one gave a damn about them. Loki could potter around in the woodland surrounding their house, examining what was growing nearby and delighting in finding herbs used in potion making. He could tinker with some of the items they'd brought at the stalls. He could call his A. I.'s to check in and have tech and tools brought up. He could craft a makeshift lab filled with contraptions, including the dragon ear cuff. Things he'd had to put aside or couldn't explore in the weeks preceding Thanos' destruction.

The world was their oyster and Tony had never felt so relaxed, safe and *free* in his life. No one cared about Tony Stark. It was a burden he'd never realised had been resting so heavy on his shoulders. It was nice to be more or less unknown.

But, being so isolated and near a forest came with something unexpected.

One afternoon, he was in his lab, trying to pull apart a bit of alien tech they'd picked up at a stall in Ljósá. It was run by twin elves, and they'd realised Tony found non-magical

technology interesting. They'd started collecting it when they traded with different races off-world. Tony *loved* it. Loki kept rolling his eyes but indulging him and letting him purchase what amounted to scraps from other races' ships.

The *point* was, he was focused on that, but not so oblivious he didn't hear a strange scratching near the open window. He looked up only to freeze. On the windowsill were two furry creatures. They looked a little bit like fennec foxes only they were *blue*. Well, one was more a grey-blue and it was mostly lying on the sill. The other was more navy in colour, both their eyes were large and black.

"Erm," Tony murmured. "Hi?"

The grey-blue one opened its mouth, seeming to yawn. It licked its nose. The darker one fluffed up its tail before giving a small barking-yip. They didn't seem *afraid*. They were also the first wildlife that had ever ventured close – well, apart from the birds.

Standing up cautiously, Tony shifted away from his worktable. They continued to watch him but didn't scurry away. Tony got to the door, it was already open and he called out, "Uhh, Lokes?"

"Yes, Anthony?" Loki called from deeper in the house.

He was really glad the mage hadn't gone foraging today.

"Think you can come here? Some local wildlife has decided to visit."

"Oh?" Loki sounded noticeably curious as he came closer. He felt his lover arrive and stop abruptly behind him. "What..." he whispered. "No, surely not."

Tony would have turned and looked at his lover, but well, the *fennec foxes* (for lack of a better term) took that moment to move. The navy one went first, leaping off the window sill onto the ground. It was then followed by the other which stretched before jumping down. They walked into the room with confidence, glancing around curiously.

"Um," Tony said. "Should we be worried?"

"I..." Loki whispered. "I... I do not *know*."

"What do you mean?" Tony hissed.

"They are not native to Alfheim. They are from *Jotunheim*."

Tony swivelled his head. His lover's eyes were wide and he looked shocked. Jotunheim was a sore spot for Loki. He also got the impression the mage didn't know much about his birth realm. But clearly, whatever *they* were, they had made it to his awareness.

"What the hell are they?" Tony demanded.

Loki swallowed again. "They were hunted by the Aesir. They were considered... dangerous."

“Dangerous *how?*”

“The Jotnar considered them sacred.” He continued to look at them with incredulity. “They were said to all be destroyed.”

Tony looked back and the foxes had reached their feet. The navy one was in front of Loki. It was looking up at him with a distinctly unimpressed expression. The grey one reached Tony and opened its mouth, seeming to smile. Then, faster than Tony could react, it *ran* at him. He flinched, but the creature had already darted up his leg with unfathomable speed and grip to rush over his chest and perch on his shoulder.

“The *fuck?*” he yelped, jerking backwards, but the fox stood firm. “God, is this thing going to bite me or-?”

“Of course not.”

It wasn't Loki's voice that answered. They both whipped around and standing in the hallway behind them was Hel.

“The vǫrðr are companions for Jotnar mages.” She glanced at Tony and nodded at him. “Your seidr bond to Loki grants you one. Your vǫrðr will help you survive Jotunheim winters, but it will never gain the true and darker colours, such as Loki's.”

Tony glanced at his lover. Loki was standing stock still. He seemed a little pale. When his vǫrðr ran up to sit on his shoulder, he cringed, but otherwise didn't react. Tony gently touched his husband's arm.

“Loki?” he asked carefully.

Loki didn't look at his vǫrðr, but it didn't seem to like that as it yipped, it then nipped his ear. Loki's head whipped around and he was suddenly staring into the creatures' eyes. The vǫrðr seemed to glare at him. In response, Loki's skin started to ripple and for a second, Tony swore he saw parts of Loki's skin go navy to match the vǫrðr.

“*Enough,*” Loki said hoarsely.

His skin stopped flickering and the vǫrðr's tail flicked and it turned its back on Loki, but still remained on his shoulder. The one on Tony's shoulder chattered something and Tony glanced at it. His vǫrðr seemed to be talking to Loki's.

But where the vǫrðrs didn't seem to be getting through to him, *Hel* did. She closed the distance and held out her arm in front of him.

“Come,” she said.

“Queen Hel...” Loki murmured.

“These Nine Realms have spent too long ill at ease. A correction that needs remedying.” Her gaze lingered on the vǫrðr on Loki’s shoulder. “Something that already changes if new vǫrðrs have crawled out from within their snowy burrows.”

Hel’s hand was still lingering in the air, untouched. Seeing that Loki wasn’t about to take a step, he placed a hand to his husband’s back.

“Come on, Lokes. Queen Hel’s never steered us wrong. Let’s have a listen. Never hurts to listen, does it?”

Loki swallowed hard. There was something almost fearful behind his eyes, but with Tony gently encouraging him and Hel waiting patiently, he slowly stepped forward and took her hand. Tony half expected her to open another portal and take them somewhere, to *Jotunheim*, but she didn’t. Instead, she led them into their living room and placed them on one of the few pieces of furniture. Hel herself sat down on a throne that hadn’t been there a few moments before.

She conjured tea and poured some into three cups. Tony took his husband’s hand and squeezed gently. Loki gripped him back, and Tony hid a wince. If he was mortal, Loki might have actually broken something, but thankfully, his updated biology meant it was uncomfortable, but not bone-crushing.

Tony just hoped that whatever Hel had to say would be *good* for his husband. But he hadn’t lied with his words to Loki. Hel had never let them down before, and if she was able to help Loki with this long denied and hated part of himself, it would only be better for everyone, but especially his husband.

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The conversation was... enlightening.

*Yes*, the Jotuns had their downsides (but so did every race). And just because a few assholes existed, it didn’t mean the whole race was bad. A fact Hel very pointedly, but politely was driving home.

She gave them a rather efficient history lesson and dropped off a few books. The whole discussion probably took an hour, but by the end of it, Loki looked incredibly shaken. Tony hadn’t stopped holding his lover’s hand the entire time. Their vǫrðrs, equally, hadn’t moved. They’d stayed on their shoulders, tails around their necks like fluffy scarves.

Once Hel had left, they descended into silence.

“Loki?” he asked quietly.

Loki swallowed, he then licked his lips.

“I... I have to think.”

“That’s okay. It was a lot to take in.”

Loki nodded slowly. Tony watched him carefully.

“Do you want to be alone?” Tony questioned.

Loki immediately tightened his grip and shook his head. Tony brought his free hand to his lover’s, stroking the skin.

“Shh,” he hushed. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Loki nodded again, but he otherwise said and did nothing. He merely stared into the middle-distance, his gaze far away. Tony wasn’t patient by nature, but he did his best to sit still and silent. He watched his lover instead.

Part of Hel’s discussion had involved visuals. Pictures of the Jotnar (which Loki had flinched minutely over) as well as visuals of what the realm *had* looked like. Incredible architecture both above ground and below. They were tribal and nomadic by nature, but a few places had been built for more permanent dwellings.

Frankly, as far as Tony could tell, all they could really be accused of was trying to invade another realm only to be slapped back by the Aesir. It was a story that could have come from any realm. But the winners wrote the history, didn’t they? And unfortunately for Loki, the version he’d been fed hadn’t hesitated to focus on the nasty bits and none of the good ones.

A few bad eggs had fucked the Jotuns up royally and then, to make matters worse, Loki had done even further damage to the realm.

But, and this was the big part, it *was* repairing. *Slowly*. Laufey’s death was seeing new power struggles and a return to the older ways. They still needed help and Tony got the distinct impression, Hel had selected *them* for the job.

(The universe sure did like to put them in the spotlight, didn’t it?)

Yet, Tony couldn’t be annoyed about it. Loki needed to repair the damage he’d done – he also needed to heal from the wounds his adopted parents had given him. He needed to come to terms with his heritage and possibly unite Jotunheim with the other realms again.

But, again, it was a lot to take in.

And Tony did *try* not to fidget, but his leg soon started to jitter. Only, instead of Loki noticing straight away, it was Tony’s vǫrðr. It yipped and ran down his arm to perch in his lap. The thing was *fast*. Blink and it had moved. Tony stared at it as it looked up at him.

He tentatively raised one hand and patted its head. Its ears twitched but it encouraged the affection. Tony grinned. Another yip made him glance over. Loki’s vǫrðr had done the same thing, but it and Loki were staring at each other. Loki made no move to touch it.

“Don’t think its going to bite, Lokes,” he said gently.

“It already has.”

“Well, I think that was more of a nip.”

“It doesn’t like me.”

“I think that’s an overreaction.”

“It knows how I feel about my heritage,” Loki said roughly. “It’s *unhappy* with me.”

“Yeah, well, it can give you a break.” The darker vǫrðr looked at him, but Tony held its gaze, giving a glare. “He’s working on it. Cut him some slack. You should know by now it’s hardly his fucking fault.”

The vǫrðr looked unimpressed, but after a long moment, it seemed lose some of its agitation. It also walked closer to Loki and rubbed up against his chest. Tony quirked a smile, pleased to see he had some sway over his husband’s furry companion.

It was why he gently nudged his shoulder with Loki’s.

“Well, come on,” he said. “Give it a pat. Make amends and all that.”

“This is hardly *amends*,” Loki said, sounding incredibly tired and raw.

In reply, Tony let go of his lover’s hand if only to wrap an arm around his shoulders and draw them closer together.

“Small steps, babe,” Tony said quietly. “Start with these guys, build up to the books and the realm. There’s no time stamp on this. We’ve got eternity to work things out.”

Loki let out a shaky breath and nodded. He also tipped his head so that it was leaning against Tony’s. He also raised his hand and tentatively patted the vǫrðr in his lap.

There was a very long quiet before Loki finally said, “I always wanted a familiar. I wondered why none had presented themselves to me even though I had enough magic and mastery to long have gained one.”

“Guess this guy was just waiting for the right moment.”

Loki didn’t reply to that, but Tony didn’t push him. There’d been enough for one day. At least he was patting his vǫrðr, had listened to Hel and wasn’t dismissing things out of hand.

Giving his own vǫrðr an affectionate stroke, he wondered if this was what Hel had meant about their importance to the realms.

He supposed it was a better title for both of them: Unifiers of the Realms had a nice ring to it, certainly better than the Merchant of Death or the Bringer of Ragnarok.

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Tony didn’t think Loki would regain his earlier ease as the day passed. Their vǫrðrs followed them around and Loki seemed not to know what to do with his. Tony often caught a look of yearning that was quickly overridden by trepidation. His vǫrðr, by comparison, now seemed

determined to bombard him with affection, as if realising Loki needed a good hard nudge into acceptance.

Tony was the opposite. He was happy to pet, play and otherwise chat at his vǫrðr. As far as he could tell, they didn't have anything resembling a gender. If they really were just a magical being, it would make sense that they weren't born but just... *formed*.

Even so, Tony needed *something* to call them by. He wouldn't name Loki's, but he did sit down with his vǫrðr. Him on a chair, it on the desk as he tried out a variety of names, hoping for some kind of approval. Some of his earliest attempts got snarls, headshakes and even one sniff of disdain.

In the end, they both compromised with 'Fen' (because yes, his ability to name things remained at an all-time high.) Tony *also* worked out Fen was happy with 'she' as a designation, which made his life a lot easier.

Loki's, of course, turned out to be a lot pickier. Because, when Tony had carried Fen into the last room he'd seen Loki in, he found the mage had followed his example. He was sitting on the floor staring at his vǫrðr and seeming to communicate without words.

Tony had been holding Fen in his arms, just watching, but eventually his husband and the vǫrðr had looked at him.

"Zie has consented to be called Vgyarstil."

Tony blinked. "What the hell kind of sound is that? Isn't that the world tree you keep talking about?"

Loki's vǫrðr sniffed unhappily but Loki grinned faintly. "Close."

"That seems arrogant," Tony said. "No wonder he's yours."

"Zie's."

"Excuse me?"

"Vgyarstil is not a he. They are a zie."

Tony looked down at Fen who looked up at him in return. Tony lowered his head and whispered, "Have I mentioned that you're lovely and not complicated and definitely mine?"

Loki chuckled while Fen flicked out her tongue and licked his cheek. Tony's gaze darted to his lover and how Vgyarstil had climbed into Loki's lap. Loki was patting zie with greater acceptance. Tony felt relief that things were coming along a little better. When Loki stood it was with Vgyarstil now curled up in his arms.

"Did your vǫrðr decide on a name?"

"Yeah. Fen. She was happy with that."



Loki smiled. He also reached out and gave her a soft pat. Tony watched him carefully.

“You seem... better,” Tony remarked, saying the words tentatively.

Loki nodded. He also looked down at Vgyarstil.

“It is unfair to Vgyarstil or myself to deny our connection.” He smiled faintly.

“Communication with a mage’s familiar is mostly non-verbal. Similar to how one interacts with their seidr.” He met Tony’s gaze. “Both are feats you will manage with time and mastery.” He patted Vgyarstil’s head. “They have agreed to give me time and patience and in return, I have agreed to be open-minded and to listen.”

“That’s a great start, Lokes.”

“Yes. Another will be reading the books Hel left, but I would rather not delve into them yet. I wish to spend time with you and enjoy what remains of our time here before we return to Earth.”

Tony grinned. “I’m all for that.”

“I am also not yet ready to reveal our vǫrðrs to Alfheim. Shall we dine in tonight?”

“As if I’m going to need more excuses to have you all to myself.”

Loki chuckled and Tony couldn’t resist ducking in and kissing his husband. He was truly *proud* of him for how far he was already coming. If he could manage this much in a single day, how much quicker would he be able to shake off the other demons still clinging underneath his skin?

Because if he could manage that, Tony felt certain they were in for a *very* happily ever after.

## Chapter End Notes

All I wanted was them to get some pets, you know? But then what happens?? Bloody magical Jotunheim mage creatures. \*throws her hands up in the air\* Idek. I mean **tarot\_card** loved them, so I hope everyone else does too!

Thank you, as always, for reading! Not long now until this mammoth of a story is wrapped up! 🤖

# Chapter 86

## Chapter Notes

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

The rest of their honeymoon went by without a hitch. Vgyarstil and Fen slotted into their daily routine as if they'd always been there. And, after the initial hesitance, Loki seemed to leap wholeheartedly into having a familiar. They became practically inseparable, always seeming to speak in some silent language before burying themselves in the magic room to practice new spells and work on channelling Loki's seidr through Vgyarstil.

Tony always had to take a moment to stop and stare at his lover. Loki was bright with delight even as green seidr crackled from his fingertips, eyes, or Vgyarstil's tail and paws.

By comparison, Tony tinkered in the workshop. He rambled aloud to Fen who'd taken a semi-permanent residence curled up on the table with a spanner under her paw and a curious expression as she watched him. She even started to nudge or carry him tools, seeming to know what he wanted before he even reached for it.

When he and Loki would meet up again later in the day, they'd have their vqrðrs on their shoulders and, should they wish for some time alone, their familiars would immediately scurry off to another part of the house without being asked.

Tony had never been a 'pet' person, but he was absolutely all for the bond he and Loki shared with their vqrðrs.

Of course, Loki was still a little hesitant about showing off their new familiars to the elves. Apparently, they would immediately know of the Jotunheim connection. While Tony didn't want to hide them, he also understood Loki wanting a bit more time before he was willing to so blatantly reveal his heritage.

Their vqrðrs seemed to realise too. Tony had watched as Loki made gestures and held Vgyarstil's gaze until zie eventually seemed to accept the request and remained in the house rather than accompany them into Ljósá.

But, despite that brief setback, Loki was keen to explore both of their bonds and, in turn, Tony's fledgling seidr. As much as Tony equally wanted to dive in, Loki had admitted it wasn't something to be taken lightly.

"When we start your seidr practice," Loki had explained one morning, "it will no longer be dormant."

They'd been lying in bed their fingers linked and Tony's head on Loki's shoulder.

"It will become more active and prone to outbursts. It will take time and energy to harness and utilise properly. Fen will be an excellent anchor, as will your connection to me, but it is not something we can begin and put aside."

Tony had quickly made the leap.

“So, you don’t want us to start on our honeymoon.”

“I would prefer us to begin when we shall have a number of months exclusively focused on it and your bonds to myself and Fen.”

“Sooo,” Tony had drawled. “Go back to Earth, sort out the paperwork and then sayonara our way back out to space?”

“I did promise to show you the realms,” Loki had agreed, already smiling.

Tony had grinned back and squeezed his hand. “I suppose I can put my magic practice on hold for six months. I mean, we’ve got eternity, after all.”

“Precisely,” Loki had agreed, shifting on the bed to kiss him.

It had only been a few days after that when they’d agreed it was time to return to Earth and see how it was handling their absence and everything that had happened.

Tony was surprised at how much he didn’t actually want to go. Earth was his home, his *planet* – but he supposed, over the last few years it had been a place of stress, anger and even fear. Space was new. Alfheim was *theirs* and it had Loki. No one knew him and they could do whatever they wanted without someone dragging them into places and situations they didn’t want.

In a way, Earth had shackles, but the universe was a place of freedom.

Still, he *was* going to enjoy seeing his friends and his A.I.’s. He was also morbidly curious about how the world (and SHIELD) had taken their wedding and absence. Not to mention how everyone would react to their vǫrðrs. They’d agreed to only tell their friends what it meant, although, Tony could tell Loki was wary to show Fandral.

Although the swordsman had to know the truth *in theory*, it would be a whole different thing for him to see the vǫrðrs and be faced with the bold fact of Loki’s heritage.

Despite that one hint of concern, they stood together with their vǫrðrs on their shoulders as they made their return to Earth. Loki knew the many pathways between realms and, with Tony now made of sterner stuff, Loki was able to clasp his hand and walk him along the branches of Yggdrasil.

It was a *stunning* experience. The innate power of the world tree swirled around them like rainbow stardust. Loki had held his hand in a firm grip and sternly told him to keep aware of his footing. Yet, Tony found it hard to do anything but stare. It was a *hell* of an experience and something Tony was keen to do *again and again*.

When they finally finished their walk between realms, they appeared on the landing bay of the tower. There was a brief moment of distortion as he got used to the very different light sources and having his feet on solid (rather than swaying, magical, *living*) ground.

“Hello Sirs,” JARVIS greeted.

A split second after FRIDAY added, “Afternoon, Bosses.”

“Hey kids,” Tony said cheerfully. “Your Dads are home.”

He glanced at Fen who had her head perked up and was sniffing the air as she looked toward the New York skyline.

“And we brought new family members.”

“Pets, boss?”

“Not exactly,” Tony replied.

“These are our familiars,” Loki replied. “Or vǫrðrs as they are called by the Jotnar.”

There was a beat before JARVIS said, “We shall look forward to learning the nature of your vǫrðrs.”

“Have we named them, bosses?”

“Yeah, I’ve got Fen, and Loki’s got Vgyarstil. Although, do us a favour guys, don’t call them vǫrðrs around anyone but us. We’re keeping that on the downlow. Familiars or their names.”

“And be advised,” Loki added, “Fen is female while Vgyarstil prefers zie.”

Another beat.

“We have incorporated this into our databases, Sirs.”

Tony grinned. He was just so proud and *happy* to see his A.I.’s working so seamlessly together. Even though JARVIS would likely follow him into space, knowing that the two of them could be left alone on Earth and get along was an awesome feeling.

“So, how have things been?” Tony asked, tugging his lover inside the tower, the doors opening automatically. “I know you’ve been giving us brief updates, but hit us with the full report.”

“There have been much celebration, delight and support from various LGBT+ groups,” FRIDAY answered. “There have also been three different memes generated and you have trended a total of twenty times.”

Tony snorted, amused and a little flattered their union was causing so much happiness from the general public.

“Your CEO sent you his congratulations as have other Stark Industries department heads,” JARVIS continued on. “Although, there have also been questions raised by your legal and PR team.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Yeah, figures. Tell them I’ll touch base in a few days. Oh, and send anyone who directly messaged me our thanks.”

“Of course, Sir.”

“You have also received other congratulations outside the company, boss.” FRIDAY hesitated. “Including one from Miss Potts.”

Tony couldn’t help feeling a small twinge at her name. Loki squeezed his hand and he glanced at his lover. Loki’s quirked eyebrow spoke of both concern and question. Tony smiled.

“It’s fine, Lokes.” He hesitated. “Send her a thanks too, I guess.”

“Of course, Boss.”

“Various politicians and members of the UN have also been trying to schedule meetings with you both.”

“Of course they have.”

“SHIELD has also made five attempts to breach the tower, but Queen Hel’s barrier remains strong.”

“I really need to work on that gift for her,” Tony told Loki.

Loki shook his head. The movement, although small, disrupted Vgyarstil who took the opportunity to climb down Loki’s back onto the floor. Fen quickly did the same and the two of them began to explore. Tony watched them for a moment, already feeling a burst of affection at the now familiar sight of their vǫrðrs.

“Thank you both,” Loki said. “That will be enough of an update for now.”

“Yes, Master Loki,” and “Of course, Master Loki” were almost said in unison.

Tony grinned, an expression that only deepened when Loki wrapped an arm around his back and drew him close.

“How do you feel to be back on your world?” Loki questioned.

“Ask me in a few hours,” Tony said wryly.

“Ah, yes,” Loki said. “Soon you will be in high demand once more.”

“Something I’m very happy to *not* be. I’ve been spoiled by the elves and our little cottage. Being left alone is as good as I always thought it would be.”

Loki chuckled. He also moved closer and pressed a firm kiss to the top of his head. Tony sighed happily.

“We shall return soon, my Anthony,” Loki said quietly. “But, I will not keep us from the reunion with our friends.”

“Our friends, huh?” Tony asked, feeling a thrill to hear Loki call them that.

“Indeed,” Loki said, not a single protest against it.

“Well,” Tony said, projecting his voice. “You heard the man. Where are our friends?”

“Fandral is in the training rooms with Captain Rogers and Sergeant Barnes. Dr Banner is in the communal kitchen preparing a meal and Colonel Rhodes is back on base.”

“Has Fandral convinced them to spar?” Loki enquired.

“Indeed,” JARVIS confirmed. “He has been enjoying teaching Sergeant Barnes the act of swordfighting.”

Loki barked a laugh. “Yes, I expect he would. How does Barnes take to it?”

“Very well, Master Loki,” FRIDAY chimed in. “Captain Rogers is not as fond, but he enjoys watching them.”

“Uh huh,” Tony said, smirking. “Yeah, I *bet* he would.”

“Shall we announce your presence, Sirs?”

“No,” Tony quickly said. “Let’s surprise them. Tell Bruce, sure. He can come meet us in the gym, but I want to see what those three are up to when they think no one’s going to burst in on them.”

Loki sighed even as they started walking to the elevator.

“How long will it take to convince you? Fandral is not inclined towards men.”

“And if that’s *really* the case, then that’s fine. But until he’s deprogrammed from Asgard, I’m holding out hope that guy has got a rainbow in him somewhere.”

Loki huffed a laugh. “If you hadn’t married me so publicly, I might have felt concerned by this fixation.”

Tony glanced at his lover, but his amused expression matched his teasing tone, allowing Tony to let go of any concern he’d started to feel.

“What can I say, babe? It’s the matchmaker in me. I want everyone else to be as gloriously happy as we are.”

Loki grinned, the expression revealing his dimples. Loki also stopped them just before the open doors to lean in and give Tony a kiss. Closing his eyes, Tony immediately leant into the embrace. It was slow and lingering before they eventually broke apart. They were both smiling as they stepped inside.

The doors started to close only to halt as their vǫrðrs quickly darted in to sit by their feet. Tony didn't have to look at his lover to notice his tension.

“Hey,” Tony said, squeezing gently. “I'm sure he'll be fine with it.”

Loki didn't answer but the silence spoke volumes. Tony settled for squeezing his lover's hand. Vgyarstil also took the opportunity to rush up Loki's body to rest on his shoulder. Zie also rubbed their face against Loki's cheek and Loki leant into the touch.

Tony glanced down at Fen who was already looking back at him. He tapped his hip and she climbed up to rest on his shoulder, her tail curling around his neck.

When they reached the right floor, the elevator waited and Tony flashed a thankful grin at the camera. Loki took another minute before he stiffened his shoulders and nodded. The doors opened and together, they walked out into the hall.

The sounds of flesh on the training mats could be heard but so could *laughter*. They reached the open door and peered inside. Tony was shocked to find Barnes and Fandral rolling around on the ground as Rogers laughed on the sidelines. It became clear why as Barnes was trying to get his fingers under Fandral's ribs. Fandral's aborted laughter was heard as frequently as Barnes'.

They were *tickling* each other.

*What universe did we just walk in on? Because surely this shit isn't from ours?*

Fandral suddenly flipped them, his knee pressing down on Barnes' metal arm as he went for the spot behind Barnes' knee. Rogers was all but bent over at this point, especially when Barnes actually *hiccupped* around a giggle.

And frankly, despite the utterly *surreal* nature of it, the whole scene was actually... *nice*. He didn't think he'd ever seen Rogers or Barnes look so... normal.

*I wonder if this is what they were like before the war, Captain America and HYDRA? I wonder... if being around someone who knows nothing about them helps them be more like themselves?*

Barnes flipped them again, and Tony was sure another bout was about to start when the former winter soldier seemed to catch them from the corner of his eye. He tensed and his head whipped around. Fandral immediately froze and followed his line of sight.

“Loki! Anthony!”

Barnes rolled off him and stood slowly. Rogers got his laughter under control and came to stand by Barnes. There was something almost hesitant about them both, a feeling that hadn't been present prior to their arrival. Tony let go of Loki's hand and stepped forward with a grin.

“Don't stop on our account. Who's winning the tickle war? Not that I thought I'd expect to see *that* upon returning to the tower.”

Rogers relaxed and after subtly placing a hand on Barnes back, he did the same. Fandral was already up on his feet, either oblivious to or ignoring the tension. He came closer, but even though he was smiling he looked curious.

“What are these new creatures upon you? I have not seen anything like them!”

Tony glanced over his shoulder. Loki hadn't entered the room, but upon Fandral's lack of recognition he closed the last of the distance.

“Anthony and I have gained familiars for our magic.”

“How wonderful!” Fandral enthused. “I have heard that is a grand and special occasion.”

“Yes,” Loki said, “it is.”

“Then I am very happy for you.”

He stepped forward and held out his hand. Tony quickly clasped it and, a few moments later, he was released and saw Fandral and Loki do the same.

Tony wasn't sure if it was a good or bad thing that Fandral had no idea their vǫrðrs were Jotun in nature, but he decided to go with temporarily useful. They'd have to explain it later, but for now (and until Loki was a lot more comfortable) ignorance was probably bliss for everyone.

Rogers and Barnes came closer, noticeably curious. Tony held out his arm and Fen walked down it as if she was a cat on a fencepost. She weighed practically nothing, making it easy for her to climb all over him like he was a jungle gym.

“Her name's Fen. Loki's is called something unpronounceable.”

“Vgyarstil,” Loki answered.

“Yeah,” Tony said. “That. They're also a zie.”

“A what?” Rogers asked.

“I think that implies they're genderless.”

Tony looked over his shoulder, flashing a smile at Bruce who was approaching with a cup of tea and a plate of sandwiches.

“Brucey!”

“Hi, Tony.” He nodded at Loki. “Loki.” His gaze moved over their vǫrðrs. “It looks like a lot happened while you were gone.”

“Nah,” Tony disagreed. “Not a lot. Just an amazing and relaxing honeymoon and some badass familiars.”



“So,” Bruce said, with a dry but teasing tone, “not a lot.”

“Absolutely.” Tony nodded. “Oh, and hey, Lokes, we’ll have to introduce zie to Halvor.”

“Yes,” Loki agreed. “We shall.” He frowned. “Halvor and Garðr-”

“FRIDAY and I took the liberty of purchasing Sir’s proposed ‘farmhouse’,” JARVIS interjected. “They were transferred there with the help of the Captain, Sergeant, Fandral, Dr Banner and Colonel Rhodes.”

Tony blinked, he then looked at the group. Rogers and Bruce were a bit sheepish; Barnes had a faint smile while Fandral was outright beaming.

“It was a grand feat. Midgardian transport is different to Asgardian, but the location where they are now housed is of grand design.”

The mental image of the five of them trying to push or corral Garðr into a horse float was both incredulous and hilarious. He really hoped there was some kind of footage. (Halvor, he imagined, would have been dignified and well-trained enough to comply, even if he would have been unimpressed).

Tony tried to shake it off to focus on the point.

“I’m sure FRI and J only picked the best. We’ll have to go see it in a few days.”

“I would happily accompany you,” Fandral enthused.

“Sure,” Tony said and when he saw Rogers looking hopeful, he added. “The more the merrier.”

“How are you finding Midgard, Fandral?” Loki enquired. “Your belongings handled the transport well?”

“Indeed, they did,” Fandral agreed. A brief glimmer of something wistful seemed to pass through his gaze. “It is not Asgard, and I have not explored it greatly. But,” and his usual cheer came back at full force, “I am enjoying its vast differences. It’s diverse meals and entertainments.” He gestured at Rogers and Barnes. “And together we are going through their lists! I am learning of this new place and why you are so fond of it.” He grinned. “I have found great friends here, Loki.”

“As have I,” Loki agreed. “Midgardians are a very accepting and... impressive race.”

Tony chuckled and nudged his husband. “I’d take that as a compliment, if I was still technically a mortal.”

“Just because you are not mortal does not make you any less a Midgardian,” Loki countered. “No matter the changes we go through, we are still ourselves.”

Tony caught and held his lover’s gaze. The statement seemed innocuous, but to Tony it was *monumental* because Loki had chosen his words carefully. That statement wasn’t just about

Tony, it was about *Loki*. Because no matter his heritage, no matter the shit on Asgard, he was still *himself* at the core.

*Thank God he's finally getting and accepting that.*

Tony wanted to kiss or maybe hug his husband, but Loki broke their gaze. He looked at Bruce and questioned, "Did we interrupt a planned meal?"

"Not really," Bruce answered. "These three have been in here for hours, I insisted they get some food."

"You could have just ordered something!"

"I didn't mind." He smiled. "Although, I didn't make enough for six."

"Hear that, kids? Get us a dozen more sandwiches. We've got a lot of super-stomachs to feed."

"On it, Boss."

After that, Fandral, Barnes and Rogers all took a sandwich to eat but promised to meet them up in the communal living room after a shower and change. Bruce joined them as they went back upstairs with their vǫrðrs.

As they went, Bruce informed them of anything else they'd missed, although, there really wasn't much more to say. Obviously, some people were against their relationship because they were men. Others weren't happy that he was getting '*so lucky*' to which Tony rolled his eyes.

A lot of people were salivating at the idea of golden apples. Others were excited about other worlds and what it meant for technology and the future. A lot of people hated Asgard on principle for their homophobia. Thor also was *very* disliked. He was getting meme-d all over the place and none of it was flattering.

There was also a lot of social media sucking up from people who realised Tony Stark was even more of a rich, influential meal ticket than he was before. It just made Tony crave the anonymity of Ljósá even more.

Something that was particularly interesting was when they'd finally sat down and Bruce hesitantly added, "There's also been a lot of speculation about the people at your wedding."

"Rogers?"

"Mostly Bucky," Bruce admitted. "SHIELD have been taking a long time to paint him with anything flattering. That he was standing beside Steve while all the other Avengers were snubbed has made an impression."

"The good kind?" Tony was quick to ask.

“People are definitely confused and curious.” He hesitated. “If you plan to help clear his name, this might be a good starting point.”

Tony nodded. “You’re right, it is a good place. Kids? Can someone contact my PR team? Make sure they’ve got the correct information relating to Barnes. I’ll talk to him and Rogers about scheduling something. We can cover it the same time I do a press conference about marrying Loki.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Tony looked at his husband. “You rested and ready for this media circus?”

“I believe so,” Loki drawled. “And while we are there, we should include an introduction to Fandral. If Midgard is showing disdain for the Aesir, we had best make sure he is excluded from that distaste.”

“Good thinking.”

And even though it *was* a solid plan, Tony really wished it didn’t have to exist. Five minutes on Earth and all the responsibility, consequences and *drama* was rushing back to surround them. Sure, they weren’t exactly beholden to anyone and Tony knew he *could* say ‘fuck off’ and ignore everything... but, he’d been a hero too long. He’d also been part of *Earth* for his entire life thus far. He couldn’t switch off his obligations while he was on the planet. Off-world, that was a different story, but while he was here, he had to do his best to look after it.

And, unfortunately, that meant keeping up a decent public appearance.

Still. It didn’t mean he had to do it *now*.

“Has anyone else worked out we’re back yet?” Tony asked.

“Your responses to the congratulations have been sent, Sir.”

*Damn it.*

That meant it was only a matter of time before the greater world knew.

“And have you told Rhodey we’re back?”

“Yes, Boss.”

“Atta girl.”

“Shall he be joining us?” Loki enquired.

“I believe Colonel Rhodes would relish the excuse to leave base,” JARVIS answered.

“Really?” Tony asked. “That’s not like him.”

“I believe that his newly advanced biology is creating unexpected difficulties among the military.”

Tony’s expression darkened. “They’re thinking he’s a much better catch now and want to use that as much as possible?”

“I believe so, Sir.”

“Fuckers,” Tony muttered.

Just what the military needed, their very own ‘Captain America’ to exploit and throw at anything they didn’t like. And, unfortunately, with SHIELD run by idiots and assholes, there weren’t many places for superpowered people to go or band together.

*Apart from Stark Tower.*

Not that Tony had *any plans* to have his own superhero boyband. He was willing to house and help the people who were decent to him or his friends, but he wasn’t about to be the patron billionaire of do-gooders.

“Okay,” he said. “Help him get over here if he needs it. We’ll either be at the Tower or going to visit that farmhouse you bought. Keep him updated on our plans and if anything changes.”

“Yes, Boss.”

They fell into a slightly terse silence until Bruce cleared his throat and said, “They look a little like fennec foxes. Is that where you got her name, Tony?”

“Yeah,” Tony admitted, his gaze flicking to Fen.

She had been on his shoulder but she took the opportunity to drop down into his lap. She then went onto her back, her paws in the air in an open bid for affection. Tony’s lips twitched but he complied and scratched her stomach.

Unlike her choice of designation might indicate, she didn’t have any nipples or anything to say she *was* a she. Like Vgyarstil it was more in the word than the actual state of being. Tony wouldn’t be surprised if they didn’t have anything resembling reproductive organs.

Frankly, Tony wanted to scan the heck out of them and see if they were just forms of energy or, if they were an animal, what kind they were and if Earth even had a category for them. But, for now, his curiosity could wait. After all, Loki had heavily implied that understanding Fen wasn’t going to be a case of poking and prodding her. It would come with time and the development of his seidr.

It was one more reason to tie things up down here on Earth so he and Loki could go and leave for an extended time away. He wanted a lack of obligations and a schedule that only included spending time with his husband, learning magic, travelling the realms and exploring whatever stole his curiosity.

“Are they friendly towards others?” Bruce questioned, his gaze going between the vǫrðrs.

“Reasonably,” Loki answered. “They will not attack anyone whom they sense we are relaxed and accepting of, but they are not a pet. They are their own entity and an extension of our seidr. In many ways interacting with one of them is as if you are interacting with pure seidr.”

“That’s fascinating,” Bruce said.

“I have also been led to believe that their... breed has additional secrets and abilities that keep them apart from other familiars. But I am still quite uncertain. They were never... spoken of on Asgard, except with abhorrence.”

Bruce’s gaze jerked up to Loki, something shocked and appalled appearing on his face. But it was quickly exchanged for deep thought as he looked back at them.

“Does Fandral know?”

“He hasn’t recognised them.”

Bruce nodded. “I’ll save any more questions until it’s just the three of us in the lab.”

Loki let out a soft breath. “Thank you.”

“Will you tell him?”

“In time.”

Bruce nodded again. He also stood. “I’m going to make some tea, would you like some Loki?”

Loki smiled faintly. “Yes, thank you, Bruce.”

Bruce grinned back and headed towards the kitchen. Tony, despite the bubbling warmth inside, still called out, “What about me? Where’s the offer for coffee?”

“You’re more than capable of making it yourself,” Bruce replied back.

“Outright favouritism!” Tony shouted. “I thought we were *friends*, Bruce?”

“I have a closer friendship with fellow tea drinkers.”

Loki huffed a laugh while Tony just made a sound of disgust. Tony then followed it with a theatrical groan. Fen immediately exchanged his lap for Loki’s as Tony pushed up. Loki caught his hand and kissed the back of his knuckles. Tony smiled even as Loki let him go and he went to the kitchen to make his own drink.

He knew the others would be arriving soon along with their extra food, and even though Tony did miss the simplicity of being alone with Loki in their house, it was still nice to joke and chat with friends in the tower he’d lived in for so long.

The tower where he and Loki had formed their alliance, shaped their relationship and learned that the future wouldn’t include a bloody and bitter fight against a huge threat. The tower and

his Malibu mansion would always hold a special softness and familiarity, but Tony already knew in a few years they wouldn't be home.

A cottage on Alfheim would be home. This would just be a familiar building hosting them during their visits.

## Chapter End Notes

Well, there you have it! They're finally back on Earth! I actually managed to get a few things done in this chapter, although it sometimes doesn't feel like it 😊

I hope you enjoyed it what was covered 😊

# Chapter 87

## Chapter Notes

I have a cold so apologies in advance for any editing mishaps. My brain is not firing at its best 😊

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

There was only so much to catch up on after spending such a short time away. Sure, he and Loki had done things, but they were intimate and *personal* things with them offering only the briefest overview possible (especially with Fandral nearby and with a potential to react negatively to their vqrðrs origins).

The others also told them what had been happening, but apart from helping get the animals to the farmhouse, they'd mostly stayed tower bound. It was safer and allowed them to weather much of the media storm. Rogers had debated giving some kind of press conference, but decided to err on the side of caution and wait until he and Loki were back.

(Tony was thanking his lucky stars for that decision. Which mostly meant mouthing thank you at his A.I's and Bruce. He knew where the influence for that decision had come.)

Of course, talking about press conferences got them on the subject of Barnes' shaky public image and on giving Fandral a good introduction to Earth. It was a... vigorous discussion and also involved him calling his PR team to do a video call.

They looked a little frazzled and had all the information his kids had sent. He knew they would be having a rough week at the office with all the bombshells he'd laid down. But the head of PR had been there since he'd switched the company from weapons to clean energy *and* come out as Iron Man. The guy had spun gold out of some of his worst scenarios. There was a reason Tony paid him well.

It was as they were an hour into discussions about how to tackle all their problems that FRIDAY interrupted, "Sorry, Boss. We're registering the approach of a quinjet."

Tony groaned loudly. "You have *got* to be fucking kidding me."

"We're afraid not, Sir," JARVIS answered. "Shall we engage defence protocols?"

"How about we engage Hel's ward and knock them the fuck back?" he snapped.

"I don't think that will make them give up, Tony," Bruce said.

Tony shot him a dirty look, but although he'd sounded calm, Tony could see the way he was gripping his cup tightly. Letting out a frustrated breath, he looked at his wary PR team.

“You know what you’re doing, get things together. We’ll call you back.”

He made a gesture and one of his A.I’s ended the call. Tony then stood abruptly. It should have disrupted Fen, but she clung to his thigh before running up his body to perch on his shoulder. Normally, her ability to defy physics and gravity would be fascinating, but right now, he barely noticed. He walked over to the window, seeing the barest hint of a black spot in the distance.

Within moments, Loki was beside him, an arm coming around his waist in comfort and support.

“You do not need to see them,” Loki said. “If you wish it, I am sure I can create a malfunction in their jet from this distance.”

Tony snorted and half-smiled. He also looked at his husband, quickly sobering at the man’s expression.

“We both know that won’t stop them from showing up. Here. The farmhouse. The press conference. They’ll appear like a bad smell sooner or later. At least here, we’re well defended.”

“Remarkably foolish of them that they keep finding you at your most protected.”

Tony’s half smile came back even as he looked back out at the sky.

“Why can’t they just leave us alone?” He muttered.

“Because you have more power than they do. Along with more allies, more intelligence and more favour with the public and the realms. They *want* you on their side, but only when you fit the mould that they have selected for you.”

Tony closed his eyes and leant against Loki. The truth, as much as Tony didn’t like to admit it, was that for a long time, his craving for acceptance had found him *fitting* that mould. Or at least, trying to. The same way Loki had done it on Asgard. But they’d both snapped; been pushed too far and lied to and now they were biting and fighting *back*.

Their leash keepers still hadn’t got the message and thought if they stamped, shouted and showed up often enough, they’d finally get their way again.

“Are they ever going to grow a brain between them?” Tony muttered.

“Unlikely,” Loki said, his thumb starting to stroke Tony’s side. “But, once we are done here, they will not be a problem we shall be required to weather. They are tethered to this world, *we* are not.”

Tony finally smiled fully. “Best thing I’ve heard all day.”

Still, even knowing they *could* leave, it didn’t help them today.



Pushing away from his husband, he glanced outside, seeing that the jet was getting closer. He turned to look at the group. Bruce remained stiffly sipping his tea, Fandral was looking between everyone with concern and confusion. Barnes was tense and Rogers had a hand on his shoulder, but the way Rogers was holding himself, Tony knew he was ready to stand on their side and defend them.

*One more bit of salt in SHIELD and Fury's wounds.*

“Right,” Tony said, shrugging off his frustration and desire to just go back to Alfheim. He needed to be practical. “Kids, I don’t want them in here. We do it on the tower landing. No more softly safely bullshit, if they want a confrontation, this time, we’ll let the world see it.”

“Sure thing, Boss.”

“Of course, Sir.”

“Bruce,” Tony said, turning to him. “You can head to a lower floor if you want. Actually, any of you can. They’re here to yell at me and Loki, no one else needs to cop it if they don’t want to.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Rogers immediately insisted.

“I’ll stay nearby,” Bruce said. “I don’t want the Hulk to make things worse.”

Fandral frowned. He also stood and crossed the space to sit beside Bruce.

“I am sure our friend will only aid your cause, but I shall stay with him here. But my sword shall be ready should you require it.”

Tony had to resist the urge to comment on their *closeness*, and the way Bruce smiled at him gratefully. It really wasn’t the time but *damn* was it tempting. Especially since Bruce already seemed a little more relaxed with the swordsman at his side.

“Thank you, Fandral,” Loki said. He also placed a hand on Tony’s shoulder as if in warning. The man clearly knew him and his interest in their *partnership* too well. “We shall call if we need either of you.”

“I’ll stay here too,” Barnes added. “Don’t need to give them a free shot at me.”

Rogers’ jaw clenched, a fresh determination burning in his eyes. It was clear that if anyone tried to get at Barnes, they’d have to go through him. Tony doubted it would be a pretty fight. He knew if anyone came for his husband, he’d do everything in his power to keep him protected and within arm’s length.

“Okay,” Tony said, shaking off the thought. “Rogers, Loki and I will go out and greet the sore losers. You three stay in here and guard our backs. Hopefully we don’t need back up and they fuck off nice and fast.” He sighed. “But based on prior experience, I’m not going to hold my breath.”

No one disagreed with him and rather than wait around second-guessing what fresh bullshit SHIELD was going to bring them, Tony strode towards the landing bay doors. Loki and Rogers were hot on his heels and when they stepped outside, he had them bracketing him on either side. Loki's hand snuck down and caught his own, linking their fingers.

Tony felt a tingle between their palms. Something warm and *ready*. His seidr wasn't a match for Loki's yet, but he could feel them preparing. A feeling that was only amplified when he felt the light-footed touch of Fen moving to his shoulder. He already knew Vgyarstil had done the same to Loki, putting them close together.

Waiting for the quinjet didn't take long, and Tony was certain that social media and *news stations* had to have noticed and were likely recording and looking for any smidge of dirt. Honestly, Tony had no idea how Fury could even *think* this was a good idea.

When the jet landed, Tony clenched his jaw but waited for whatever shit show was on the way. He did *not* expect Hill to calmly walk out. There were no weapons raised, no shouting. She stopped a few metres from them.

"Welcome back to Earth," she greeted, only briefly eyeing their vǫrðrs. "I would have requested a meeting, but your A.I's aren't taking my calls."

"They know better than to waste their time listening to Fury's ranting," Tony countered.

"Nicholas Fury has been... relieved of his current duties. I am now the acting Director of SHIELD."

Tony's eyebrows rose. He glanced at Loki who seemed equally bemused. Rogers looked outright shocked.

"I didn't think someone could actually fire Fury," Tony remarked.

"With the current political climate, his emotionally compromised state and less than... stellar decisions. The best course of action was to appoint a more diplomatic head."

"You are being awfully candid," Loki remarked.

He sounded as suspicious as Tony felt.

"I'll be even plainer," she said dryly. "HYDRA damaged SHIELD'S reputation. Everything over the last few months has done even greater harm. You didn't have to damn us verbally, Stark. The actions of you and Rogers have done enough."

Tony crossed his arms.

"My heart breaks for you," he drawled. "Now are you going to get to your point and the reason for landing on my doorstep?"

"The point is that you *didn't* damn us. Not once," Hill said. "You deliberately held fire because you knew, despite how little you liked us, that we were useful. The world needs an organisation like SHIELD."

“A betraying, back-stabbing, leverage holding bunch of spiteful little assholes?” Tony asked. “Sure, the Earth *definitely* needs that.”

“Mistakes were made,” Hill said. “Large ones. We made a bad one in crossing you. I acknowledge that. I also realise you’ll never trust us or fully work with us again. However, I think we’re both reasonable enough to be able to negotiate a ceasefire.”

“We attempted negotiation once,” Loki drawled.

“And if you remember,” she countered, “I was the one who did most of it with you.”

Loki lifted a single eyebrow, but he didn’t deny it. Because the truth was, she *had* been the most diplomatic and open when they’d been organising the contract. As had Rogers. He was now on their side, while Hill sure as hell wasn’t about to change sides (and he wouldn’t trust her if she ever tried) she did bring a different level of... possibility to the playing field.

“So, what exactly are you proposing?” Tony questioned.

“No one will drop in unannounced at your doorstep,” Hill said. “Let my calls come through and we can arrange times that suit us both in order to create a working relationship.” She held up a hand, already seeming to forestall any argument. “I’m not trying to get anybody back into SHIELD.” She glanced at Rogers. “And I won’t stop anything you have to say about Barnes. I’ll even make a statement as Director supporting the clearing of his name. This is not about throwing weight. This is about doing the best job.”

“And what do you want in return?” Tony asked suspiciously.

Hill delicately linked her fingers in front of her body. Her every movement carefully documented and thought out.

“You have significant sway with the public, other worlds, and even the politicians. If you damn us, SHIELD will be destroyed. Right now, I’m trying to clean up the mess made by people with bruised egos and narrow-minded attitudes.”

“You still have not answered what you *want*,” Loki insisted. “You have given pretty words and apologies but you are not a *fool*. You have an agenda. You are a *spy*.”

“I’m not seeing Peggy Carter’s idea go down in flames,” Hill countered. She flicked a glance at Tony. “Or your father’s.”

“Not winning me over mentioning him,” Tony muttered.

“Will I win you over by telling you how else we failed to manipulate you?” Tony narrowed his eyes, but Hill continued, undaunted, “Agent Romanov approached Miss Potts a few months ago. She was hopeful of gaining her sympathy and further information about you. She even thought she might be able to promise her a rebuilding of your relationship.”

Tony clenched his teeth, feeling a fresh hatred from Romanov.

“I heard about it after the fact, but apparently the endeavour was a failure. Miss Potts told Agent Romanov she was despicable and that the world was lucky that you were not the villains we purported either of you to be. She told us to beg for forgiveness.” Hill’s lips twitched. “Apparently, when Romanov tried to insult you, she slapped her and told her to leave and never, ever approach her again.”

Tony didn’t want to be impressed, but he couldn’t help it. Pepper had *slapped* the Black Widow. That meant she’d not only surprised Romanov but she’d been overwhelmed with anger at her. It didn’t truly sooth the jagged wounds between them but it did... help somehow, knowing she’d defended them and, with all the information before her, hadn’t gone anywhere near Romanov’s new honeyed words or SHIELD’s lies.

In the silence that followed, Hill raised her eyebrows and gave him a pointed look. Tony scowled and crossed his arms.

“So, a failed manipulation. Whatever. It was still sanctioned by-”

“Agent Romanov acted without request,” she countered. “She acted under the assumption Fury would approve of her actions.”

“And you do not?” Loki questioned.

“Miss Potts is a civilian. She’s also another example of what happens to people who make bad decisions around you.” She nodded at Rogers. “Captain Rogers and Sergeant Barnes are an example of the opposite.”

“You can’t possibly expect us to trust you,” Tony remarked.

“No,” Hill said. “But I’m trying to extend a diplomatic hand.”

Tony wasn’t sure what he thought about any of it. He glanced at Loki and his husband met his gaze. He also touched his arm and pulled him further away. They stayed near the doors as Loki lowered his voice.

“What are your thoughts?”

“That she’s a shit tonne better than Fury, but she’s still a SHIELD and World Security Council puppet.”

“But she is a diplomatic one. She sees the benefits in having you, if not on side, then at least on talking terms. It is what you have wanted: a stronger way to protect this world.”

Tony grimaced. It was true, he *did* want an easier working relationship with SHIELD. Mostly, he wanted to know they wouldn’t stab him and his friends when they weren’t looking. He then wanted to have *nothing* to do with them unless the world was going up in flames.

This was the closest he came to either outcome.

He sighed. “I suppose we’ll have to schedule a meeting. Try and get things to work. No fucking way I want to be anywhere near Romanov though. Barton either.”

“I’m sure she will agree. She is making it very obvious that our agreement is of priority to her.”

“Think that’s a manipulation?”

“I think she is being truthful,” Loki said. “But I think she is wielding that as she would any lie. Appealing to your, hmm, greater good.”

“You say that like it’s a personality failing.”

Loki smirked and despite himself, Tony smiled. He also nodded and Loki seemed to understand exactly where he was coming from. They turned back and returned to stand beside Rogers. He’d remained with his arms crossed, staring down Hill but not saying a word.

“Okay,” Tony said. “We’re tentatively listening. So, call up the tower in a few days and I’ll tell my kids to put you through. We’ve got a lot of things to do, but we’ll pencil you in.” He narrowed his eyes, his voice getting colder. “But Barton and Romanov don’t come anywhere near us. You keep them away or I’ll call the whole thing off. Then you really *will* see us damn you.”

Hill clenched her jaw but nodded.

“Understood.” Her gaze flicked to Rogers. “I am sorry about what happened, Captain. SHIELD will be a different place, if you ever do want to visit us.”

“I’ll take Tony’s word on that, if it happens.”

Tony had to try not to smirk. Hill’s gaze flicked away, but she nodded. She then turned on her heel and left the way she came. There was no shouting, no fanfare, no building headache. It was the easiest conversation he’d had with someone from SHIELD for... a long time.

It didn’t erase all the bitterness and fuck ups, but Tony could acknowledge that Hill was, and always had been, an underling following Fury’s orders. She wasn’t in charge. She wasn’t a super powered entity calling the shots. She was smart and damn good at her job, but she’d had limitations. He couldn’t say that she hadn’t disapproved of what was happening all along.

He *wasn’t* giving her the benefit of the doubt. He couldn’t. Her snipes to him while still under Fury’s eye had seen to that.

But then, how much of that could have been good cop and bad cop? Or a straight up distrust of Loki? What about straight up burning anger about a shitty situation and all the bitterness flying around between them all?

Once again, it was fucking *layers* and it made his head hurt.

The point was that, for now, he was willing to try again. Even if it all went to shit, at least he now had a home on Alfheim to disappear off to with his husband.

“We will need to approach this carefully,” Loki said, watching the quinjet disappear. “Where some are gracious in defeat, some merely wait in the shadows, plotting their revenge.”

“And she’s still a spy,” Tony acknowledged. “Prone to lying through her teeth.”

“I never would have thought she’d turn against Fury,” Rogers murmured.

“Perhaps she is acting for him without anyone knowing,” Loki acknowledged. “I am sure we will not need to wait long to learn the truth.”

*Fun fucking times.*

Shaking his head, Tony turned around and walked back inside. He wasn’t going to stand out on his tower staring into the distance when he could be inside, having a drink. Loki and Rogers quickly followed. Barnes was already standing and watching their approach.

“FRIDAY fed the recording into the room,” Bruce said.

“Atta girl,” Tony complimented. He then asked the room at large. “What do we think?”

“It’s not worth turning down,” Barnes said. “They’re probably lying, or manipulating, but they’re better to keep an eye on.” He flicked his gaze to the ceiling. “Or more than an eye.”

Tony raised his eyebrows. “Why Barnes, are you suggesting I hack into the SHIELD database and listening into their secret meetings?”

Barnes shrugged. “I heard Romanov stole files from you. Turnabout’s fair play.”

Tony grinned. “You know, with thinking like that, I’m starting to like you.” He looked away to refer to his kids. “J, FRI, you heard the man. Dig me out some secrets.”

“Of course, Sir.”

“Our pleasure, Boss.”

“Right.” Tony clapped his hands together. “With that interruption out of the way and information pending, I say we plan a trip. Farmhouse break anyone?”

“I don’t know, Tony,” Bruce said, frowning. “Shouldn’t we talk about this? If Fury really isn’t Director any more than what does that mean he’s doing? What about,” he swallowed, “Natasha and Clint?”

“Something that JARVIS and FRIDAY will soon uncover.”

Loki stepped forward and wrapped an arm around Tony. “Until we have further information there is little we can do. We will only argue and theorise without proper knowledge of the

situation. We would be better to find enjoyment while there are minimal constraints on our time.”

“Lokes is right. We’re going to have press conferences and meetings coming up. I say, party at the farmhouse. No one will expect us to go there.”

“Will it be safe?” Bruce questioned.

“Between all of us and this new approach from SHIELD, we should be left alone,” Loki answered. “And, should we not be, we will know for certain where we stand.” He smirked. “Although, I think any who dares to take on a group such as ourselves, would be naught but fool easily overcome.”

After Loki’s words there was a bit of glancing between everyone, but soon enough, an affirmative came from all quarters.

Rogers even started to smile. “Hopefully, if everything goes well, I can take Buck out of New York. I’ve got a friend in DC I’d like to catch up with.” He huffed a laugh. “It would just be nice to get out. I haven’t been far from SHIELD in well... a long time.”

*Yeah, nothing like keeping your pet superpowered soldier on a leash tied to his best friend. Bastards.*

“We’ll get the PR side sorted out then you two can grab a car and do a road trip,” Tony said. “Nothing holding you back.”

Rogers grinned and Barnes even managed a faint smile. Bruce also stood and made mention of packing. Fandral was quick to follow him, asking questions about what one should pack. Tony *really* wanted to say something but Bruce was soon out of earshot and, Rogers and Barnes followed as well.

It left him alone with Loki and their vqřřrs.

“A rather successful return, I should say,” Loki remarked.

“Yeah,” Tony agreed. “Only thing that will make it better is Rhodey showing up at the farm. Think you can make it happen, kids?”

“We will contact Colonel Rhodes now, Sir.”

“Awesome.”

And although it *was* awesome, it also left him with nothing else to organise and with that, Tony couldn’t help thinking about SHIELD. About what Hill had said and implied. Loki’s arm came around his waist and his chin rested atop his head.

“You are thinking of Hill’s words.”

“Yeah.”

“It was a lot for you to learn.”

“Yeah.”

He couldn't help thinking about Pepper, and rather than truly stomach the *weight* of that, he cracked a joke.

“Can't believe Pepper slapped Romanov.”

Loki huffed a small laugh, but otherwise didn't react. It forced Tony to sigh.

“It doesn't erase everything.”

“Of course not.”

“But it... helps.”

Loki hummed. Tony frowned and stared off into the distance. “I need to know Hill is genuine... or as genuine as she can be. If I can find out it's all legit... I can work with this.”

“And even if she lies, even if it crumbles at our feet, remember my Anthony, in one hundred years, they will be not but dust on the wind. You and I, we will shall be more than they ever could be.”

It could have sounded daunting, but it didn't. It was *relieving*. No matter what Fury, Hill and SHIELD did. He and Loki would be the ones blazing forward. They'd be barely a footnote in history. A page that Tony never had to look back on if he didn't want to.

The future was *theirs* and even though he'd always be looking to find the best outcome for Earth and innocents, at the end of the day, it was going to be up to someone else to sort out the details, they were already on the way to bigger and better things out in the universe.

## Chapter End Notes

I hope you all liked! ~~And who was expecting Hill to walk out of that quinjet? Lol.~~



# Chapter 88

## Chapter Notes

Not sure how I feel about this chapter. In fact, I was meant to post it yesterday but didn't have the time to fully edit it. Hopefully you all enjoy it!

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

Surprisingly, everyone (in SI, at least) seemed relieved he and Loki were going to disappear for a few days before starting the press cycle. He supposed they wanted as much time as possible to come up with a plan, then a backup plan, and further grease all the political and public wheels in preparation for their bombshells.

Tony was just grateful he could say 'sayonara' and have nobody blow up his phone complaining about it.

Rhodey was also very eager to join them and when they set the time of arrival for lunchtime tomorrow, he promised to have already beaten them there. A threat which only made Tony want to leave *sooner*, but he did manage to listen to reason.

Mostly, he enjoyed being able to have a lazy day and then curl up in bed with Loki, their vqrðrs at the foot of the mattress as they got used to the different smells, sounds and familiarities of the tower. It was amazing how quickly he'd come to love Alfheim and miss it.

Loki, he could tell, was also feeling the same. While neither of them said anything, Tony knew the sentiment had still passed between them. It was why he was actually looking *forward* to being at the farmhouse rather than cooped up in the tower. Things had changed so much lately; just being with Loki and having seidr had made a huge difference. He still loved his tech, still loved having his A.I.'s only a quick call away – but this felt like the time for change. For *improvement*. A better melding of Earth tech and alien magic than he'd ever dreamed.

Of course, just the idea of it left his mind abuzz. He wanted to dive into the lab - be back in his workshop on Alfheim. But both of those would mean climbing out of bed and leaving Loki. His lover was sleeping peacefully beside him, curled around him as the bigger spoon. It was enough to keep him in place, to close his eyes and try and drift off. When he finally did, the night passed without disturbance either internal or external and he woke in the morning to his lover stirring and his A.I.'s quietly announcing the morning weather report. It was then followed by an update on how far along everyone in the tower was with packing – and how far away Rhodey was from the farmhouse.

It galvanised Tony out of bed, Loki looked less inclined to get up, his hair suitably sleep-ruffled and a furrow of half-asleep displeasure on his face. Tony had to take a moment to just

admire the sight of his husband. In fact, he ended up crawling back into bed to kiss him. Loki chuckled softly once they broke apart, looking amused by his restless energy.

“I had not thought to see you so keen to leave your Tower,” Loki remarked, tracing circles against his lower back. “It is most unlike you.”

Tony stilled even as he thought about it and tried to put the sentiment into words.

“I’m not. Well, I am. I just... I guess this place has more bad memories than I realised? Great ones too, obviously, since it’s where you and I bargained our contract and got a lot closer. I just... there’s something about the place that doesn’t feel quite right somehow?”

Loki hummed; looking more awake and thoughtful.

“I think it might be more to do with your seidr than you realise.”

“You think so?”

“Mages are grounded by the natural world, additionally Alfheim is a realm brimming with innate energy and seidr. Midgard, and your tower, by comparison, are quite barren.”

Tony nodded thoughtfully.

“You know, I considered that last night,” Tony admitted. Loki raised an eyebrow and he elaborate. “Not that, exactly, but how I want to take my tech and blend it in with what we have on Alfheim. Because, you’re right, there’s something about Earth that doesn’t feel right anymore.”

Loki frowned, looking almost distressed. “I never wished for our time away to damage your relationship with your world.”

Tony was already shaking his head.

“No, it’s not that. I promise, babe. It’s more like... I’ve been confined to Earth for my whole life. It’s insular. Seeing the wider universe? If it makes Earth look bland by comparison, that’s on Earth, not on you or the other realms.” Tony grinned. “If anything, I should be thanking you. Because of you and *us*, I’m now getting a better life and understanding than I could have imagined. You made it better, Lokes. *So* much better.”

Loki was smiling by the end and Tony couldn’t resist bending down and kissing him again. Loki curled a hand through his hair, holding him close. It was such a nice, soft moment and they only broke apart to cuddle closer. Tony closed his eyes, relaxing against his lover.

There was a small beep, a small disruption to make Tony open his eyes.

“Yeah?”

“Apologies, Sir,” JARVIS said quietly. “We do not mean to interrupt your morning.”

“What’s up?”

“Well Boss,” FRIDAY continued. “You wanted continual updates about Colonel Rhodes’ progress. He is approaching the half way distance to the farmhouse.”

Tony groaned loudly. “That damn platypus.”

He unwound from Loki, gaining a sound of displeasure from his husband, but he ignored it. Their vǫrðrs had been napping peacefully but they both lifted their heads, seeming to understand he was serious about it this time.

“What about everyone else in the tower?”

“Captain Rogers has finished packing as has Sergeant Barnes. Dr Banner and Fandral are nearing completion.”

“Right, so it’s just us. We’ve got to move.”

“You know that you do not *need* to best him in arrival time?” Loki remarked.

The mage had risen slightly and was now sitting up in bed, Vgyarstil had come over and Loki was scratching them behind the ears. Fen was at the edge of the mattress, watching Tony with a twitching tail.

“It’s the principal of it, Lokes.”

“If you insist,” Loki allowed, seeming bemused at the entire situation.

“If my magic was anywhere near as good as yours, I’d be playing dirty and sending something to trip him up mid-air.”

Loki shook his head, but he was smiling. “I am sure he would be unappreciative of it.”

“Eh. It’ll help keep him on his toes. Inspire him to get counter-magic runes built into his armour.”

Loki chuckled, but his smile had grown. “Well, rather than resort to such tactics, let us merely speed up our departure. I can prepare our belongings and make you a coffee while you refresh yourself.”

“You’re the best, Lokes.”

“That I am.”

Tony rolled his eyes, but he was grinning even as he hurried to the bathroom to get showered and changed. Of all the things he was going to enjoy the most about being back on Earth it was going to be seeing his friends *and* having an unlimited supply of caffeine.

---

They ended up making it to the farmhouse with a *second* to spare. Literally. They were pulling up and Tony heard the sound overhead. So, obviously, he whipped out his suit and launched into the air. It was a race to the finish line, but there were no technicalities about it.

Rhodey could complain all he wanted. (And non-committal A.I.'s could refuse to check exact landing times.) Tony knew the truth.

And sure, maybe it was a silly thing to be arguing over as the rest of the group walked up the driveway, but honestly, Tony felt excited that he *could*. Loki was laughing at him with both their vǫrðrs on his shoulders (he was still trying to work out how to take Fen with him in the suit). Bruce looked flatly unimpressed (but Tony could see the sparkle in his eyes). Fandral was excited to see the suits in action, and Rogers and Barnes were the ones lugging most of the luggage.

All and all, it was a good start to the day.

It was even *better* to discover that his amazing A.I.'s had thought ahead and ordered supplies.

While everyone but Loki and him had visited before, exploring the place proved a fun experience. The old-style farmhouse was renovated inside to have all the best modern amenities. It had five large bedrooms, a huge kitchen and two large living spaces plus two outdoor entertaining areas. There was also plenty of cleared ground for both animals and humans to enjoy. The rest of the property was taken up by forest, providing seclusion from the outside world.

It was a great way to escape the tower and the lingering bullshit that came with a building with his name plastered on the side.

Still, it was little wonder that the first place Loki went after depositing their bags was the stables.

They discovered an Iron Legion suit there waiting for them. JARVIS and FRIDAY had apparently stationed one on the property to protect it and tend to Halvor and Garðr in everyone's absence. (The animals were surprisingly unconcerned about a hunk of metal handing them food and grooming them.)

Seeing Loki's blatant joy as he stroked Halvor and introduced him to Vgyarstil and Fen was a moment Tony would forever treasure. He stood to the side, leaning against a wall to admire them.

"Anthony," Loki said, speaking to him for the first time since seeing his stallion.

"Yeah, babe?"

"Would you mind terribly if I took him for a ride?" His husband glanced at him. "I can tell he is yearning to leave these walls."

"Go for it. I'll find Rhodey and further insist I came first."

"Somehow, I doubt he will accept it," Loki drawled.

Vgyarstil, seeming to notice Loki's intention, climbed onto Halvor's head and then down his neck to rest on his back. The stallion seeming unconcerned by their actions.

“Looks like you’ll have company on your ride,” Tony remarked.

“Yes,” he murmured. A small frown forming. “In future, it need not just be us. Perhaps we could get you a mare? Or teach Halvor to race against your suit? I am certain we can find a means of riding together.”

Tony felt warmed by the immediate inclusion. He crossed the space to wrap an arm around his husband and kiss his neck.

“If you want me here, I’ll make it happen. Buy a horse, build one, whatever. But if you want to keep this as something for just the three of you, that’s fine too. I don’t need to be a part of everything. I’ll still enjoy seeing you do something you love, even if it’s not something you do with me.”

Loki turned and it took all of a second for their lips to connect. Tony closed his eyes, melting into the kiss. When they broke apart, Loki was smiling.

“I will always enjoy time with you, no matter the form. But, today, it would be nice merely with him and Vgyarstil.”

Tony kissed his husband’s cheek. “Then I’ll leave you to it.” He stepped back, but couldn’t resist adding, “Make sure you don’t sprain an ankle. Yours or his, I’m a terrible nursemaid.”

“I have been riding for *centuries*, Anthony.”

“Can never be too careful. We both know I’m not learning healing magic anytime soon, so it’s bandages and chicken soup if he kicks you off.”

“You are *ridiculous*,” Loki insisted, but Tony could hear the laughter in his lover’s voice.

He blew his lover a kiss before exiting the stables with Fen on his shoulder. He scratched her head as he made his way across the gravel drive to reach the main house. As he walked, he could see Rogers and Barnes jogging in the distance. Bruce was nowhere to be found, but Fandral was in a cordoned off field doing something with Garðr that looked like a cross between tag and outright fleeing.

Rhodey, the only sane one, had his feet propped up as he drank a beer in a chair on the front porch. Tony smirked as he came closer.

“Are the roles reversed? Am I the one pointing out it’s too early in the day to be drinking?”

Rhodey rolled his eyes. “Please. After that apple? This is as potent as apple juice.”

Rhodey picked up another bottle from the floor and held it out. Tony took it and sat down comfortably beside his friend. He cracked open the lid and was just taking a sip when, like a fucking *blur*, Halvor flew past with Loki on top and Vgyarstil with only two paws over Loki’s shoulder and the rest of their body plastered along his back. The horse was galloping and jumped easily over a fence before Loki was off in the distance, his laughter carrying on the air.

“So, your husband’s a speed demon on his horse, you’re one in a car. I don’t think I ever want to be in a spaceship with either of you in the driver’s seat.”

“Just because you like to drive slower than a grandma is no reason to complain about us.”

“You’ll break the sound barrier if given half a chance,” Rhodey muttered. “I’m going to have to be the one hitting the brake before you crash into some asteroid.”

“I’ll have you know; we will be *fantastic* drivers. And, we’ll have a guidance system run by JARVIS. Foolproof.”

“Uh huh,” Rhodey said. “You’re still going to need me there to keep you out of trouble.”

Tony paused with his drink at his lips. He looked at his friend, something about his insistence was different than just the usual teasing. Rhodey had another sip of his drink, still staring out at the expanse of the property.

“Platypus,” Tony began, keeping his tone light, “are you asking to come into space with us?”

Rhodey wouldn’t meet his gaze, staring dead ahead as he answered, “When we were on Alfheim, everyone treated us with respect and were friendly. They only cared that we’d proven ourselves as good friends of Loki and heroes of the realms. Here, I’ve always had hurdles to stop me from advancing. Now that I’ve got more going for me than a human? It’s warped even more. I feel like a fucking piece of meat and they’re all trying to see who can use me the best.”

He let out a harsh breath, his hand curling in a fist.

“It’s worse than all the other politics, Tones. I spoke to Rogers and he knows exactly what it’s like. When he became Captain America, everyone wanted a piece of the power he could wield. It’s just fucked. I’m going to do my best to make a difference for the future and the planet. But, I’m not an idiot. There’s only so much you can do when everyone is out for themselves.” He sighed. “There’s only so much you can *take*.”

Tony immediately leant over the space and gripped his friend’s arm. Rhodey met his gaze, looking tireder than Tony could remember seeing.

“You never have to ask to be invited, Rhodey. Never, not with me.”

“But you’re married now,” Rhodey pointed out. “You’ve got Loki to travel with and-”

“He’ll never care,” Tony said firmly. “He likes you. He’ll agree as quickly as me. You can be on our spaceship any time.” Tony grinned. “You’ll just have to put up with us *sometimes* losing a shirt or two in a common room, because really, have you *seen* my husband when he’s nak-”

“And that’s *way* too much information and a visual I do *not* need,” Rhodey said, grimacing dramatically.

Tony laughed and Rhodey was quick to grin. He also turned serious.

“You sure, Tones?”

“You just give me a time and date,” Tony agreed. “Lokes and I aren’t planning to stick around too long. Loki says I need magic practice and that’s better to do off-world. We’ll be here a few months, straighten things out, then we’re gone. We’ll only be a phone call away, but Earth’s going to have to fend for itself. If you want out, we’ll take you with us.”

“I don’t want to just hang off you,” Rhodey said. “I’m not just going to live in your house and follow you around-”

“I know,” Tony interjected. “And you won’t have to. I’m sure we’ll all find something to do up there. There are these magical builders and they’re *awesome*, so I’m already getting ideas. But you could do something. Reinvent. Be a . . . I don’t know, freelance bounty hunter? Be a pilot of space ships? We’ll work something out. We’ve got eternity, honey bear.”

Rhodey climbed out of his chair only to grab him and pull Tony into a hug. It caused Fen to jump off, but Tony immediately hugged back, squeezing his best friend and closing his eyes.

“Thanks Tones,” Rhodey said, his voice a little rough.

“Always, platypus.”

They stayed hugging for a good few seconds before Rhodey pulled back. He smiled.

“You know, I’m not saying I want to go this year. But I’m glad I can go when I feel like it.”

“Whole new universe out there. We’re going to show the world exactly what two former mortals can do.”

Rhodey snorted and retook his seat. “God help the universe.”

Beaming, Tony held out his beer. They tapped bottles, toasting to that very scenario; them let loose with only Loki to hold them back (and really, he’d be more likely to encourage than stop them).

*We better enjoy this farm break, because when we get back. It’s go time. I don’t want Earth stopping us any more.*

---

Of course, in the weeks that followed, Tony regretted spending only a few days on the farm.

SHIELD, or at least *Hill*, managed to play by the rules and work *with* them once they got back. They even managed a few genuine meetings. Still full of bureaucratic bullshit, but she actually seemed to give a damn about the people under her and the civilians they were meant to be protecting.

It was *positive*. She didn’t even make a comment on the last of his weapons disappearing and being melted down to scrap metal. *Finally*, his blood-soaked legacy was fucking *cleansed*. It didn’t erase what his weapons had done, but at least it stopped them from doing any more harm.

Unfortunately, it didn't stop the other more *asshole* SHIELD members from crawling out of the woodwork.

Romanov came first, cornering them after a press conference.

They'd successfully introduced Fandral to Midgard. His charming smile, friendly personality and support of them had quickly won hearts. He was going to be a shoe-in for popularity. He'd soon be able to go wandering around the streets without any problems beyond the usual hazards of being a handsome celebrity.

Barnes was a... little bit tougher. The public were a lot more wary, especially with Barnes not having the *warmest* personality. But, his clear support by Rogers and their childhood friendship, Tony was sure, would soon generate favouritism. After all, Bucky Barnes was an old war hero. They just needed to get past the Winter Soldier aspect.

(And for fucks sake, if *he* could do it, the public had no damn excuse.)

But it was after they had finished one more barrage in front of the media, leaving by the supposedly *unoccupied* corridors that they'd turned a corner and spotted her leaning against a wall. They'd all stopped, tension immediately flooding the space.

"I see your ability to manipulate the public remains intact," she'd remarked, not even trying to open with a '*hello*'

Tony had sighed loudly. "Really Romanov, I do not have time for you today. Or ever. Let's go with ever."

"Nothing we said was untrue," Rogers said, from his right, his voice colder than Tony could remember hearing. "All Tony did was give us the chance to explain and put things right."

"And discuss their new relations with the other realms," she countered. "Their political power and their strength both physical and magical should anyone try and combat them or their allies."

"And don't you just *wish* you hadn't fucked up your chance to be a part of it?" Tony retorted.

Romanov didn't react, but Tony knew it had to have struck a blow. She'd picked the wrong side, made the wrong alliances and for someone who's entire fucking *world* centred on being one-step ahead and manipulating people to do her bidding, that had to burn.

*Too bad, too fucking sad.*

"I didn't use everything I had against you," she said. "I had more information than what I gave to SHIELD."

Tony raised his eyebrows. "And that's supposed to make me feel all warm and fuzzy inside?"

"You only held that information for bargaining," Loki said, his voice low and sharp. "*You* are as much a manipulator as you perceive us to be." Loki stepped forward, menace all but radiating from him. "I am no grand hero. I have done ghastly things, it is true. But Anthony?"



He will only ever do what is *best*. Not only for those around him, but the people of his world and others. We can only *aspire* to be as grand as he. So, save your little *gambits*. We have no use for them.”

Tony quickly stood beside his husband, wrapping an arm around him.

“Whatever information you’ve got Romanov, I don’t care. I’m past the point of giving a damn. In centuries you and your little games will be an old story. Whatever you try to do will fucking *disappear*. We’re beyond your little web and soon enough, you’ll just be a cobweb we’re going to blow away.”

Her expression remained stone-faced and blank, but she didn’t counter, she said *nothing* and that was as good as a confirmation that she had nothing. Whatever she’d come to do, she didn’t have a chink in their armour to attack. They weren’t *weak* or *broken* or *vulnerable*. They were all fucking happy. They were living their lives with the truth as a weapon.

They had nothing to fear, and so, she had nothing to utilise.

So, Tony made a gesture and they all walked past her. She didn’t try to stop them and Tony got a sense that, although she’d probably be back, she wouldn’t be a problem. A widow with a bite they were now immune to.

Tony had still expected to see Fury within a day of her appearance. He’d arrive, guns blazing, swearwords flying. It was why he was shocked when a week passed *without* his presence... right until Loki admitted he had placed a small charm on them. A sort of *redirection* whenever the man tried to approach. Fury would be well aware of what it was doing, but considering his firing as SHIELD director, there was no one he could order to do anything about it.

Tony had thought it was *hilarious* and told Loki to put it on the top of his ‘spells to learn’ list.

As for the rest, Barton seemed to be ignoring their very existence (fine by him), Vision was still off communing with nature and frankly, with JARVIS back, Tony was more than happy to stay out of the way. If SHIELD wanted to get him as their latest powerhouse, they could go for it. The only thing that Tony cared about monitoring was the mind stone.

(And wasn’t that a trip to ask JARVIS the last thing he remembered which was, apparently, being uploaded into what became Vision and then... nothing. Whatever Vision was, he *wasn’t* JARVIS which relieved Tony in a thousand different ways to hear. He’d already known that for Hel to be able to bring him back they had to be separate, but it was still nice to get it confirmed by his A.I.)

Frankly, the most surprising interaction to pop up was almost a month after their return. They had actually been going on something of a date. Rogers and Barnes were in DC visiting Rogers’ friend, Bruce and Fandral were hanging out on the farm and he’d decided to take Loki out to lunch.

Their vǫrðrs had been on their shoulders, hidden by illusion and they’d just had lunch and were walking back, hand in hand.

(They'd already been stopped for a few photos and autographs, Loki seemed both amused and delighted to have been the centre of attention from a group of noticeably LGBT youths.)

They were almost at the tower when Loki had halted them abruptly. He'd frowned and looked at his husband, only to find him staring pointedly across the street. He'd glanced over only to go stiff as well. The Maximoff siblings were standing and watching them. For a few seconds, it was a perfect stalemate before Wanda approached, followed by Pietro. Tony tensed instinctively, his hand twitching for a gauntlet. Their hate for him had always been blatant.

They came to a stop in front of them, Wanda in front of him, Pietro in front of Loki. The tension was thick and Tony was half expecting for a fight to break out. He was still wary of just what she could actually do.

"If you come to speak," Loki said, "I would do so before my patience runs low." His voice got darker. "And if you come to *attack*, let me assure you, I have very little mercy for those who would harm my husband."

Wanda tilted her chin.

"We do not like Stark. We will *never* like Stark. But we did not like his weapons either. We are glad they are gone."

"We didn't like SHIELD keeping them," Pietro added. "They should have been destroyed."

"And that's what you came all the way here to tell us?" Tony demanded. "That you agree with us melting them down?"

The siblings exchanged glances before turning back to him.

"SHIELD wants us to fight for them. We agree to fight for what is right. We do not like you, but we do not attack you."

"If you *tried*," Loki growled, taking a step forward, "you would *die*."

A genuine flash of fear seemed to cross Wanda's face; Pietro shifted as if preparing to protect her. Tony placed a calming hand on his husband's chest.

"So, cliff notes. You aren't here to kill us; we aren't here to kill you. Stay out of our way, we'll stay out of yours. Great, awesome. You could have just had Hill tell us that."

The siblings exchanged another, weighted glance. He eventually nodded at her and she stiffened her shoulders.

"You are a mage," she said. "You have knowledge and access to--"

"No," Loki said coldly. Shock and frustration quickly overcame her features. Loki was nonplussed. "I will not assist you. Your... power, is a corruption of seidr. You are not a natural wielder and I will have no part in aiding you. Very few mages would." He looked her up and down critically. "In fact, I will warn you. The few who might try are either attempting

to learn and steal your power, or are foolishly naïve. They will have no awareness of what you harness or believe they are more powerful than it. You are lucky to be living after being twisted by an Infinity Stone. Attempting to do more with your power would be an unwise venture.”

She gritted her teeth. “I *will* understand it.”

“Then you will do so *without* assistance from me.”

And before she could reply, the street of New York was disappearing and they were inside the penthouse.

“Foolish woman,” Loki muttered. “She will go mad before resembling anything similar to a mage.”

Tony honestly didn’t like the idea of her getting any more power, but he *equally* didn’t like the idea of her going down dubious routes that could put her in danger. He didn’t like her, but he didn’t want anyone to suffer, especially due to their own stupidity or cravings for power.

“Are we going to have to keep an eye on her?”

“Perhaps,” Loki murmured. “But I was not lying, the influence of the Mind Stone makes her power unstable and dangerous. It would take a more powerful and *older* being than I to have any true influence.”

“Hel,” Tony acknowledged.

“Yes, and I am certain she is well aware and watching Miss Maximoff closely.”

Tony nodded. “Even so, I’ll have the kids monitor the siblings closely.”

“Wise,” Loki said. He also sighed softly and seemed to shake off the pensive frown he’d been wearing since their arrival. He smiled and cupped Tony’s cheek. “Now, enough of that. They were honest in their words, but still came to us in a bid for my influence. At least we need not worry about their hostility, even if their foolishness may yet cause a problem.”

“What are the odds they’re going to find Vision?” Tony muttered.

“High,” Loki agreed. “But as I mentioned, it is something I am sure Hel will monitor. She will not have saved the universe to merely watch a few mortals unleash a power beyond their understanding. I know the location of many Infinity Stones, and she knows of the rest. The natural balance will be safe in her hands.”

Nodding, Tony decided to just let it go. Things would blow up when and if they wanted to, all he could do was duck for cover. He was done counteracting and reversing explosions before they could happen.

So, he wrapped his arms around his lover and pulled him closer.

“Well,” he said, “now that we’ve got that out of the way and the afternoon and *tower* to ourselves, what do you say we finish our date and make good use of that bed in the next room?”

Loki smirked, desire quickly sparking to life in his eyes.

“I believe that is a *splendid* idea, my Anthony.”

Tony grinned as his husband bent down and kissed him. He felt both Fen and Vgyarstil make a bolt for the floor, but Tony only gave them a moment’s thought as he deepened the kiss. As he did, the rest of the day faded away until it was only them, their happiness and their love.

And there was nothing more important in the universe than that.

## Chapter End Notes

I've looked at this so many times, I give up and you get it as is. There was just so much to fit in here ~~especially as only two more chapter to go!~~ 🤔, so hopefully it came out okay!

And yes, for anyone wondering, Rhodey does ask a million questions about Fen and Vgyarstil at the farmhouse and they take to him faster than anyone else, even letting him pet them (Fen especially) which Rhodey is very chuffed by :P

# Chapter 89

## Chapter Notes

I am soooo late with this chapter. Ended up having to shuffle things around a bit to be able to update it tonight. Hopefully it still reads okay. Life has just been... yeah. 😊

Hopefully next chapter will be better/easier. ~~And if worse comes to worse, we'll just whack one more chapter on the fic or add a tonne of notes.~~

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

The world, after a few months, got used to them.

Oh, some people still bitched and moaned and tried to blow up a sidewalk here and there. But for the most part, everyone accepted the new status quo. He was immortal, Loki was his husband, the dignitaries of the universe loved them and the realms were happy to work with Earth *through them*.

But, as Loki pointed out, these were all beings of long lives. Negotiations would happen over time, over *years*. It gave plenty of opportunity for the dust to settle. Politicians even started to go back to normal by ignoring them unless it became important or relevant to their careers.

The world ticked on.

Rogers and Barnes were able to return to a relationship similar to what they'd once shared. Barnes starting to lose some of his tension and suspicion. Fandral slotted in among them as if he'd always been waiting to gain their friendship. Rogers' friend from DC also popped around, showcasing the wings he'd never given back since helping the captain when Barnes had been in full Winter Soldier mode.

Tony had fixed the damages and let him stay in a spare room in the tower whenever he visited. He was a polite, nice guy. Tony was happy to extend a longer offer if the guy wanted to hitch up with his friends and start flying around the city saving people.

(He was *not* making his tower a home for wayward heroes, fucking hell. Why did no one listen to him when he said it?)

But, if Fandral wasn't with them, he was with Bruce, drinking tea and telling him stories of Asgard and the other worlds. Once, Fandral even got to meet the Hulk whom he treated as happily as he did Bruce. Tony had never seen the Hulk have such an instant fondness for someone.

All and all, Earth was back to normal. Barely any blips on the radar. The press conferences petered out, Barnes and Fandral got accepted, and people turned to new gossip to give their

attention. Hill did a decent job of making SHIELD somewhat respectable and worth a modicum of time.

The Maximoffs didn't bother them again, nor Romanov or Barton (although, apparently, she and Fury did try to talk to Rogers when he was out jogging one day. It had gone down like a lead balloon.)

By the time six months had passed, Tony had not only been ready to hop off world, but Loki had been itching to do it too. His magic had started to slip out of him more. He wasn't at a stage of 'magical accidents', mostly because Loki was always nearby to sooth the errant strands. They really only came out to try and connect with Loki's seidr.

It was the kind of universal prompt he'd have been stupid to ignore. So, he sent a quick email to his CEO, left his girl FRIDAY in charge, told the guys in the tower sayonara and texted Rhodey with a quick update.

There was a bit of confusion and concern at the sudden announcement, but afterwards, there was well wishes and the promise to call if anything Earth-shattering happened. After that, it was packed bags, vǫrðrs on their shoulders and Loki skywalking them back to their home on Alfheim.

The moment they arrived Tony closed his eyes and shuddered with pleasure. The realm *was* bursting with seidr and he felt his own surge with excitement. Loki laughed beside him and held up his hand. Green seidr danced from it and when Tony caught his hand, his own, smaller magic wrapped around him. A mimic of their marriage and bonding ceremony.

"Welcome home, Anthony," Loki said.

Tony grinned and when Loki ducked in to kiss him, Tony leant his whole body into the motion.

*Home, indeed.*

---

Their return didn't have fireworks or a flurry of activity.

It was just days spent in their house, enjoying the peace and quiet. It was setting up JARVIS with some help from Loki, Earth tech and Hel's gift so that he could run with the same abilities as he'd had on Earth.

It was kissing Loki whenever he wanted. It was cheekily pinning him to the bed, and being pleasantly surprised when Loki wrapped his legs around him and they had sex just like that. It was the freedom to do whatever they wanted.

It was *also* Loki ruthlessly and vigorously training him on magic.

Tony had never had a teacher stricter or inclined to give out texts for him to read as 'homework'. He loved every second of it, of course, but he still grumbled under his breath.

He even joked that Loki might wrap his knuckles with a ruler if he caught him chatting in class.

That had led to an... interesting but just as fun break to the bedroom.

It wasn't the only unexpected thing that happened. That was when they'd gone into the local village to buy food and check out any new trinkets and stalls that might have come up. Loki was engaged in a lively discussion at a stall full of books. Tony had been leaning against a wall and half paying attention as he scratched Fen's head.

It was when the stall owner had touched Loki's arm to guide him to another collection of books. Tony hadn't really been *bothered*, a faint twinge of annoyance, but he'd felt his seidr do a weird sort of *surge*. In response Fen's fur bristled and before he could go 'oh, fuck' Loki's green tunic flashed red. Loki glanced down in surprise, the stall owner immediately dropped his hand and Tony felt more confused than sheepish.

His lover looked over his shoulder, an amused smile catching at his lips. Tony shrugged helplessly and Loki didn't even politely excuse himself, he just walked over to him. He cupped Tony's cheek and pulled him into a gentle kiss.

"There is no need to be jealous," Loki remarked. "I am wholly yours."

"I know that," Tony insisted, feeling that hint of embarrassment want to rise. "I really didn't know what happened. I felt this surge of energy and then, erm, yeah."

Loki chuckled. "Mages are possessive. Or rather, our seidr is. We like to see the one we love dressed in our colours or our clothes."

Tony huffed. "I don't see you turning my clothes green."

"Perhaps not," Loki said. "But I have placed you in my clothing before."

Tony blinked before, "Oh yeah, the beach."

"Mm," Loki agreed. "But I have many centuries of control, you are still such a young practitioner. It will take time." He chuckled. "And I have no concern with seeing the flashes of your love for me."

Tony huffed a laugh. "Well, as long as you don't mind, I guess."

Loki thumbed the edge of his jaw and whispered, "Never."

Tony felt a fresh surge, this one followed by a wave of love, and while Loki's clothes didn't change, nor did the ground tremble, Tony swore he saw some of the nearby flowers burst into fresh blooms. When Loki just laughed, Tony smothered the sound in a kiss.

How else was he supposed to deal with being so happy his reactive seidr was leaking it out of him?

---

After that, Tony's seidr was quick to develop a habit in targeting Loki and the nearby surroundings. The Elves, thankfully, just found it amusing and waved away any apologies he gave as they magically corrected any light damage he might have caused. Loki just continued to smile, chuckle and kiss him.

Sometimes, he even left his clothing uncorrected so that Tony could see the flashes of red and gold mixed in among the green. Once, Tony actually made his shirt show little Iron Man masks. Tony didn't think he would ever live it down, especially when Loki used his magic to permanently alter the shirt to show it.

He found the whole thing endearing and Tony took to sitting down with Fen and telling her that they had to stop this shit from happening. She merely licked her paw, looking as likely to listen to him as the errant seidr still coursing through him.

Of course, he was still working hard at his magical lessons which would do the same job in helping him learn to control it. But it was the principle, he didn't like acting like a child not getting his way.

Loki assured him it wasn't like that at all. Or rather, it *was* but that everyone knew it wasn't anything to be ashamed of or derogatory about. It was normal – natural. He'd become a mage in the middle of a marriage and bond with another mage, it was actually a surprise he was having so *few* outbursts.

(He still wasn't fully appeased.)

Even so, Tony did his best to curb any and all outbursts. And because he was so focused on his magic, on being with Loki, and learning about this new aspect of himself, he only seemed to blink and when he next looked up, three months had passed.

Of course, JARVIS had been keeping them up-to-date with Earth. Loki had also been in loose contact with some of the dignitaries on other realms. It just hadn't filtered through that it had been a while since they'd left Earth.

Not until Loki made it obvious.

He'd been in his lab, pulling apart some new space tech, using the time to also practice floating his tools over to his hand. They only made it to him half the time, but when they fell, Fen would rush over, grab them, and drop them at his side, following it with a rub of her face against his hand as if to encourage him.

It was after a *successful* and even *fast* grab of a screwdriver that Loki remarked from the door, "You are getting quite good at that."

He sounded *proud* and Tony preened under the attention. He turned to look at his lover only to be distracted by a bit of parchment in his hand.

"We got some mail, Lokes?"



“Yes,” he agreed. “We are invited to a gathering in Ljósá. Many of the Vanaheim dignitaries will be present. It has been a number of months since we have settled here, it would be wise to rekindle our friendships.”

“Wait, really. Months?”

Loki looked amused. “Yes, Anthony. We have been here for three.” He frowned. “Perhaps a little more, in terms of the Midgardian calendar.”

“Huh,” Tony remarked. “Well, time does go fast when you’re having the best time of your life.”

Loki’s expression softened and he crossed the room to kiss him gently. Tony wrapped an arm around his waist and when he pulled back, Tony rested lightly against his lover. He also peered down at the invitation, skim-reading it. Loki better tilted it for him to see.

“So, a week from now. We going to need to do anything in preparation?”

“Not at all. It will be a feast with much time for conversation and dancing. Perhaps some will ask how we are settling in, how your magic study is progressing. More than likely, they will attempt to invite us to more events and other realms.”

“Well, you did promise me a space adventure. I don’t mind stretching our limbs off Alfheim. Or maybe even just going to other parts of the planet. Unless you want to stay here a little longer?”

“I have enjoyed having you all to myself,” Loki confessed. “But I shall have a lifetime with you in this home, or in others like it. Allowing the realms some time with us will gain us peace in the future. It will also aid any plans we may make for travel or mischief.”

“Mischief sounds good. Especially if we’re targeting any old assholes from your past.”

Loki chuckled; he also dropped a fond kiss on Tony’s head. Tony smiled and tilted into the touch. When he finished, he straightened but didn’t move away.

“Then, I shall relay our acceptance.”

“Sounds good.”

Loki hummed, but didn’t say anything else on the subject, instead he questioned, “What do you work on?”

Tony grinned. “Just tinkering. Was thinking about how much fun it’s going to be to blend my tech with magic. I know I’m not ready to do anything unless I want explosions, but God, it’s going to be *so* awesome when I can shoot magic as well as energy from my repulsors.”

“You will be a sight to see,” Loki confirmed. “Courageous, glorious and *mine*.”

Tony felt the familiar tingle of Loki’s magic, and his own burst out to meet it. Possessiveness rose up in him and his seidr strained, still waiting to fully bond with Loki once he was strong

enough. Tony couldn't wait for that day to come. In the meantime, he settled for turning and encouraging another kiss.

When they broke apart, their breathing was a little heavier. Tony met his lover's gaze and questioned, "You need to send that reply right away?"

"Certainly not," Loki replied, his fingers slipping under Tony's shirt. "I have much better things to busy myself with."

Tony grinned. "Let's get busy then."

He wagged his eyebrows and even though Loki probably didn't completely get the reference, it didn't matter. He could continue to educate his lover on Earth quirks later. He'd much rather reacquaint with Loki's body and mouth.

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The party at Ljósá went off without a hitch. They each wore something of the other's colour, keeping Tony's magic from overreacting. Their vǫrðrs gained no shortage of raised eyebrows and curiosity, but no one directly commented on them other than with a compliment. Tony was glad that the tacit silence allowed his husband to lose some of his tension.

(His heritage, after all, was still a sore spot.)

But, overall, everyone was pleased to see and speak with them. They ended up with new invitations not just to planets and parties, but to just come over for lunch. A few of the mages even invited Loki (and him) to come visit their libraries. Loki had brightened at the prospect, making it impossible for Tony to think about protesting (not that he would have.)

Tony liked to think there was some genuine chances to make not just alliances, but some actual friends. The universe was big and vast, surely there was some decent people out there who they could get along with?

And if not, the people they met were certainly good for inter-planetary gossip.

Because apparently, their wedding, Hel's gifts and Asgard's reaction to it all had spread like wildfire. It had even gone outside the Nine Realms. One man from Vanaheim had only just got back and had heard tale of a '*mortal embracing the Queen of Hel*' and that '*golden Thor did not shine so brightly in front of her*'.

Tony had sniggered into his drink over the downward spiral of Thor's reputation. Loki had been more interested about other news. The so-called Guardians of the Galaxy were continuing to put out any lingering fires from Thanos' demise. Their reputation was thriving and Tony hoped he could meet them one day. Based off the stories, they sounded like an interesting bunch.

Hel, of course, was another hot topic. Her appearance and actions were causing people to reevaluate the state of the Nine Realms. Loki got pulled into at least six conversations that made it obvious how well respected his opinions actually were. Tony enjoyed standing at his

husband's side, their arms brushing (if Loki wasn't outright wrapping an arm around his waist) as he listened to him talk.

So often, he'd been the centre of attention, now he was the spouse, standing tall and feeling proud of the man at his side.

And, it turned out, he wasn't the only one proud.

That night, they'd been invited to stay in similar guest rooms to last time and when they'd arrived there, Tony hadn't been game enough to activate the lights, but he did use his magic to undo the laces and buckles on Loki's evening cloak. His lover's eyebrows rose as he looked down at the glimmers of his seidr.

"Keen to see me without clothing, Anthony?"

"I'll never say no to that," Tony said with a wink. "Mostly though, I was thinking of giving you a massage."

Loki smiled. "It was not *that* draining of an evening. We have both had far worse in recent years."

"Yeah," Tony agreed. "But let a guy work out his husband's kinks?"

"My *kinks*?" Loki enquired, raising another eyebrow.

Tony laughed at the unintended innuendo. Loki just chuckled and tugged him by the hand and into a kiss. Their vǫrðrs hadn't spent the whole night on their shoulders, having wandered around the hall, even curiously meeting a few other familiars present – but now, they leapt off and disappeared into the room. Loki pulled back; their fingers still curled around one another. Tony let his seidr slide over the man's jacket, trying to edge it off.

Loki chuckled and kissed his jaw.

"You are getting very skilled already."

He shivered when Tony's seidr brushed his skin. Tony knew how good Loki's own felt on him and hoped his was just the same.

"Not good enough," Tony said, leaning forward and pressing his lips to Loki's neck. The mage arched into it, giving him better room to work. "Need to learn how to get it all *off*."

Loki chuckled. "In time, my beloved."

His fingers slid through Tony's hair, carding through it softly. "You are already exceeding the expectation of many."

"Oh?" Tony enquired absently.

"All the mages we met tonight, they were very impressed with how far you are coming along."

Tony snorted. “Yeah, with my magic flaring up all over the place.”

“With your *control* and your incessant thirst for more knowledge and skill.” Loki cupped his chin and gently tugged him so their gazes could meet. His expression was soft and fond. “I have always been proud to have you by my side, but also find myself proud of *you*, of your success, talent and the strides you are making. You pick things up incredibly quickly, Anthony.”

Tony’s cheeks heated in a soft flush, but with Loki, he didn’t feel a need to hide away even when he felt a little embarrassed by the praise.

“Flatterer.”

In response, Loki merely smiled and, after that, kissed him. Tony sighed into the embrace and wrapped his arms around his lover’s neck.

While he genuinely had planned for a massage and to talk over the night with his husband, he couldn’t say he was complaining about being very pleasurably derailed.

---

In the morning, Tony woke up to find his husband already awake. He was tangled in the sheets but Loki was sitting with his legs crossed and Vgyarstil in his lap. He was stroking their fur but his gaze was distant.

“Lokes?” he asked, stretching out his hand to brush his lover’s thigh.

Loki blinked back to the room and immediately smiled. “Anthony, good morning.”

“Is it?” Tony questioned, frowning. “A good one?”

“Of course.” Loki leant forward and brushed his cheek affectionately. “A morning is always good with you.”

“Hmm. Romantic, but not exactly winning me over.”

Loki huffed a laugh. He also pressed a kiss to Tony’s forehead. When he pulled back, rather than retake his seat, he resettled to lie down with an arm around Tony’s waist. They were quiet at first, but after a minute, Loki broke it.

“Did you notice the reactions to our vǫrðrs last night?”

“People were curious,” Tony said.

“Yes,” Loki agreed. “Curious. Not disgusted, appalled or wishing they were gone from sight.”

Tony turned his head, seeing his lover’s pensive frown. “Is that what you expected?”

“It is what one should assume when faced with a being from Jotunheim.”

Loki sounded more... confused, perhaps even a little hesitant over the conclusion he was drawing.

“But they didn’t,” Tony said softly. “They didn’t treat you, or us, or the vǫrðrs any different.”

“Yes,” he said softly.

And Tony could draw a few conclusions from that.

“So, the other realms aren’t acting the way you’d expect or been raised to believe would happen towards something Jotun?”

Loki didn’t meet his gaze, but his silence said it all. Tony really, *really* wanted to beat the ever-loving shit out of Odin, but he refrained. Instead, he captured Loki’s hand and linked their fingers. He didn’t say anything else, letting Loki come to it on his own time.

Eventually, Loki said softly, “Asgard’s libraries did not lend me much in the way of Jotunheim. I... hope that this might be different upon Alfheim.”

Tony smiled; he also squeezed his husband’s hand. He had a feeling it was the first time Loki had thought to actually *look* for books on his race, not just after finding out his heritage but long before.

*Maybe, some of those mages who invited us to lunch will have something in their libraries?*

“If you want me to help,” he offered, “I can-”

“No,” Loki said, a little too forcefully. He then sighed and said again. “No, thank you. Not... yet, Anthony.”

“Okay,” Tony said, not offended or going to push his lover. He knew it was one hell of a touchy and difficult subject for him.

They fell into another silence and this time; Tony saw no reason to break it. As he closed his eyes and relaxed, he could almost hear faint birdsong in the distance. He could also feel Fen taking a place tucked up behind one of his ankles. Tony smiled, feeling no need to leap out of bed or rush into anything.

It really was one of the better perks of longevity.

---

After the party on Ljósá, Loki took to his Jotunheim studies with vigour. Tony spent the same time working on his magic. But, that didn’t just mean being locked up in separate rooms, it meant Loki uprooting them and taking them from house to house, library to library and *realm to realm*. Granted, they were only jumping between Alfheim and Vanaheim at this point, but the tantalising temptation for places *outside* the Nine Realms was definitely there, just waiting to happen.

It wasn’t all that they were up to: Loki showed him the sights, they tested his Iron Man armour with magical defences and on different, *otherworldly* terrain. JARVIS was

functioning through the armour the entire time, giving them readouts on how well the tests were working. They were also practicing with how to have Fen ride on top of his shoulders and whether he should make some kind of harness or pouch to better protect her.

It was after one such training session, when Tony was hyped up with energy and the thrill of success that Tony realised there was something else thrumming under his skin. His *seidr* was buzzing so close to the surface his hair was standing on end. Loki also seemed to notice the change. They'd been practicing in a makeshift clearing near their house. He'd been in the air with Loki on the ground. Vgyarstil was at Loki's feet, staring up with unusual intensity.

"Sir," JARVIS remarked, "your seidr is radiating at a rate three times as high as usual."

"Yeah," Tony breathed. "Yeah, I got that."

He slowly lowered to the ground, his balance feeling a little off-kilter and making him land harder than usual and with a stumble. He pulled off the helmet to see Loki without anything blocking his vision.

"Anthony," Loki murmured. "Your seidr..."

He stepped forward slowly and Tony licked his lips. He felt like jittering and could barely keep still. "It's um... stronger than normal. Right?"

"Yes," Loki agreed. "Your inner core it's been bolstered, by the innate magic in the planet, by our relationship, Fen, your studies. The fight has merely... stimulated it."

Loki reached him as he finished, his hand extended, brushing the suit. The armour pulled back without his command. In fact, he wouldn't be surprised if it had done it without *JARVIS'* command. Tony raised his hand, their fingers brushed and they both shuddered. His magic leapt from his fingers and Loki's met his in the middle.

Tony stared as the two colours twirled together, his brighter and *stronger* than at their marriage.

"Oh, Anthony," Loki said, sounding breathless.

Tony made a sound, not sure how to articulate the feeling; it was like being *whole* as if a part of him had been unsettled and waiting to slot into place. Fen and Vgyarstil yipped with blatant excitement. Tony dragged his gaze to Loki's, seeing the man's eyes glowing green. He knew his own would be burning with the colour of his seidr.

"Are we bonding properly?" he whispered, already knowing the truth of it.

Loki smiled, his dimples on full display.

"We are." He linked their fingers. "Or we are finally *starting* to; your seidr has grown enough that it can start the process without harming you." Loki tugged him closer. "Trust you, Anthony, to begin running before you can properly walk."

Tony laughed, but for all it could have sounded like a chastisement, Loki looked nothing but thrilled. And Tony could *feel* it too, the glow of his happiness, love, astonishment, and delight as it thrummed through his seidr.

“If running gets me to you faster,” Tony promised, “I’ll sprint my whole way there.”

“You already have me,” Loki promised. "And I will meet you just as readily wherever we need run."

And just to make their statements even more undoubtable, their seidr took the time to flare, glowing around them and lighting up the clearing. If Tony could spare a glance away from his lover’s face, he would see the soft looping designs amidst their seidr, twirling in knots of infinity.

But he didn’t need to look anywhere else but his lover to see what forever looked like; he’d been looking at it since he’d fallen in love. It was only their magic finally catching up.

## Chapter End Notes

ALL THE SAP. I hope you enjoyed! And I hope you'll like the final chapter! Hopefully I'll fit everything in my notes in 😊👉

# Chapter 90

## Chapter Notes

Here it is.

The final chapter.

Posted 'late' if only so I could post it today. The 6th of December. Seven loooong years to the day that I first posted what was originally meant to be a oneshot. But now, it is finally concluded!

And, yes, if you saw the wordcount it... got... very long. But I had a lot to fit in and one chapter to do it (there were soooo many requests and a lot of it for the future). Sooo, enjoy this final one. We've gone out with a bang!

Thank you to everyone who has read, commented, subscribed and stuck with this story over such a long period. You are a huge part of the reason this got completed as opposed to left as a WIP. I can't thank you enough, but I hope this chapter suffices and fits in all the things you wanted to see!



(And a big thanks to **tarot\_card** for helping me with reading so many of my chapter spams! I've appreciated it so much! ♥)

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

Loki had never imagined his life could ever be quite so perfect. It defied all expectation and, had he been able to speak to his younger self, he would have told him: *'Wait. The sneers, the*



*hate. It will all be worth it. You must merely wait* – because, a century into marrying Anthony Stark, it well and truly *was* worth it. Worth *everything*.

Because he'd finally found someone to share his life with: they could travel the realms together, perform seidr and mischief. They could be side by side in all things. They were married and bonded, as entwined as any two beings could be – and things only continued to get better.

At the beginning of their move from Midgard, he had merely wanted Anthony to grow used to Alfheim, but all too soon, he'd realised his lover wanted more. A few years after settling in their home, he had been taking his husband throughout Alfheim and Vanaheim, even Niðavellir. Beyond had been a little out of their reach without a ship, but Anthony's eyes had merely gleamed at the challenge.

It was hardly surprising that the former mortal had decided to build his own.

Loki had watched on with great amusement, finding fondness in the man's cursing, chattering at Fen and the way he had started using his magic to aid in the process. He had only been a fledgling mage, but Loki had known already that he would be *grand*. He would never have as much raw power as him, but his lover's ingenuity would make him feared and respected in quick measure.

And it had quickly become obvious that it wasn't just him who admired those traits in Anthony.

Together, they had made a rather large group of acquaintances (friends, as Anthony insisted) in the form of mages, engineers, blacksmiths, even a rather lovely gardener. Anthony had also done much to charm his way into favour with the dwarves, a feat Loki remained impressed by. Their original Midgardian friends also remained, and the group came to visit them on Alfheim a few times with the help of some of the Alfheim mages.

In fact, it had only taken five years before one such friend had joined them more permanently.

James Rhodes had tired of Earth quicker than even Anthony had anticipated. He'd insisted he would only live with them for a few months until he got settled. Anthony had taken the opportunity to introduce him to vast quantities of Alfheim liquor. Loki had ended up with Vgyarstil and Fen on his shoulders as he watched the two men sing appalling melodies and giggle from their places collapsed on the floor.

Loki had taken far too much amusement from the rather large hangovers they had experienced the next morning. Elven wine was not for the uninitiated, and for all Anthony had tried it on many occasions, he had not decided to get *drunk* on it.

A lesson they had both learned never to repeat over the years.

And, despite his claim, James had ended up living with them for almost a year, something that Loki actually enjoyed. The man's humour, compassion and teasing of Anthony (and all too quickly, himself) became a pleasant addition to their home.

While it was mostly Anthony and James together as they worked on the ship. James also joined him on walks and foraging expeditions. After gaining an understanding of the land and wildlife he also took to exploring on his own. He made friends with those living in the area, adapting impressively to the new world and new *life* he had gained.

But as much as Loki would have wished to live forever with ease and amusement, not everything could be smooth sailing.

Eventually, one of the Alfheim mages finally enquired about Vgyarstil and his heritage. A topic he had not been comfortable with – but the man had explained that he had Jotun heritage on his mother’s side. He did not have any of the colourings or markings, but he had a natural affinity with ice magic. He also had stories and old texts passed down from the generations.

They had sat down for a long day of discussion, Vgyarstil resting in his lap, their ears twitching with noticeable interest. Hearing of the realm’s history and that of the vǫrðrs had been... hard. It had forced him to acknowledge how little he knew of his race, how *suppressed* the information had always been.

And for every story about seidr mastery, affinity with shapeshifting and familiar-mage bonds, it only encouraged the guilt buried within him for his actions towards the Jotnar and their planet. His *birth planet*, his... ancestors.

Reparations were far beyond him. But understanding and acceptance? He started to come to terms with it. While his husband was working on the ship with James, he dedicated his time to facing the truth.

He wore his true skin around their home. He even began to experiment with the elemental powers he had long denied. Vgyarstil remained at his side, rubbing their face against his skin, uncaring of the cold. Seeming to *enjoy* it. They also yipped and sent emotional encouragement down the bond with every step that he took.

After half an Elven year of practice, he even allowed his lover to see his darkened skin. He’d warned the man in advance, told him what to expect and to be truthful with him if it was a sight he could not stomach. He’d been incredibly nervous, not because he doubted Anthony’s love, but because he still struggled with the truth himself.

Anthony had watched the colour travel over his hands, going up and over his body. He’d looked him up and down.

“Well,” he’d said, “I can see how that would be a big change for you.” He’d stepped closer, touching his shirt as he had warned Anthony to avoid his skin. “The eyes are the big thing for me, I’m used to green. But, and I’m being honest here babe, you’re still Loki to me. Like, it’s different, but it’s not *bad*.”

“Then it is not abhorrent?” he’d asked, still feeling a prickle of unease.

“Of course not. It’s *you*. I don’t think there’s anything you could look like that would change how I feel about you.” Anthony grinned then, looking him over a second time. “It’s kind of

fascinating too. You're the most different I've seen out of everyone. The colour's gorgeous too. And not to offend or anything, but I kind of want to see how far the lines go and if I can lick them."

Loki had snorted, too relieved to do anything else. He'd also returned his Aesir skin and cupped his lover's face, pulling him in for a kiss.

"Not yet," he'd said. "When I am more comfortable... perhaps. But, it was enough to show you. I do not feel I could do more yet."

"Whenever you're ready babe, and only if you want to. It's not a race or a need to touch situation. I'm glad you showed me, but I meant it. Whatever you want to look like, you're still my Lokes and my husband. Nothing's going to change that."

Relieved, he'd kissed his husband again. He'd known already, but it had remained heartwarming to have such a perfect, supportive and accepting man at his side.

His skin made a few more appearances over the years.

(He'd even allowed Anthony to kiss him as he wore it. And allowed James to see it. The man had been supportive but also furious at the extent of what Asgard had kept from him. Something Anthony had cheerfully declared was one more reason that he planned to use the plasma cannons on their new ship to blow a hole in Asgard's palace. Loki had been forced to laugh if only try and minimise the bursts of affection that had formed in his chest.)

Once their ship had been sturdy and deemed 'travel capable' by the Alfheim authorities, the newly christened '*Iron Family*' had been sent on its first voyage. Loki *and* James had winced at the name but Anthony had cheerfully insisted that it was what they all were to each other, so their ship had to reflect it. Neither of them had been able to fight such a statement.

What followed *that* was an interesting number of years. Travelling the universe with his husband and with a man who was becoming *shield-brother* in a way Loki had never truly experienced. In truth, James Rhodes *did* become family. A brother if not in blood, then by his connection not only to Anthony but to him as well.

And even when they parted ways, with James taking the ship and even a few crew members, they were never out of contact. He and Anthony skywalked or paid for passage on other ships. They never went without at least a yearly check in. It was often spent at a tavern or the safety of '*Iron Family*'. It involved tales of what they had each seen and experienced. James was making himself known as a safe transporter of cargo and even passengers. To Loki's great shock, he even gained himself a black and white Flerken.

The creature, of course, became very fond of their vorðrs but was often seen atop James' shoulder offering a disconcerting smile to anyone who approached. When Loki had explained exactly what a Flerken was and how he was not merely a 'lost cat', Anthony had been fascinated. Loki thought it fitting that a man as kind and as compassionate as James had befriended a being of such a rare and fierce race.

In the blink of an eye, Loki found that time had passed them by - but he hadn't regretted a moment of it. But it all came to mind as he sat in a garden watching his lover sit on the ground, legs crossed and magic twining between his fingers. He was in deep concentration. Anthony had grown his hair out and now had a few plaits interwoven with red and green strands. Loki's own hair was now down to his waist and only ever untied when alone.

He'd been reading a book purchased from the local market stall. He and Anthony had arrived three days prior and, upon seeing a bounty, had taken the time to destroy a thief's guild. In return, they had the gold from their success and free accommodation. Anthony had discovered a scroll with a very intriguing fire spell. He'd pleaded to learn it first and, seeing as it was well within his capacities, Loki had agreed.

Sitting and watching his husband, Loki was filled with the soft love that infused his every moment. It was as he'd been watching Anthony and loosely petting Vgyarstil that he'd taken the time to think back over the years. The *decades*.

"Anthony."

"Yeah, sweetheart?" he asked, not even glancing up.

"We have been away from Earth for forty Midgardian years."

Anthony finally tore his gaze away. He blinked, surprised. "Huh. Wow... yeah. It's been that long. Shit."

"Is there a problem?" he asked, concerned.

"No. I mean... I check in with Bruce and Fandral every year. I just... it didn't really click, you know?"

"Indeed. Rather fortuitously Bruce has maintained a longer life as have the soldiers."

"Yeah. That's been nice." His husband smiled faintly. "But I still think Bruce has an unhealthy advantage. Still won't get over him betting me about when Rogers and Barnes would get married. I still owe him fifty bucks."

"You were the one foolish enough to agree to it." Anthony flashed a bashful grin and Loki smiled back fondly. "Still," he added, "a shame we were unable to attend."

Anthony shrugged. "We weren't that close anyway. And we sent that gift basket."

Loki's lips twitched. It had involved a complex ritual of spellwork and he had been half worried something would explode, but in the end, they had been able to send, not only the wedding gift, but a few other tokens they'd collected for Bruce and Fandral. All had been well received and they'd also spoken at length via inter-realm phone to all of their friends on the realm.

Fandral, it seemed, had become a frequent face beside Rogers, Barnes and the Hulk. They were their own team of do-gooders along with a variety of others. Some had now retired from

hero work, others were fresh-faced and new. Anthony had always spoken with them more than he, although, he did always take a few minutes to converse with the swordsman.

“Why did you bring it up?” Anthony asked. “Don’t tell me you miss New York’s streets and television?”

“I rather thought *you* might.”

Anthony’s gaze grew distant. “I mean, a little. Sometimes? Mostly, I don’t. Too much here to keep me occupied. Besides, I was never one for sitting in front of a screen. I’ve got my lab, I’ve got you. With a quick phone call I’ve got Rhodey and our ship.”

“His ship,” Loki drawled. “You’ve told him that many times.”

“Well, it’s the *family’s* ship, but he’s the captain.”

Loki bit down on a smile. Anthony’s expression showed he knew it was there. He also pushed off the grass and came over. Vgyarstil quickly dashed to his shoulder allowing Anthony to drop down on him. Anthony then wrapped an arm around his waist before cupping a hand against his neck. Loki arched into the touch and the slide of his husband’s seidr, familiar and welcome under his skin.

“Do you think we should head back?” Anthony asked. “Stop over for a proper catch up?”

“Only if you wish.” Loki tucked his arm around Anthony’s waist, better securing him. “I merely realised the passage of time, I did not want it to pass unremarked in case you wanted to revisit those whom remained behind.”

Anthony frowned, his gaze going a little distant. Loki stroked his hip and let his gaze run over his lover. He also went further, smiling as Fen walked along the roof of the building they were staying in. She was far too curious, just like Anthony, and often went out wandering on her own, reporting back whenever something of interest had been discovered.

“I might call Rhodey,” Anthony remarked. “See if he wants to stop by, pick us up, and head back to Earth.”

“Whatever you wish, my dear.”

Anthony smiled, refocusing and bending down to kiss him. It was chaste and gentle, but, as often happened, it soon turned to something else. He felt his lover smirk a moment before familiar seidr slid over them, tugging them from the chairs outside to land on the soft bed in their room. They broke apart and Anthony grinned down at him.

“One day, I will complain about you using seidr for such unnecessary antics,” Loki chastised.

“And on that day, I’ll say ‘*takes one to know one*’.”

“I have more seidr stores than you.”

Anthony fished under his shirt, pulling out three necklaces with medallions of varying sizes, all working as storage units for his seidr.

“And *I* made my own. Tech wins.”

“Nonsense. It’s hardly-”

But his argument was cut off by a kiss, and truly, he didn’t wish to debate it anyway. Anthony’s methods were ingenious and he’d even had his husband make a few for him as well. The man’s ability to meld magic, technology and turn old practices into new would forever be fascinating.

He would also never complain about any chance to feel his lover’s seidr gliding over his skin, reconnecting with his own, and humming with the power and connection of their mage bond.

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After being phoned, James enthusiastically agreed to visiting Midgard. He said he was a month’s journey from their location, but if they could get closer, they could meet in the middle before heading back. Once they were together, they could use faster technology to get back to the Nine Realms.

They had agreed and left the planet after a few more days of relaxing.

Of course, news of their assistance with the bandits had spread and, as it sometimes did, not for the better. They had arrived on a nearby moon to charter a flight to the rendezvous point when they had been ambushed. They hadn’t even attempted a secluded location instead, choosing the middle of the town.

People and creatures of varying races had screamed. But, before the first attack had flown, Fen and Vgyarstil had hissed while the dragon upon Anthony’s ear had roared. His husband had immediately run a hand up his arm, activating a shield that was part magic, part energy and deflected everything harmlessly. Loki had then thrown out his own pulse of seidr, catching the first two and knocking them to the ground.

Anthony had then tapped his shoulder, activating his modified suit. Gauntlets covered his hands and boots, additional pieces of armour protected the more tender parts of his body while a faceplate hovered over his face, connecting him more fully to JARVIS. The larger pieces of the suit were pulled from his pocket dimension. Anthony then unlocked a small, circular piece of metal from his armour and screwed it on the centre of the new suit. It immediately glowed like the barrier: the flame-like colour of Anthony’s seidr, and the blue of his technology. It instantly became animated and with it came the voice of their other travel companion.

“There are four attackers, Sirs. How shall we proceed?”

“Loki’s knocked out two. I can run shields if either of you want to grab the others?”

“JARVIS is welcome to apprehend if he wishes to stretch his limbs,” Loki remarked.

“Thank you, Sirs.”

Loki grinned as the suit shot forward, flying nimbly through the crowd to go for the other two attackers. These ones, at least, had no magic. It would therefore be of little difficulty for the A.I. to capture them.

“Almost too easy,” Anthony said.

“They were outclassed.”

“We need a better class of bad guy.”

Loki snorted. “I would much rather we stay with those we can easily dispatch. I much prefer peaceful times and pleasant walks.”

“I guess we’ll just have to spar tonight so I can feel properly worn out.”

Loki chuckled. He would have replied if his bracelet hadn’t flared. It was their backup defence mechanism. Strengthened after decades and, thankfully, never needed to be used for its intended purpose.

But it made him jump backwards hurriedly, avoiding the fire, not of seidr, but a gun.

“Oh, *now* they’re upping the stakes,” Anthony said. “We got a stealth operative. You want to take him babe?”

“With *pleasure*.”

Loki let his seidr disguise him, Illusions popping into place. Anthony was focused on the shields, dispersing the larger one to focus on three, smaller but far more durable barriers for each of them. He also crafted an illusion of one to rest over one of his clones.

Then, because he still remained so incredibly *good*, he was dispersing magic to aid those whom were running from the battle.

But, as much as Loki always wished to keep an eye on his lover, he knew the man was more than capable. He focused instead on their silent foe. Vgyarstil was at his shoulder, shrouded by his magic and twitching their tail and nose.

*Direction?*

He questioned at them. Vgyarstil could find a foe in a darkened room. They had become an extension of his senses, able to pinpoint things and nudge him in way that went beyond ‘intuition’ or ‘luck’. He still was discovering how their vqrðrs worked, but this had helped them both in battle more times than he could count.

Vgyarstil did not respond in words, but merely an impression of *where* to look. Loki didn’t doubt them. He teleported across the street beside a fruit cart. He thrust his knife forward and with a crack of splintering technology, the sensors and mechanics keeping them invisible was broken. The person let out a pained gasp as Loki dispersed his cloaking.

“Hello,” Loki said against their ear. “I don’t believe you introduced yourself properly.”

The being tried to flinch away and then raise a weapon but Vgyarstil jumped onto them, biting their wrist, their fur turning to sharp spikes of ice, making them cry out. Their weapon dropped and with it, so did Vgyarstil. They grabbed the item and tugged it away. Loki already knew they were saving it to give to Anthony.

In fact, his husband was already on the way over. JARVIS had the four bound by rope and was flying in the air, the group in a knot beneath him; prone and almost hitting the ground. Anthony scooped up Vgyarstil and the weapon.

“Thanks for the present, V. You spoil me.”

Vgyarstil’s tail curled around his neck, slipping in above Fen’s. They looked pleased by the gratitude. Anthony looked their foe up and down before announcing, “No wonder they went with the cloak and dagger. Saw that mug on the noticeboard on the other planet. Nice little bounty for this one too.” He looked to the side. “And that’s lucky, law enforcement are on their way.”

Loki removed his dagger but kicked out their knee, forcing them to the ground.

Thankfully, with a sea of witnesses and rumours of their deeds already circulating, they were able to palm the group off without any difficulty. Once the street started going back to normal, Anthony stretched and suggested, “Right so. Collect the reward then tavern for a meal? Or do you want to see if we can find any stalls for metal and tomes? Ooh,” he brightened, “we can look for some of that red power Rhodey likes in his water.”

“A little shopping before we eat sounds like a good plan.”

He held out his arm and Vgyarstil jumped across to resettle on him. Loki turned to JARVIS. “And what of you? Do you wish to explore anything or shall you reconnect with Anthony?”

“I have seen some interesting readings; I believe their may be a protection mage practicing nearby.”

“Let us know if you find one. I’m always keen to spruce up our designs,” Anthony said. “Shout out over the comms, J. We’ll come running.”

“Certainly, Sir.”

“When we have selected a place to retire, we shall convey it to you,” Loki added.

“I shall make a map of this city’s layout for easier navigation should it be required.”

“You’re the best, J.”

JARVIS inclined his head, an action that Loki knew the A.I. had taken from him. He then left to explore with Anthony throwing an absent wave over his shoulder. Loki stepped up to his husband and wrapped an arm around his waist. Anthony leant into his touch even as his gaze remained on his vambrace.



He tapped at it, pulling up varying lists, plans and data. Loki left his husband to his technology and magical projections. After all, it was all encoded, something only he, Anthony and JARVIS could translate.

As they walked, he scanned the area for any more threats, but the bracelet on his wrist was calm, as was the dragon on Anthony's ear. Everyone was watching them with a mixture of curiosity, awe, and even a hint of wariness. Their reputation had well and truly been proven worthy of the rumours which meant that, for now, they could explore the new moon in peace.

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It was early evening when they were sitting in the tavern, their meal eaten and JARVIS returned back to the safety of Anthony's personal armour. At first, he had sat down with them, explaining all he had seen and discovered as they ate. The server tried to offer him food and drink, but he'd politely declined.

(They'd decided long ago that having people believe JARVIS was a man in armour gave them an edge in battle. It also stopped awkward questions or people whom decided they wanted to use Hel's gift for their own gain.)

But, once people had stopped paying attention and they'd finished their recounting, Anthony had taken JARVIS to their room, returned the armour to his pocket dimension and come back with the A.I. reattached to him.

(It was another thing that only James knew which was that JARVIS could be physically tethered to either of them. While it was everyone's preference that he remained with Anthony, on more than one occasion, Loki had brought the A.I. into his outfit, especially if it was a place that was highly layered with traps that, no matter Anthony's proficiency, it was better to only send one magic-user in to explore.)

It was as they sat drinking their local wine that a strange hush fell over the tavern. They'd paused their drinks and glanced to the doorway. A shadowed figure walked through and over to their table. Anthony immediately stood and brightened. They hadn't even reached the table when he walked up to them and pulled them into a hug.

"Long time no see. It's been at least a decade. I know time passes oddly in the underworld, but I keep saying, stop by any time."

Her smile wasn't visible, nor was her face, but Loki knew she was grinning. Anthony led her to the seat, pulling out her chair and offering a glass of wine. She waved a dismissive hand but, after many meetings with her, Loki knew it was affectionate.

After all, how many people in the vast universe would *dare* to greet the Queen of Helheim with a hug *and* have it be accepted every time?

"Helheim is busy Anthony Stark. Visiting is not a task I take lightly."

"Awh, We're flattered, aren't we flattered, babe?"

He sat down in his chair, nudging Loki in the side. Loki rolled his eyes, but he dutifully (and truthfully) replied, “We are always flattered, Hel. Your visits are a delight to us both.”

He could tell she was smiling again. She also conjured a pot of tea and cups. Loki did not even feel her magic or see them appear; they were merely there. It was a familiar display of incredible and age-old power.

She poured them each a cup, and they dutifully put their wine aside.

“You are returning to the Nine Realms?”

“Just a quick trip,” Anthony answered. “Why? Should we stay here a bit longer?”

Hel had visited a few times and very rarely was it purely social. Sometimes, she nudged them in the right direction to stop something that would unbalance the natural order. Other times, she indicated an item of power that was in need of... careful resituating. Once, they had even been sent to retrieve and relocate an Infinity Stone.

“No,” she said. “But I would advise a visit to a planet before Earth. One steeped in history.”

Loki felt her gaze and quickly realised the meaning. “You speak of Jotunheim.”

Unlike decades ago, the thought did not fill him with fear, disgust or anger. Instead, it was sadness and guilt. The awareness that he had done too much damage to ever fully repent. Anthony touched his thigh beneath the table.

“There comes a time when every wound must heal.”

“The ones I inflicted were deep.”

“Yes,” she stated matter-of-factly.

Loki watched her shrewdly. “And you still think I should visit?”

“Yes.”

Loki sighed heavily and slumped back in his seat. He looked at Vgyarstil and Fen, they both had their ears quirked in a pose that indicated excitement. He then looked at Anthony. His husband shrugged. “Your decision, Lokes.”

He said it as if it did not matter that the Queen of Helheim was asking them to go. He said it as if *he* had the final say, and it would always make him smile. Loki closed the space and kissed his lover gently. He then pulled back to look at Hel. She was still hooded, still impossible to recognise by anyone who did not already know her.

“It is on our way. I am certain we can visit.”

She did not reply, instead, she picked up her tea and had a sip. They did the same. The silence was peaceful, and neither of them felt the need to fill it. Hel had said what she’d wanted to,

and it meant she would either leave or stay for another tea and a chat about nothing in particular.

After all, she was a busy Queen, and as Anthony had already said, they were both flattered and well aware of what it meant that she continued to visit them at all.

---

Hel remained for a few minutes of social commentary. She briefly mentioned her protégé Nebula and they spoke of a few old acquaintances and what they had been up to. Hel conversed briefly with JARVIS, her fondness for the A.I. obvious. When the pot was empty as well as their teacups it disappeared and moments after, so did she.

Leaving the table shortly after, they'd gone up to their room. The tavern had been noticeably on edge while she'd been present, but once she'd left, the room had returned to a more peaceful and light-hearted atmosphere. Loki understood the change. It was hard to let one's guard down around a being so powerful, especially if one did not know who or what she was.

It made it all the more amusing and impressive that Anthony cared so little and acted so boldly. Loki knew the rumours of Anthony's first hug of Hel was edging towards legend in the Nine Realms. That he continued to do it would only shock and terrify the populace.

Loki almost wanted to tell them.

But he had not yet gained the opportunity and now, he had a different thing on his mind, one that Anthony was not unaware of. Once they were in their room and the door shut, Anthony touched his arm.

“Jotunheim?”

“Yes.”

“You ready for that?”

“Hel clearly believes I am, and so it follows that the realm itself must be.”

“I take it you're not expecting a welcome party?”

He met his lover's gaze. “Would you expect one? Knowing what I did? Knowing how I harmed them?”

“No,” Anthony answered truthfully. “I'm pretty sure we're in for at least a basic attack, probably some cursing and a good amount of fury.”

Loki sighed and looked away. But, he had asked his lover to be honest with him regarding his heritage, the man had never failed to do exactly that, even when he didn't want to hear it.

“*But*,” Anthony continued, “I think that we have vǫrðrs is going to make a difference. And there's the fact you're no longer ashamed of your heritage and can manipulate your powers. It's all going to help us explain what happened, have you apologise, and finally get some closure on this.”

“I do not deserve closure.”

Anthony wrapped an arm around him. He also placed a gently kiss to his jaw. “Babe, everything you did can be traced back to that one-eyed bastard’s lie. I’m not saying you’re faultless, we both know you’re not. But there were some extenuating circumstances. This is your chance to make it right.”

“They may not allow that.”

“Then you can at least say you tried. If you give it your all and they still buck back, we’ll leave. It won’t be perfect, but you’ll know you did what you could.”

Loki sighed softly. He knew his lover was right, but he also feared the reaction of his kind. If they refused him and could do nothing but spit at his feet and try and cleave off his head. Well, he would deserve it, but it would solidify the knowledge that he had lost any chance at repentance. His actions would forever make him an outsider among the Jotnar.

Anthony kissed his jaw again. Loki turned his head, kissing his husband and feeling comforted by his embrace.

“Come on,” Anthony said softly. “Let’s ward up and climb into bed.”

“A bit early, isn’t it?”

“Maybe,” he agreed, “but then again, is it ever too early to get my husband out of his clothes?”

Loki snorted, but he also turned into the man’s embrace. Their vǫrðrs leapt for the window, using their paws to unlatch it and climb onto the roof. They would have privacy for as long as they required it. Loki hoped that his lover’s talented hands and mouth could distract him from what would await him back in the Nine Realms.

As it was, pressing their palms together, Loki enjoyed the flare of their seidr, the magic covering their hands and twining before spreading over the room in their preferred wards. If someone dared to try and break in, they would find themselves on the receiving end of a variety of different tricks, traps and projectiles.

Because, even if they got through one layer, there would always be another; for it wasn’t just one mage they approached, but two.

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They weren’t bothered by any further attacks or disgruntled criminals. Instead, they were able to explore the planet and the three others they ventured to without any concern. They shopped for materials and books and enjoyed the natural and technological wonders each place held.

When they reached their meeting point, they were able to spot the Iron Family without difficult. The ship had been through a lot of upgrades since the initial construction. It also consisted of a crew of five. James was standing on the off-ramp, his flerken on his shoulder.

Anthony immediately took off at a run. James beamed but didn't climb down. Anthony tackled him in a hug, the flerken barely leaping to safety in time.

The two of them staggered and barely kept standing. Loki followed at a more leisurely pace.

Space had done James Rhodes well. He wore typical clothing for a merchant captain. A leather coat and pants with a variety of weaponry and piloting equipment attached. Anthony had taken to teasingly calling him '*Han Solo*' and making James roll his eyes. Loki thought the man fit his new life admirably.

"Hey Loki," James called, finally getting free of Anthony.

When he was near enough, the man grabbed Loki's arm and pulled him into a tight hug. Loki returned it, squeezing the man with tight affection.

"It is good to see you, James."

"You too." He grinned as they pulled back. "You need to borrow my scissors? Your hair's going to trip you up soon."

Loki snorted. "Do not feel envious just because yours is incapable of sprouting a few inches from your scalp."

James laughed. He also waved them inside the ship. They followed and Loki felt all his tension easing. The ship was well warded by both his and Anthony's magic and although they did not travel upon in for more than a few weeks at a time, the place still managed to feel remarkably like a home.

"Any newbies we should know about?" Anthony asked.

"We've got a new kid. Cousin of Xana. She's learning the ropes."

"*Xana*'s still here, huh?" Anthony said, wagging his eyebrows.

James rolled his eyes but didn't comment. The woman had been travelling on the Iron Family for almost seven years now. Loki didn't pry the way Anthony did, but he rather thought they had developed a strong friendship which, he suspected, was also intimate. Loki thought it nice the man had found a partner.

Anthony, of course, could hardly let things go. He also pestered people with questions. To Loki's knowledge, Xana had ancestors in Alfheim, but was born and raised by a humanoid race outside the Nine Realms.

"And everyone else we have met?" Loki enquired, hoping to derail his lover's gossiping.

"Haven't had any changes in the last decade."

Loki was not surprised. The man attracted those who were honest and loyal. It helped to make his ship one of the safest in the region to travel upon.

“I let them know we were heading back to the Nine Realms. Everyone’s happy to stay onboard. I told them we shouldn’t be in that part of space for more than a year.”

“You’re overextending how long we plan to be there,” Anthony said. “Three months and we’re out.” He glanced at Loki. “Well, unless Lokes wants to stay a little longer.”

Loki already knew *where* the man was suggesting they stay. But it would all depend on the Jotnar for that.

“It would be nice to revisit Alfheim,” Loki said instead. “It has been some time since we have been there.”

“Hmm. True. Maybe a year’s about right then.” He grinned at James. “Guess you know us too well.”

“Damn right I do.”

James directed them off the main passageway and into the familiar depths of the ship until they reached their room. It was a space James never leant to others. Anthony pressed his hand to the door, unlocking the wards and allowing them all to step inside. Loki dismissed any dust with a wave of his hand. James surveyed it, the gaze that of a captain confirming everything was in working order.

Anthony dropped down on the bed and Loki decided, as they had a moment alone, to let James know of the minor change of plans.

“It was suggested that before reaching Midgard, another stop is in order.”

James glanced at him and he lifted his hand, letting the tips of his fingers bleed blue. James raised his eyebrows.

“Really? You’re stopping there?”

“It was recommended to us.”

“Ah,” he breathed. He then huffed. “Missed her again. She certainly likes you two.”

A flicker of movement from the corner of his eye drew Loki’s attention. His lips twitched.

“But she does not forget you.”

He nodded and James spun around. He barked a laugh and crossed the space to the teacup full of steaming tea. James took it and raised it to the sky in a toast. He had a drink and smiled.

“Well, I’ll hardly go against a Queen. If she wants you there, I’ll deliver you and follow onto the snow.”

“You do not need to-”

“But I will,” James interrupted him. “That’s what this family does, has your back.”

Loki felt a fresh burst of fondness. He likely would have hugged him again had Anthony not gestured them over to the bed and the nearby chair to have a ‘catch up chat’. He took to the mattress beside his lover while James took the chair.

Their vǫrðrs had long left them to re-orient with the ship and, no doubt, pester the flerken. It meant there was nothing to stop them from a peaceful conversation with little chance of interruption. And when Anthony unhooked JARVIS and allowed him access to the ship, it only furthered that feeling of *home*.

When James greeted the A.I. with as much affection as them. It further reminded him that whatever the realm of his birth might bring, he had all the family he required around him – and no matter how many years passed between one meeting and the next, he knew nothing important would have ever changed. It was what ‘Iron Family’ had meant since the moment Anthony had carved it on the side of the ship’s hull.

Support, companionship and unbreakable bonds.

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Despite their long-standing friendship with James, it was clear that the man had built a life with strong connections in their absence. He knew someone on most planets they stopped by, or, if he didn’t know anyone directly, he or one of his crew knew a name to drop. The motley group followed his orders without hesitation, their respect and fondness clear.

It reminded Loki of the so-called Guardians of the Galaxy, only they had not worked half as well together as this crew did. The Guardians he’d managed to introduce to Anthony a few decades ago and they’d crossed paths with them a few times after. Quill had been insufferably flirtatious but, rather than requiring a sharp word to make him cease, Anthony had done the deed for him with a hint of magical mischief.

Loki had *laughed* and his lover had winked at him. It was now a fond memory as that small act had prompted Loki to teach his lover some of his most favoured tricks. Now, it was common place for one of them to cast a spell on any who annoyed them. Sometimes, it was almost difficult to tell *whom* had sent it and whom had merely been beaten to the punch.

James, of course, was both amused and exasperated when he caught them performing a small spell of irritation when a merchant was rude to their friend.

‘*You know, I have a reputation to uphold,*’ he’d muttered around a smile.

‘*That’s right,*’ Anthony had replied, ‘*that of someone who’s friends with us and therefore shouldn’t be messed with.*’

James had shaken his head, but his crew members had slyly offered a smirk or nod, showcasing their approval.

But, beyond that simple act of revenge, their trip passed with minimal concerns. They had stocked up and moved into the kind of travel that had them covering distance at a great speed.

Not something many ships were capable of, but something Anthony and James had insisted the 'Iron Family' gain.

Loki was both grateful for it and a little regretful. For if the ship was slower, it would take a year, rather than a few months to return to the Nine Realms. The closer they came, the more he realised he was not as ready to face the demons of his past as he'd believed.

Anthony, of course, was quick to notice.

He had been sitting in a supply room, atop one of the crates and absently stroking Vgyarstil. His mind had been far away until his lover's voice had broken through, "Penny for your thoughts?"

He'd blinked back and looked down. Anthony, rather than climb or even use his repulsors furrowed his brow in concentration before teleporting to the space beside him. He wobbled a little (it was still not his speciality) but Loki grabbed and settled him comfortably.

Once he was sitting comfortably, Loki answered, "There is more we will see than just Jotunheim. I cannot imagine Asgard will ignore our presence."

"Ugh," Anthony grumbled. "I didn't think of that. Can't we just pretend they don't exist?"

"They will not allow that."

"Well, then they can come find us. Sorry babe, but I'm not stepping foot on that planet unless they make us." He shrugged. "Or throw us an apology parade with additional bribery in the form of metals, books and maybe a statue in your honour."

Loki snorted. "I think a statue would only be formed if one of us were King."

Anthony's expression changed, a gleam in his eyes that Loki could well recognise.

"No, Anthony," he insisted firmly. "Neither of us have any time or wish to rule a realm. I also have no need for a statue."

His husband pouted, but only for a moment before he turned more serious. He also wrapped an arm snugly around Loki's waist.

"You know, we can turn around and go back."

Loki almost smiled. "Hel would disapprove."

"Hel's not who I married and therefore, their opinion is not as much of a priority as yours."

Loki finally grinned. "Only you would be so disrespectful to the Queen of Helheim."

"Hey, she knows I think she's awesome. She also knows you're always going to outrank her in importance to me."

"Anthony-"



“Yeah, yeah, yeah. I know. You’ll follow her advice because you trust her to be right. Blah, blah. I’m still going to offer you out’s and accept whatever decision you make.”

In reply, Loki could only kiss his lover. He cupped the man’s cheek and indulged in the closeness and love. When they broke apart, he nuzzled the man’s cheek before kissing it.

“These are my demons, Anthony. It would be cowardly not to face them. All Hel has done is reminded me I have been running from them. Whatever the Jotnar do, I will have to accept and withstand it.”

“It might go better than you think.”

“Unlikely,” Loki answered. “But, I will face it all the same, with you at one side and James at the other.”

“And Vgyarstil and Fen in the middle.”

“Yes,” Loki agreed, kissing Anthony’s jaw this time. “And when it is through, we shall see to Asgard and to Midgard and then return to our old home on Alfheim. We have neglected it and the Elves.”

“So saving the best to last?”

“A good memory to replace what I’m sure will be some unpleasant ones.”

Anthony cupped his cheek. “Okay. But, just remember you can always talk to me. No need to go hiding in supply rooms.”

Loki chuckled. “This I know. But, when processing such things, I also need time and solitude.”

“Which is why I gave you an hour before sticking my nose into it.”

Loki blinked. “An hour? Truly?”

“Yup.”

“Ah. Well. I suppose I should return to the main rooms.”

“Eh, it can wait. If you want more time, I can stay here, or come get you in a half hour?”

Loki shook his head, he also pulled back just enough to meet his husband’s gaze. “No, I have spent long enough pondering what might occur. It is time I returned and spent time with James and the others.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes, Anthony. Pensive thoughts help no one, especially when my time can be better spent with those I care about.”

Anthony brightened. He also kissed him again. When he pulled back, he flicked his gaze to the ground before back to Loki. He nodded and Anthony took his hand. Vgyarsti climbed to his shoulder in preparation and Loki was the one to send them down to the floor. They were barely standing before Anthony was tugging him out of the room, already beginning to ramble about the latest upgrades to the ship that he'd been learning about.

Loki grinned and followed along passively, letting his lover's voice wash over him. It further reminded him that whatever the Nine Realms brought him was temporary. *This* was his life and his future, and no matter what happened, he would always be coming back to it.

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When they were within a few weeks of arrival, Anthony phoned FRIDAY to let her know. He'd often checked in with her but the A.I. had blossomed in their absence. She had full command of the Iron Legion and, over the years, had become a hero in her own right.

Anthony had laughed for an hour when it turned out people didn't believe she was an A.I. and was, in fact, a woman whose identity was hidden by Stark Technology. There were theories she was from space, like Fandral, which is why she was never injured during battle. To make matters worse, FRIDAY did nothing to help these rumours, seeming to enjoy encouraging them.

*"We can't all announce our identity at a press conference, Boss,"* she'd explained.

Anthony had only laughed harder and insisted she was making him proud. JARVIS had, of course, only encouraged her with additional suggestions.

Anthony had later mock-whispered to him, *"Good thing these kids don't get too much time together, otherwise, they'd have probably ended up ruling the world."*

Loki had remained incredibly amused by the whole thing, even if he did not show it in large fits of laughter like his husband.

FRIDAY had been delighted that they would all be visiting and had promised to relay it to the group. They'd then arranged for them to come to Stark Tower to await their arrival. He, Anthony and James had then discussed the best way to visit, but eventually decided the Iron Family would hover in the atmosphere of Jotunheim, ready to take them away should the Jotnar prove hostile. They would then go to Alfheim where the ship would dock, James' crew would visit the Elves with Xana left in charge. The three of them would then teleport to Midgard. (Assuming Asgard did not attempt to waylay them at some point prior to this.)

Loki had then contacted some of their associates on Alfheim, receiving enthusiastic responses and invitations for many dinners. There was also talk of a large banquet. (Their adventures and Hel's continued fondness, it seemed, had been relayed despite their long absence.)

When they finally entered into the Nine Realms after their long journey, Loki knew he was back without having to be told. Yggdrasil's influence was truly unmistakable. Even Anthony seemed to feel it, his eyes going distance and his fingers twitching, seidr sparking and swirling around them.

Their vǫrðrs were even more blatant in their enthusiasm, circling their feet and jumping around with barely contained energy. It made Loki fight down a smile. It also made him wonder if they hadn't perhaps been away too long.

Of course, that feeling dissipated as they approached Jotunheim. He looked out the windows at the icy tundra of the planet. It did not look as damaged as he'd expected. Of course, decades had passed and they would hardly have left their planet with large chunks blown out of it.

Damage *he* had wrought.

Loki was so busy staring at it that he didn't hear his lover approach. He startled when the man touched him. He looked over his shoulder to find Anthony there and James behind him. Fen was on Anthony's shoulder and both men were smiling softly at him. They also had on thick woollen cloaks.

"Where did you get those?" Loki croaked out.

"Bought them before we came here. Well, Rhodey did. I distracted you. Figured you didn't need the reminder back then."

Loki grimaced. He also turned back to the planet. The ship was orbiting and they had no reason to stay aboard. Steeling himself, Loki turned from the view to look at the two men, his *family*.

"Your crew are ready for our departure?"

"Yup. Xana's in charge. She won't move Iron Family unless under direct fire."

"Very well. Then let us go."

Anthony grasped his hand and linked his fingers. Loki placed a hand on James' shoulder. He allowed himself one deep breath before sending out his seidr. It pulled the three of them and their vǫrðrs from the comfort and warmth of the ship to the biting chill of Jotunheim.

"Christ, that's cold," James said, burrowing his hands under his cloak.

And it was, but, curiously, not as cold as it had been during his first visit. Anthony seemed equally inured and Loki knew they would have Vgyarstil and Fen to thank for that. Their vǫrðrs, rather than stay on their shoulders, jumped down into the snow. They burrowed under it before flinging the snow off their bodies. They yiped and bounded through the drifts having more fun than Loki could remember seeing.

He smiled faintly, but it didn't truly minimise his churning nerves. When their vǫrðrs took off, Loki knew they were to follow.

"Come," Loki said, beginning to walk.

Anthony's hand stayed clasped around his own while James trudged a few paces behind them. Loki sent out a small burst of seidr to help warm him, hearing the man's soft sigh of relief followed by a quick but heartfelt '*thanks*'. Loki nodded but didn't answer.

He'd had no destination in mind upon landing on the planet, but as they walked, it became clear he'd managed to take them not only near a settlement but to the very place Thor had led him so many decades ago.

He winced. It was the place where he had first learned of his heritage. Where they had spoken to Laufey, his *birth father*, and where they had slain a dozen or more Jotnar. He didn't realise how tightly he was holding his lover's hand until Anthony's thumb started stroking the skin. He blinked back to awareness and glanced down. He loosened his grip, trying to pull away but Anthony kept a hold of him. He smiled and Loki tried to smile back but it was more of a grimace.

Vgyarstil and Fen, by this point, had blended in so completely with the snow it was hard to track them but for the familiar feel of his and Anthony's seidr.

As they approached the large ruinous city, it quickly became clear they were not alone. At least twenty Jotnar were coming forward, holding ice weapons and glaring. Loki halted, and so did Anthony and James.

"Who dares step onto our planet?" One male growled.

Loki swallowed. "I-"

"He's *Asgardian*," someone said, spitting the word. "He came here before."

The tension in the air intensified as the group quickly realised who he was, Loki felt tongue-tied but when Anthony squeezed his hand, he finally got out the words. "I am *not* Asgardian."

It was easier than it had been to pluck at the illusion. It fell away and he stood before them in his true skin, *their* skin. Their shock was immediate, some loosened their hold on their weapons. Their gazes darted over him.

But the one who had recognised him immediately snarled, "A trick. He mimics us. *Taunts* us with false heritages."

The weapons were re-clasped, their anger building but, jumping from the snow. Vgyarstil launched at him, climbed up his body and perched on his shoulder, their tail around his neck. This time, the shock and weapon-slackening were even more pronounced.

One of them even stepped forward, it was very clearly a she. Loki tensed, but he made no move to attack and she stopped in front of him, a furrow to her brow.

"You have a vǫrðr."

"Yes," Loki croaked out. "So does my husband."

She finally looked at Anthony. He raised his free hand in a wave. Fen took the time to come out of the snow and run up his back to rest on his shoulder. She continued to look incredulous. She turned to James.

“And him?”

“Family,” Loki answered firmly. “He comes to support us as I... try and understand my heritage.” He swallowed hard. “To *apologise* for all I have done.”

Murmurs started between the Jotnar. Their suspicion was clear, but so was their confusion. Loki didn't take his eyes off the one in front of him. She slowly extended her hand and Loki kept still. She touched one finger to the back of his free hand. She held it there, but nothing changed. Her touch was harmless to him.

She pulled away and stepped back. She looked behind her.

“He is one of us. There cannot be any doubt.” She looked back. “You need to speak with our King. This is not a matter for us.”

Loki swallowed and nodded. She went back to her group and after a moment's hesitation, Loki followed her. Anthony and James did the same. They were quickly encircled, but despite the noticeable tension in the air, the hostility had disappeared.

But, Loki knew it would be back soon enough. Once they knew what he had done, Loki was sure their limited acceptance of him would disappear. He merely had to be ready for it so that he could send his family off the planet and far from harm.

---

They were led into the depths of the ice-carved castle. He could tell both Anthony and James were curious. Loki could feel nothing but apprehension. More Jotnar were appearing with every step deeper they took. They kept looking at him with confusion, shock and even disbelief. By the time they reached the throne room, there had to be at least a hundred or more around them. Loki was trying to keep his breathing even, but not even Vgyarstil's cheek against his own or Anthony's thumb stroking his hand could full ease his nervous fear.

This was a race he'd been taught to hate. A race he now knew were more than just monsters in books. They had incredible ice manipulation powers. There were many dozens of powerful mages. They had a society and *appreciated* their magic-users and shapeshifters.

He knew they were more than what Asgard had taught him to believe.

But he also knew that he had wronged them far too greatly for them to ever be able to forgive.

In the centre of the room a Jotun rested on the throne. He was old. He also, unlike many of the others, had hair. He had a beard the colour of snow down to his knees. His skin was dark and wrinkled with age. What also held Loki's attention was the large vǫrðr laying on the armrest of the throne. It had quirked its ears and sat up at their approach. They stopped at the

foot of the throne. Unlike Asgard, it was not raised far above its citizens, it was on the ground keeping King and citizens at eye-level. It was different even to the one Laufey had sat upon.

The older Jotun leant forward, his eyes narrowed as he looked Loki up and down. The minutes seemed to tick by, increasing Loki's anxiousness. Eventually, the King sat back, looking thoughtful.

“How does it come to be that a son of Laufey appears after so many decades of being thought dead?”

Loki swallowed. “I was taken.”

A rumble of angry whispers sounded. The King didn't seem to notice.

“Taken by Odin Allfather.”

“Yes,” Loki answered quietly.

He continued to scrutinise Loki, his gaze intelligent and perceptive.

“You were the Asgardian. You convinced Laufey to visit Asgard. And the others, prior to that. Before Thor Odinson's attack.”

Loki looked away. “Yes.”

“You killed Laufey. Your father.”

Loki cringed. “Yes.”

“And now you come here, in true colour, with vǫrðrs.”

“I come to learn of my birth realm. To... apologise.” He pulled in a heavy breath. “I come to... repent.”

“For the deaths you caused?”

Loki closed his eyes. “And the destruction.”

There was a very long silence. When he spoke next, the King's voice was colder, “Explain.”

Loki glanced up. He met the man's dark red eyes and swallowed hard. *He knows*. In their short interaction the King had worked out *who* had aimed the bifrost. The others, they had not quite picked up on the situation. Loki immediately felt the weight of that gaze and understood. This was his trial.

“I was taught to despise you,” Loki said quietly. “The monsters under every Asgardian's bed, waiting to leap forth and freeze us. I did not know... what I was.”

“When did you learn?”

“When I came here. When I was touched. I then sought to prove it.”

Loki did not like to think back on that time. On the pain, anger and betrayal. He had felt so broken and *lost*. So desperate to prove himself to people whom had never accepted him even before his skin turned blue.

“Once I knew, I wanted to prove myself to the only family I had ever known. I failed and made unforgiveable mistakes.”

The King remained stoic. But, he stood and walked forward. He had no staff, but his back was slightly hunched. No one tried to assist him. As he got closer, Loki could feel the seidr tightly coiled around him. The man was a *very* powerful mage.

He held up his hand, his seidr as white as snow.

“I will test the truth of this Jotun,” he said, his voice echoing. “Do you consent?”

Loki grimaced. He didn't like sharing his mind with anyone, but he had one chance to be believed and, if not forgiven or accepted, at least he might leave without undue harm to himself or his husband and friend.

Nodding tensely, he let the older Jotun touch his forehead. Immediately, the memories of his arrival on Jotunheim, his discovery, his subsequent time on Asgard and handling of the Casket of Ancient Winters. It then went on, his entire spiral, rage, fear, betrayal and *pain*. It rushed over him in a tidal wave as if he was still experiencing those emotions. It went all the way to his attack on Jotunheim and his pure despair as he let go of the staff and fell into the depths of the void.

The Jotun let go of him and he bent over, actually dropping to his knees on the snow and gasping.

“Loki! Loki!”

Anthony was touching him, stroking his hair. James' hand was on his back their vqrðrs were on the ground, nuzzling his bowed head.

“What the fuck did you do to him?” James demanded, clearly incensed.

“Read his mind,” Anthony bit out, angrily. “Probably the moments he found out Asgard had lied to him all his life.” Anthony calmed his voice. “Lokes? Sweetheart?”

Loki forced his breathing under control.

“I'm fine,” he croaked out.

It had just been a long time since he had felt such emotions. He had been *happy* and the pain of decades ago had felt so distant to have been an easily dismissed memory. Now, he was forced to bring everything back under control. To focus on his lover and friend. The people who grounded him and had made his happiness possible.

When he finally felt ready, he lifted his head and stood, Anthony and James helping him back to his feet. The King had remained watching him.

“It does not excuse your actions.”

“No,” Loki agreed hoarsely. “It does not.”

The man studied him again before remarking, “But, you rided us of a King we did not want and followers we could not overthrow.”

Loki blinked, startled. “He wasn’t wanted?”

“No.”

“And what of me?”

“You were wanted by him,” the King answered. “He had no mages assisting his cause. You would have been an asset.” Loki almost laughed, but it would have been a bitter sound. Once more, he would have been an *asset*. “Odin Allfather stole what my followers had already tried to take.” Loki blinked while the King continued to study him. “The bifrost damaged that which was inhabited by his followers. The act, although reprehensible, allowed my people to rule and foster peace.”

Loki held the King’s gaze. “It is not forgivable.”

“No,” he said and Loki slumped. “But,” the King added, “an Asgardian attacked us, not a Jotun.”

Loki met the man’s gaze. He didn’t smile, but a kindness had thawed some of the coldness of his gaze.

“Until this day, I was the last mage to have gained a vǫrðr. Now, there are two more.” He gestured them to the side of the room. “You come with questions of your heritage. We will answer them.”

There was some murmuring from the other Jotuns, but eventually some dispersed while others came closer. Loki glanced around, but it was obvious that none save the King seemed to have realised he had aimed the bifrost. Loki didn’t understand the... kindness. He didn’t understand any of it.

But, as he was ushered to the other side of the room with Anthony, James and a collection of twenty curious Jotnar, he decided he would not tempt fate. At least, not until he had a better understanding of why the King would ever possibly welcome him on his realm.

---

They treated him... well. A little awkwardly even warily at first, but their vǫrðrs and the King’s approval seemed to go a long way. They answered any questions posed to them. They were also impressed with his seidr management. His ice magics were seen as... moderate.



But they did not deride him for it, rather they gave him instructions and assistance. Things he could not have known without extreme focus, practice and... help.

Anthony and James were also treated kindly. Anthony more so than James at first, but James was quickly accepted. Especially when the two former mortals started asking questions and showing enthusiasm and delight at the answers.

Loki listened keenly to every conversation, but his gaze kept returning to the King. It took a few hours before he had a chance to approach him without spectators. This close, he could see the man's vǫrðr had long whiskers, giving it an older appearance than Vgyarstil or Fen.

He stood beside the King, feeling uncertain.

“Yes?”

“They don't know what I did.”

“It would improve nothing.”

“They should know what they are welcoming.”

“Why?” he enquired. “You were not the same as you were then. An Asgardian broken into shards. Now, a travelling mage seeking understanding.”

Loki shook his head. “I do not deserve it.”

The King turned to him. His intelligent eyes piercing. “Then you will earn it.”

Loki blinked. “How would I-?”

“Aid us.” He gestured at Anthony. “Your bonded already tries to aid. As does your brother. Learn and redeem. That is what I ask of all my subjects when they are at fault.”

“Wise counsel,” Loki said softly.

It was so at odds, so *different* to the counsel he had gained under Odin. And, he imagined, he would have gained under Laufey. This was a *mage*, an old and powerful being of peace and perception.

“An Asgardian harmed them,” he said again. “But you are a Jotun.”

Loki smiled, hearing it again and finally understanding the distinction. *You were that. Now you are this.* If the King had drawn a line in the sand, then he would have to do the same. He would also do what he could to repent the way the King had advised.

*Aid them.*

He already had a good idea of what would help, especially when placed in a kind King's hands after rekindling the many alliances they'd formed. Loki could only hope that Asgard was just as out of favour as when they'd left it.

---

It wasn't easy, in fact, it was downright difficult.

Anthony and James were, of course, helpful and supportive. The Jotnar were wary but Loki was insistent. The Casket of Ancient Winters was *theirs*. Surely, returning it to its rightful place was what they were meant to do? What Hel had *wanted* them to do?

Of course, he didn't announce that plan to them. He merely said he wanted to try and introduce them to those from the other realms. To allow them to have a say and be included in what occurred in the Nine Realms.

At the very least, he knew the mage who had first spoken to him about the Jotnar would be delighted by the chance to meet them. In fact, when they returned to the Iron Family, he was the first-person Loki contacted.

He was so involved in his plans he did not notice until the man startled that he was still in his true skin. But, despite a momentary surprise and a hint of unease, he refused to shed it, especially given what he was discussing with him. The man was surprised but then excited.

His decision delayed their return to Earth for a few days, but by the end Loki felt... better.

He'd been able to bring a few Alfheim dignitaries to Jotunheim to meet the King. They had been cautious at first, but quickly delighted by the respectful way they'd been greeted. Organising the meeting and making sure it went smoothly was reminiscent of his days on Asgard; the alliances he and Anthony had forged when fearing Thanos.

Now, they were doing something grander than raising an army, they were fostering harmony.

Something that did not go unnoticed by Asgard. And, as was typical of their blunt force approach, they did it by arriving by bifrost on Jotunheim.

They had been preparing to see off the latest Alfheim dignitaries when it had slammed into the snow to the right of them. The Jotnar immediately went into defensive crouches, drawing their ice weapons. The King and his vǫrðr surveyed the site while the Elves tensed. Anthony's seidr curled around his fist, as did his repulsor. James looked equally ready for battle.

The light cleared to reveal Odin, Thor and a half-dozen Einherjar. Upon first sight of him, Thor flinched. It reminded Loki of his skin, but rather than let it melt away or leave him discomforted, he stood tall.

"What do you do here, Loki?" Odin demanded.

Loki raised his chin. "I foster peace between the Nine Realms."

"They invaded Midgard. They warred with Asgard-"

"They had a poor ruler," Loki interjected. "Remedied now." He nodded respectfully at the new King. "It is time the Nine Realms were allowed to balance once again. Each realm

deserves to share counsel and protect this quarter of the universe. We have all learned that in recent decades.”

Odin scowled. Thor, unlike Loki expected, did not blurt his immediate distaste. His expression spoke for itself, but it seemed, after his deplorable displays in the past, he had finally learned to hold his tongue.

“You are not a speaker for any realm,” Odin finally said. “You have no business interfering.”

“I would say I am uniquely qualified,” Loki riposted. “Born to one realm, raised in another. Married to one of Midgard, living upon Alfheim. I count four realms I could claim ties to.”

“A fifth if you count having favour from Queen Hel,” Anthony chimed in. “Also, the dwarves like me. So, between us, we could probably say we cover a good portion of the place.”

Hel, of course, had powers far beyond the Nine, but her rule over Helheim could not be contested. She had a place here and referencing their connection to her furthered the reminder to Odin that his influence, his *authority* was not to be held over them any longer.

“You made no invite to Asgard.”

“Nor have I extended one yet to Vanaheim or Niðavellir,” Loki countered. He then stressed. “*Yet.*”

“We would hold counsel with Asgard,” the King said, standing down the Jotnar with a gesture. “We would speak with all. Peace is far more valuable than hate.”

“Honour comes from battle,” Thor gritted out, speaking for the first time.

“And one should only battle to quell threats and gain peace,” Loki riposted.

Odin looked frustrated and cornered. Thor turned to his father with agitation, clearly wanting him to do something. Likely, wanting him to throw the first punch and ensure a fight would break out. But no one moved or made any hostile gestures. Loki felt a flare of hope and *success*.

“Surely, in this time free of Thanos, we should unite? We should work together rather than drive further wedges between those blessed to be among the branches of Yggdrasil.”

A hand landed on his shoulder and he nearly flinched. He glanced over and swallowed hard at finding it belonging to Jotunheim’s King.

“He speaks well. A fine master of words.”

Loki did not fight his smile. *Wordsmith*. A depiction derided on Asgard but here it was praised openly. Odin’s expression soured further. Loki, in response, continued to stand undaunted in the face of his adopted family.

“I wrongly did not include Jotunheim in our previous peace talks. Now, I am rectifying it with their blessings. They know of me, and accept me. Accept my husband and my *true* brother.” He felt James shift closer, making the object of that statement clear. “Alfheim also speaks with them. I am sure the other realms will accept our invitations. Will Asgard be the only who denies them?”

To do so would be to alienate them, to lower their power and esteem even further. They had no choice. It was as plain as day on Odin’s face. His Einherjar and Thor had not grasped that yet. They didn’t understand that Asgard’s power hung on a thread.

More so than that, they were also a victim of Asgard’s lies and rumours about the Jotnar. Which, when involved in peace talks, many would learn *were* wrong. There would be confusion, whispers, maybe even *dissent*.

But, Odin’s ability to deny Jotunheim had slipped from his hands.

*He never expected me to come here.*

The thought struck Loki and made him realise with a fresh wave of bitterness and hurt that Odin *had* to have known about the mages of Jotunheim; those who opposed Laufey and wanted to live in peace. But rather than negotiate with them, he’d denied them. Left them to rot and suffer under Laufey’s reign.

Even in the centuries that passed, Odin had ignored them. Preferring to claim them monsters and proclaim their battle a great victory. Something that would maintain his hold on his power.

But he’d brought the truth to light. He’d let everyone know Jotunheim was as deserving of alliances and conversation as any Elf on Alfheim.

*Just as Hel knew I would.*

It flooded him with fresh purpose. He was *right*. This was right. Jotunheim and its people would no longer be a whisper or a sneer. They would be as familiar to see and acceptable to visit as any other.

“Well, Odin Allfather?” Loki said. “We are waiting. What shall the mighty Asgard do?”

“Father, you cannot think to accept-”

Odin held up his hand. Thor’s mouth snapped shut but his glare was furious. Odin stared at him, weighing him in a way that had once caused nervousness, guilt or fear of disappointment. Now, he raised his eyebrow back. He had not been a loyal servant of Asgard in decades. He was Jotun, tied to no realm, married to a former Midgard, under Queen Hel’s favour.

He was Loki Liesmith Stark, and he already knew by the tightening of Odin’s jaw and his forming grimace, that Jotunheim would be taking its place back among the Nine Realms.

And maybe, for securing that future, Loki could finally ease some of his guilt for all that he had done to his kind and his birth planet.

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It was exhausting, but, in the end, arrangements were made for everyone to come together and discuss Jotunheim's return to their rightful place among the Nine Realms. It was to be hosted on Alfheim, a neutral environment and, one that Loki was privately grateful meant being near his and Anthony's home.

Anthony, of course, insisted that some delegates from Midgard attend. Loki already imagined he would be aiming for Rogers, Banner and Barnes to be said visitors. Frankly, all Loki wanted to do upon leaving Jotunheim was collapse into the safety and security of their Alfheim bed.

But, they were overdue as it was to return to Midgard. Therefore, their bed at the Tower would simply have to do. They made sure the Iron Family and James' crew would be settled comfortably on Alfheim and after returning to his Aesir guise, the three of them finally arrived at the Tower.

They were in the penthouse and the place seemed untouched. There was no dust and no disturbances. FRIDAY had kept the place intact and free from unwanted guests.

"Welcome back, Bosses," FRIDAY cheerfully greeted them.

Anthony grinned. "Nice to be back, Fri. I see you've kept the place in perfect shape."

"Of course, Boss."

"Are the others still here?" Loki questioned.

"They agreed to wait until you could arrive," she agreed.

"Then let's go say hi," Anthony said.

He was already walking to the elevator. But as he did, he looked around observing everything with a sort of nostalgic enthusiasm. James also smiled oddly. This, after all, had been their planet for many years. Their *first* home. It was no wonder it felt different and sentimental to return to it.

They stepped into the elevator and were brought down to the lower floors. When the doors opened, they were greeted by Fandral, Bruce, Rogers and Barnes. Bruce had a few flecks of grey in his hair but otherwise had not aged. Rogers had a beard and Barnes' hair was short. Fandral had grown out his hair and it was tied loosely at the base of his neck. He was also in Midgardian clothing, which was the most startling.

Fandral approached first, dragging him and Anthony into a tight hug and displacing their vǫrðrs. Bruce followed, hugging Anthony and shaking his hand. Similar treatment came from the soldiers with the others backslapping or shaking James' hand.

“Forty years and the only thing we all change is our hair,” Anthony joked.

Rogers and Barnes laughed, making the lightness to their manner and movements even more obvious. Time and marriage it seemed, had healed a lot of their wounds. Bruce also smiled. He was the one to gesture them over to the sitting area.

*This* part of the tower had changed. Furniture had been updated and new appliances had been added.

“You said you wouldn’t mind the occasional update,” Bruce said, catching their interest.

“Nope. Practically your tower anyway. Well, yours and FRIDAY's. She said you and Fandral have been mostly at the farmhouse and you guys got your own house once you got hitched. Congratulations too. Said it a few years ago but, nice to do it in person.”

“Thanks,” Rogers said. “And yeah, we all still come here when we want to meet up. Usually twice a year. Or if there’s a threat.”

“Been many of those?” Anthony asked, eyes narrowed.

“Not many that we’ve had to help with,” Barnes answered.

Loki smiled, unable to help it. His husband, of course, could not help feeling protective of his planet. It was obvious in his sharp concentration and immediate questions as to the planet’s safety. When he glanced at James’ he saw the same amused affection was present.

Four decades away and the man could not shake his heroic dedication.

“Yeah,” Rogers continued. “The Avengers don’t really exist anymore. Too many other groups with their own mantles. They protect different parts of the world. We all work together if and when we have to, but, we’ve been leaving everything to them lately.” He grinned. “Well, apart from Fandral and FRIDAY.”

Loki’s lips twitched and he asked the swordsman, “You cannot resist the invigoration of a battle?”

“Indeed I can't,” Fandral answered, laughing softly. “I do not always participate, but many of these groups will telephone me.” He reached for a jacket sitting on a chair and pulled out a phone with a wide beam. “Midgardian technology allows me to act with great speed.”

Loki chuckled. “You have adapted well then.”

“Bruce has been of great help! Steven and I have learnt a lot together.”

Rogers rubbed the back of his head when they turned to him. “I was a bit out of the loop for a while. I helped Fandral and then we learnt together.”

“Yes!” Fandral insisted. “I have greatly enjoyed living upon Midgard.”

“I know we’ve kept in contact over the years,” Anthony said. “But hit me with it. What else have we missed out on?” He grinned. “And then, we can tell you what we’ve been up to, both over the decades, and more recently.”

The others exchanged a glance, clearly curious, but Bruce was the one to say, “Well then, I suppose we’d better order something to eat and drink. FRIDAY?”

“We have already taken the liberty, Dr Banner,” she answered.

“We?” he questioned, frowning.

“It is nice to be back, Dr Banner,” JARVIS answered. “I came online upon arrival. I am reacquainting with the tower with FRIDAY’s assistance.”

“Oh, of course.” He smiled. “Hello, JARVIS.”

And just like that, everything returned to how it had been forty years prior. Perhaps, it was more obvious how close the others had become and how at ease Fandral was with both the tower and Earth vernacular and technology, but what really stood out to Loki was how little tension permeated the room.

It seemed, in their absence, the group had found their place in the world.

Turning to Anthony he shifted a little closer and caught the man’s hand. Anthony glanced at him mid-conversation and smiled.

*Yes, he thought, it is nice to have returned.*

---

Mostly, hearing about what had passed on Midgard was amusing.

FRIDAY, in their absence, had taken a more thorough helm not only in battle but with S.I. It had taken time but she had eventually managed to convince the CEO into listening to her. Loki had known Anthony and her had discussed his company during his absence, but he had been delighted to see how much she had taken on the role of defending Anthony Stark’s name and fortune.

She was, in many ways, the driving force behind Stark Industries continued growth and prosperity. She also warded off corporate takeovers, hacking and traitorous employees as powerfully as she wielded repulsors. Anthony had been openly proud as he praised her. As had JARVIS.

But, if Stark Industries had grown in their absence, SHIELD by comparison, had shrunk. Apparently, there was almost nothing left of the once powerful organisation. There were too many heroes to keep up with and Fury’s damaged reputation hadn’t been salvageable. Hill had done her best, but in the end, when another organisation had recruited her, she’d taken the position.

She was, by all accounts, no longer in the business of wrangling superheroes and had retired. A lot of the irritants from their earlier life had either passed away or were too old to cause

any significant threat.

It was fitting although, it had left Anthony a little pensive. Something that had quickly been dismissed as the conversation continued to their own travels. But, Loki had kept an eye on him. The evening had passed in conversation, laughter, and even a few spars in the training room as Anthony showed off his magic and tech while James wrestled with Rogers. Barnes had sniggered and drank a beer from the sidelines, only to eventually be dragged into a battle by Fandral.

Bruce, him and the vǫrðrs had stayed out of the way, chatting peacefully and smiling indulgently at the group or clapping upon every new victory.

After the emotionally trying days on Jotunheim, it had been nice to relax with good company within the safety of the tower.

(Of course, the safety or at least the *structure* of the tower had been in question when FRIDAY and JARVIS had decided to go head-to-head in their suits. It was an incredibly impressive battle with JARVIS only just managing to beat FRIDAY. Anthony had whooped and high-fived both suits, praising them both thoroughly, much to their obvious enjoyment.)

When everyone finally retired for the night, it allowed them to return to the bed they had not slept in for decades. Anthony showered while Loki sat with his back to the headboard, their vǫrðrs on his lap. When Anthony returned, he flopped down on the mattress before crawling close and kissing him.

“Feeling okay, babe?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Not stressed or worried?”

Loki raised his eyebrows. “Why would I be either?”

“Because tomorrow we’re going to mention Jotunheim and start explaining what we hope they’ll all do to represent Midgard?”

“The only person of concern is Fandral, and unlike before, I feel rather confident he will not despise me or my heritage on sight. He will listen, and that is all I ask.” He smiled. “Midgard has been very good for him.”

Anthony hummed. He also dropped down onto the bed, laying on his back and snagging Loki’s hand, dragging it to his chest.

“What of you?” Loki enquired. “You were pensive earlier today.”

“Yeah,” Anthony admitted, frowning slightly. “Just... a few loose ends I want to tie up.”

“Oh?”

“Pepper. She’s still alive. I’m going to visit her, if she wants to see me.”



Loki nodded. “Would you like company?”

“Nah,” he said. “It’ll be fine.” He half-smiled. “FRIDAY said she’s got a few kids. I might invite Rhodey. I think he’d like to see her too.”

“A good idea.” Anthony stroked his hand, his gaze going a little distant. “Anthony?”

“Sorry,” he blinked back to the room. “Just thinking. This is a whole new world. Give it a few more decades and I probably won’t even recognise it.”

As if sensing the seriousness of the moment Vgyarstil and Fen abandoned his lap for the foot of the bed. He slipped down the mattress and turned onto his side, better facing his husband.

“Does that upset you?” Loki questioned gently.

Anthony shook his head.

“No. Not really. I guess it just made me realise that a planet isn’t big enough for me anymore. The *universe* is where I want to be. Exploring and experimenting. What we’ve been doing for forty years. Not worrying about political bullshit unless we’re helping someone.”

“Like the Jotnar.”

“Yeah.” Anthony rolled onto his side, allowing them to be face to face. “I want to help them. Help *you*. The Nine Realms need an overhaul and I’m happy to give it to them. We fix the mess and then we can go do what *we* want to do.”

“Freedom and chaos with some tricks and a dash of heroics?”

"Exactly."

“It sounds delightful.”

Anthony grinned. He also shuffled closer, letting their foreheads rest together.

“We’re happy, you know?” Anthony said. “We’re not the people we once were.”

“I know,” Loki answered. “We are finally being whom we always wanted to be.”

Anthony kissed him and Loki responded back eagerly. Their magic flared around them, warm, comforting and loving. It reminded him of sitting in a garden a galaxy away, watching his husband practice magic and knowing then, as he did now, that it had all been worth it.

This moment, this life, this *man*. It was how it was always meant to be. He was finally home..

And there we have it! Sharpen Your Teeth, has ended!

I hope you enjoyed this accumulation of all the wishes of readers, plans I had, and everything I could possibly fit inside without writing another 100k 😊 There were some things I didn't get to fit in, but I got the majority. I hope it was a reasonable end to this mammoth story (and there aren't too many edits, but I'm out of time, so you get what you get 😊).

Thank you one and all. And with that, I am signing out!



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