

The God Who Fell to Earth ****complete****

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The God Who Fell to Earth ****complete****

by [semaphore27](#)

Summary

This story exists in a completely different timeline from the Gotterdamurung 24/7 universe, the only common denominator being that Odin is (and always will be, in my mind), the worst dad in the history of dads. This Loki, at least at the start, is probably closer to canon than his 24/7 counterpart. He definitely has an attitude and some major lessons to learn, not the least of which is how to survive on Midgard, in winter, with no magic and no superhuman abilities, while wearing his Jotunn form.

To say he's overwhelmed would be an understatement.

Notes

The title was inspired by the film (and book, for that matter) *The Man Who Fell to Earth* about an extraterrestrial who comes to our world, only to be first completely confused, then drastically changed by his new surroundings.

"If I had my teeth, I WOULD bite." Spoken by Prince John (the villain) in *Much Ado About Nothing*. by Wm. Shakespeare.

Loki's trio of "furry Nornir" are raccoons, notorious thieves of unsecured food.

God Jul=Merry Christmas (Norwegian)

Fallen

Chapter Summary

Midgard is not kind to a powerless *Jötunn*.

Chapter Notes

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

That first sevenday, when the air remained still sweet and soft, and kept its balance between summer and autumn, Loki assured himself frequently that things would not be so terrible. His magic had been taken from him, true, but did he need magic to consort with mere mortals? He found it easy enough to steal human raiment and dress himself in it—raiment of good quality, so that he would be recognized for the prince he was, blue skin or not, crimson eyes or not.

A prince, a god, an immortal—by human standards, at least. The golden thread of his life might have tarnished slightly, but he would have it brighten again, his fortunes restored, his tormentors punished.

What had that Midgardian play-maker written? “*If I had my teeth, I WOULD bite.*” Oh, but Loki intended to have his teeth again, and then would he make such retribution the great oceans round Asgard would surge red with it. He would find a way. A plan would reveal itself to him.

Meanwhile, the better to think, he walked the streets of New York City with head held high, disdainful of the mindless scurry of the ants around him.

Few regarded him closely—but then, they avoided their fellow mortals in much the same way, filled with the sicknesses of distrust and indifference, otherwise absorbed with the small, flat boxes or metal and glass each seemed to carry along with them wherever they wandered. It amused Loki when the rare human, beholding him, actually registered the sight—when a jaw dropped, or eyes went wide, before the unfortunate tore his gaze away and hurried off in haste.

Loki wondered, truly, what they took him for. Laughable, idiot creatures.

On his first night in the city, after he overcame the numbness and disbelief that assailed him for some hours after his fall, Loki discovered an ancient ash in the great, nearly untenanted central land of meadows, lakes and trees, and made it his temporary home. He liked to climb up into its branches and perch with eyes closed, listening to the whisper of the wind in the leaves, or the chatter of the numerous bold, fat, gray squirrels. He amused himself by composing lies to tell them, as if the mundane little beasts were Ratatoskr and would bear his

falsehoods to the Allfather's ears, bringing confusion thereafter to all his hated not-father's plans.

Nights he lay cradled in the ash's crooked roots and wished Niðhöggr would get on with things and gobble up Yggdrasil and the Nine Realms entire, doing away with the whole sorry mess. In darkness Loki's plots all seemed far away, harder to hold onto than water in his hands. In darkness, alone, he felt small, powerless, blind.

He felt as if something--not his magic, but some other distinct, and equally crucial, part of himself--had begun to slowly slip away.

That first sevenday, however, passed uneventfully enough.

Prone upon a thick branch high above the heads of mortals, on the cusp between the old week and the new, Loki sipped from a bottle of stolen too-sweet mead and watched the great stars wheel their slow, stately dance in the Midgardian sky above him. The liquor sang in his veins, stronger now that he was...

Loki's shoulders tightened, and his fingers took a death-grip round the neck of the bottle.

"Now that I am... as I am," he said aloud, softly, then frowned at himself, and drank deeply, the liquor flaming in his stomach like the fires of *Muspelheimr*.

I ought to have killed my father, he thought, clutching the bottle so tightly its glass walls cracked within the cradle of his hands. *No, killed Odin. Never my father. I ought to have killed Odin, not merely secreted him away as I did.*

Except he knew he would not have been able to complete the act, not with powers a hundred times greater than he'd ever known, His heart was ever set in a precarious balance, hate on the one side, love on the other--and, oh, how Loki *hated* the old god.

Yet, oh, how he'd once loved him as well.

Loki thought about how the others of Asgard said he possessed no heart at all, that he was made up only of lies, lies piled upon lies upon lies.

And Loki thought of the worst lie he had ever told, the lie with only one word to it, that word being the "*No*," with which he denied his dear mother, spoken from the pain-filled depths of his proud and hurting heart.

He would take the word, the lie, back in a single beating of that heart, given only the briefest chance. He would take his mother's strong but gentle hands in his own, calling her by the kindest name he knew, and resting his head upon her shoulder, just to know the smallest sweetness again, the sweetness and peace only she brought to him, somewhere in his life, if only for a moment.

Somewhere between midnight and dawn, rain began to fall. The air remained warm, however, and the rain itself scarcely more than mist. The worst effect, Loki discovered when he woke in the early light, was that the wet had made his hair wind up ridiculously into great, cloudlike curls, and donning the hood he used now to conceal his face from the mortals would give him the ludicrous appearance of a man walking about with an overstuffed cushion balanced atop his shoulders.

He missed his magic bitterly as he beat and pulled and twisted the mad locks into submission, but informed himself he was foolish, it was nothing more than an inconvenience, and a petty one at that.

As Loki walked out of the great park of lakes and trees, he felt stray curls spring free from the bundle tied at his nape and wondered if his pride would survive the cutting of his hair short, in the manner of a bondsman, or a thrall

Time had never afforded Loki the chance to truly explore a human city. He took the opportunity now—out of curiosity, he told himself, to see what squalor the mortals made for themselves. And there was squalor enough, for one with eyes to see it, in both wealthy streets and poor, but there were other moments as well that caused Loki to stop, like those moments just after waking, when one is still trying to tease out those last moments of a perfect dream before they disappear out of memory entirely.

He strode all day about the streets, shaded spectacles covering his crimson eyes, head bowed to hide his face, hands thrust into the knitted garment's front pockets—looking, he supposed, like a man of great purpose.

Loki tried to tell himself he was angry, nay, furious, nay *enraged!* At the *Aesir* and their high-handed dealings with him, full of ire at the Allfather in particular, but when he returned to the park, and his tree, that night, he found that a hollow ache filled his chest and his eyes smarted and stung.

The result, no doubt, of wearing the dark glasses all day in the dim mist-light.

On the tenth day of his exile, Loki stole an apple and an odd-shaped yellow fruit from an outdoor display. He hadn't meant to eat, hadn't meant to need sustenance, but his body, *Jötunn* or not, seemed impatient with such intentions. It seemed determined to make his head whirl if he moved too quickly and he felt weaker even than his ridiculous mortality could explain. His progress along the streets had slowed, and once he even lost his balance slightly, the hood slipping back from his face.

A man, coarse-featured and corpulent, had spied him then and growled, with such violence it knocked Loki back another step, "Mutie!"

At once he collected himself, covered his face, slipped away with a rapidity he might once have thought only his magic allowed. He found himself running, pelting along with his breath tearing in his throat and a sharp pain stabbing his side, until he'd reached his ash tree again.

As if that was safe, as if any place in this benighted round world was safe for a castaway, powerless god.

Loki curled deep as he could into the roots, almost as if digging himself a burrow, anywhere to be sheltered and warm, withdrawing into his jacket like a turtle into its shell.

You are a god and a prince of Asgard, he tried to remind himself, but the Allfather's last words to him drowned any fragile scraps of pride to which he might try to cling:

"Witless, faithless, useless *Jötunn*. Useless, useless *Jötunn*."

The weather changed that tenth night, as if the last of the summer's kindness had drained away with the last of Loki's luck. The earth, with its sparse grass, felt stiff and cold beneath him. The air smelled of burning leaves.

A slight shuffling sound caused Loki to open his eyes. Beside him, like a trio of small, hairy *Nornir*, stood three masked creatures. One of them clutched his apple between its sharp-fingered hands, a second the yellow fruit he hadn't known the name of. The last of the group chattered at him in a high angry voice.

Shocked entirely out of sleep, Loki staggered away as the diminutive demons set in upon his intended breakfast, shrilling at one another in a way that seemed entirely demented. He watched for a time from a safe distance, a series of shudders running up his spine, down his arms. He felt wholly disgusted with himself—certainly he'd been caught off his guard, but to have such a reaction of horror? Was he a child now, to be so easily discomfited?

Loki squared his shoulders, turning his face up to the thin, pale sun. *I will not be afraid*, he told himself. *I will not be afraid, now or ever*.

Except that he *was* afraid, more afraid, even, than it seemed could be explained by his circumstances.

In the distance, something flashed golden-red in the grayness, attracting his gaze, and there in all its glory before him stood the great tower of the Man of Iron. "Look at me," it seemed to say. "Look at me in my might. And you? Tiny, misbegotten, unwanted... Puny god indeed."

"I know," Loki answered softly. "It is true. It is as you say."

The cold deepened day by day and it came to Loki that the shudders he experienced were not cowardice at all, but his mortal body's reaction to the chill. The Allfather, it seemed, could not leave him even his *Jötunn* resistance to harsh weather. He walked the streets now in an attempt to stay warm, and from time to time even found himself desperate enough to frequent one of the shelters where one was forced to sing the praises of the Midgardian man-god in return for a shower and a bowl of over-salted soup. The shower was his main object, because once he was clean he could enter the great library, conceal himself in a nearly comfortable chair and escape into one of the many books. For that privilege, he would hang a million insincere praises from his lips.

Loki found he learned slowly, like a somewhat backward child, though he remembered a time when his thoughts had run quicker than any other's of his acquaintance. By the time the brightly-colored lights began to appear upon trees and lamp posts, he'd discovered that the grates in the street where warm air gusted up from the subterranean world below were better to sleep on than park benches, but that park benches could be made to suffice with the clever application of those smudgy, flimsy sheets the Midgardians named newspapers, which also worked inside one's shoes in place of socks (his had soon, unchanged, rotted within his boots). He'd learned that inns and other places of eating (called "restaurants" in this country) threw away a great many items that were still perfectly fit to eat, if one put away one's more fastidious nature.

He learned, after days and weeks of trying, that it was virtually impossible for him to obtain a mortal job, the sort that would allow him lodgings, clean clothes and the sort of food he wasn't forced to dig out of the giant rubbish tips the New Yorkers called dumpsters. He learned that half the people he asked for employment would send him away with a threat, perhaps even a blow, and the words, "Get lost, mutie!" The other half would merely gaze at him with bland disinterest, requesting the references and job histories he couldn't possibly provide to them.

I am lost, he wanted to tell them. I will be proud no more, I swear to you. I am entirely lost, and will be your willing thrall. I will work, and work hard, if you allow it.

Yet even when when he forced these words past his lips, the mortals would not heed him.

Loki learned that his bones hurt all the time, and his head, his stomach, his chest--even his face. He couldn't ever get warm, even on the days he spent all its hours of opening within the library. The skin of his hands and feet cracked and bled and the cough he'd starting out suffering only in the mornings now lasted all day, causing the other library patrons to turn and stare in his direction.

When mortals stared, when he was noticed, frightening things could occur. More than once he'd been caught. More than once he'd been beaten, his fine Asgardian boots stolen—he'd gone barefoot, his bare soles cringing away from the icy pavements, until he found a castoff pair of flimsy canvas shoes. Too large for him, by a little, but they would do. The padding of newspapers helped to make them fit his narrow feet a little better.

One group, boys still in the first flower of youth, clad in warm and costly garments and stuffed with the sort of arrogance Loki recognized only too well, had sawn off his long hair with a knife meant for hunting (and hadn't the boys hunted him? was he not their cowering prey?), crowing in cruel voices "Now ya won't have to worry about cooties, will ya, mutie?"

He ought to have been able to defeat them easily, but he could not. He had no strength in his limbs, and they would not move as he commanded.

What have I become? Loki wondered. *What have I come to?* But for that he had no answer.

"Cooties" meant lice--that he did know--and lice was an infestation. A tiny, itching creature. But he was a Prince of Asgard! He could not possibly...!

The memory of this insult made Loki clap shut his library book and squeeze his eyes closed tight, tighter, his hands in painful fists, forcing himself to breathe slowly and shallowly so that he wouldn't start coughing again. His eyes leaked burning tears, though he required them to do no such thing.

It was intolerable. This life. It could not be tolerated.

In a heartbeat, he found himself sobbing, clutching the forgotten book to his chest and sobbing. He wanted his mother. He wanted home, even if he was to be hated there. He no longer required a throne, only quiet, warmth, food in his stomach, for the pain to be gone from him.

Loki had been wounded often in battle, but that pain was transient, so quickly had the injuries healed. If he possessed such a foolish thing as a soul, as the acolytes of the man-god insisted, then not only his physical form, but the whole of his soul, now hurt him.

His mother was dead. He had no home. He was hungry, cold, ill, and no one wanted him. No one had ever wanted him.

You think as a child! said the voice in his head, *Be strong. Scorn them!*

Excellent advice, perhaps, but he had no strength of body, and no scorn left to strengthen his spirit.

Still wrapped around the large book, Loki moaned with his misery.

A man, dark of skin like Heimdall, in a livery of cheap shirt and trousers coloured like midnight, approached, nudging his shoulder. The man wore a gun on his hip. He was a guardian of these sacred rooms of warmth and safety, a person of authority here, Loki recognized.

A gun may slay you now, he reminded himself. *It may injure you with its projectiles. It's no sense saying, "these mortals" to refer to the Midgardians. **You** are mortal, Lost Prince of Asgard.*

For a moment Loki wondered what he might do to make the man draw his weapon from its holster. If he appeared mad (he clearly *was* mad, Loki felt the signs of it well within himself)... If he appeared violent (his entire life had been violence, hour after hour after hour of training—knives, swords, axes, spears, once he used all of them flawlessly)...

He hurt too much to be violent. He could scarcely sit upright. He had no idea how to care for a mortal body, and he had damaged it, perhaps irrevocably. This man in blue with the stern voice and the kind eyes would never see him as a threat. He would not feel endangered and give Loki the quick end he hoped for, any more than the abyss had given him a quick end when he dropped from the Bifrost.

Somewhere far beyond, in the void, Thanos, the Mad Titan, laughed at him, Loki knew. Was this his punishment for failure? It could hardly have been worse.

He would die, yes, in this useless body in this terrible Realm of Midgard. He would die, but the ending would not be swift, it would be lengthy, horrid, shaming.

“I’m sorry, sir,” said the guardian of the library. “I’m going to have to ask you to leave. You’re disturbing the other patrons.”

Let them be disturbed! Loki wished to proclaim. *I am Loki of Asgard!*

But he wasn’t. He was Loki the Unwanted. Loki of Nowhere.

“I go,” he mumbled. “My apologies. I mean to disturb no one.” He truly feared to trouble the guardian, feared to be locked again in a Midgardian dungeon (would they muzzle him and cripple his hands again, when he was so useless? Surely they would not be so cruel as to do a second time what they did the first, not when he lacked the strength to fight them).

No, they would not, Loki realized. They would not even know him. He would be locked up in an ordinary, filthy dungeon if he should be taken, in the company of ordinary, filthy men, because he himself was ordinary now--though not so ordinary that he would not be called “mutie” and beaten again by the inmates around him.

Was this, too, a part of his punishment? Odin's madness equaled his own; Loki found it hard to guess.

“I go,” he attempted to say again, with slightly more volume. The words came out of him as a faint, hoarse, leaking sound. “I am so very sorry. Please forgive me.”

A hand touched his shoulder, the merest pressure.

Loki’s head jerked up, then immediately tucked down again. A woman stood by him, matronly, a little gray in her ginger-gold hair. Had she seen? Gods, what did she want? If she began screaming...

A brown-wrapped parcel was laid in his lap. “I knitted it for my son-in-law, but green is your color, I think. *God Jul*, Loki.”

Loki twisted in his seat, staring after her: broad shoulders, broad hips, a sturdy, confident figure in sensible warm clothing. He hugged the package to his chest. Not *Aesir*, not *Jötunn*... how had she known his name?

It came to him in an instant: a *mutie*, the woman was a *mutie*, like the cruel name the mortals *would* call him, that thing the terrible people thought he was when they hit and shouted at him.

A *mutie* was the creature who haunted the darker dreams of these so-called normal mortals, as the *Jötnar* haunted the dreams of the *Æsir*.

Loki rose as swiftly as he was able, which was slowly indeed, setting the book carefully on the chair he’d lately occupied, taking up the package in its place, his hands so weak and numb he could scarcely hug it to his chest, though the bundle weighed near nothing.

“I need...” he rasped, not meeting the guardian’s eyes. “Might I make use of the... the restroom ere I depart? I vow to you, I will not linger.”

Hiding himself in the men’s room to unwrap his package, he shut himself into a stall, locking the door behind him, as he had learned one must do for privacy. The air within the tiled room seemed burningly cold after the cozy warmth of the main rooms. Perhaps, Loki thought, they kept it so to discourage just such unwanted sorts as himself from seeking shelter therein.

The reek of harsh cleaning potions burned his sore lungs and Loki coughed more than once as he attempted, with trembling hands, to unwrap his gift from its enclosing brown paper and sticky cello tape. Inside, at last, he found a thick jumper, expertly knitted in tones of black and green and soft as the undercoat of the white hind that grants wishes, also an envelope containing ten bills of Midgardian currency, the ones with the portrait of the handsome and somewhat foppish former king of these lands known as Hamilton.

Loki stood a long time staring at the money before glancing upward to the small window above the washbasins. Snow had begun to cling to the glass in jagged patterns. The currency meant he might sleep inside tonight, if he wished. There were places he knew, not so very far away from this shelter, that would rent a chamber by the night to ruined people such as himself—meager lodgings, yes, and often greatly troubled by the minute demons known as cockroaches, but warmer than the park, or the damp spaces under the bridges, or the heatless abandoned rooms one could find here or there throughout the city, now and then.

A tiny flame of his old pride stirred within him only for a moment—that a mortal would have such temerity as to offer him charity! He, Loki, Prince of Asgard!

The flame died nearly at once with nothing to sustain it.

Loki gathered the bills to himself quickly, secreting them deep within the pocket of his coarse, dark trousers.

Another night, he told himself. Save it for another night, it’s not meant for such a night as this, with a mere flurry of snow in the air. Be wise: worse nights lie ahead.

Before he would allow himself to pull the new warm jumper over his head, he drew off his now-threadbare hooded garment and the worn shirt beneath. He’d have liked to wash them beneath the taps, but it was too late for that now—perhaps tomorrow, when they could be washed and put on again at the start of the day, to dry against his skin as he read inside the safe haven of of this building. He scrubbed himself as best he could with the thin, sour-smelling yellow soap and the rough paper toweling, until his skin showed nearly purple and he shivered in sharp, convulsive waves. Only then did he don his old clothing and pull the gift on over them.

There were reindeer, small ones, knitted into it, in a thin band near his shoulders, and they made Loki recall his great horned helmet and the Man of Iron, Stark, calling him “Reindeer Games.” The jest filled him with mirth suddenly, as it hadn’t on the day they’d fought, and Loki found himself laughing aloud, laughing and laughing until he realized that he’d slid down to the floor and his face had begun to stream, stingingly, with tears and his own red blood. He was still trying to staunch the flow from his nose when the man in midnight livery

returned for him, flinging open the washroom door. Loki barely had time to fumble the poorly-made tinted spectacles over his crimson eyes before the man's deep voice boomed out at him.

"C'mon man, we're closing up. Time to rock and roll."

Loki stared at him, hands twisted in the generous folds of his new jumper.

"Grab another glob of TP for your nose, then you gotta go. Seriously, dude."

Meaning came through him with a shudder. "Go. I need to go. Closing. I..." Loki shuddered again at the sound of his own voice, raw and foolish and subservient. He made an effort to pull his body straight, to modulate his words. "I beg pardon for the delay."

"No harm done, your highness," the big man said, laughing, patting Loki's shoulder in passing. "No harm done."

For the merest instant Loki thought he'd been recognized, his true worth known, then just as swiftly the truth came to him. The man meant only a gentle mockery. He possessed a kind heart, and so there was no cruelty in his jest, only a slightly weary acceptance of his world as it existed: a world of minds encased in madness, a world of many others as sad and broken as himself.

Loki hung his head as the guardian led him to the door, ashamed now of both his rough and broken voice and his loftier tones. He scurried out through the small side portal, down the steps to where a carved lion crouched, wearing a conical cap of snow. His strength left him there, leaving Loki clinging to the frozen beast, his blood flowing down into the rivulets and curlicues of its mane. Like Thor's hair, it would be, were the color only golden, and Loki fell into a waking dream in which the lion came alive and was not a lion at all, but his own dear brother come to drag him away, weakly protesting, from his books, down the Bifrost and into a Hel-bent gallop across the Northlands, where the reindeer ran, still, numerous as stars and the lights in the sky were not insipid ribbons of pink and green but fantastic bursts of vermilion, indigo, ochre, lapis.

"I've a mind in me to feast!" Thor would call to him when the day's ride was done and the great halls of a hundred kings would be thrown open to them, endless revels of gluttony and mead, the songs Loki would sing for their hosts, the tales he would spin, while Thor would laugh and shout his approval and applaud his brother's clever tellings.

Thor liked the tall tales best, even the ones where he himself looked a little foolish: the one in which he was forced to dress as a great, bearded bride, the one where they camped for the night in a giant's mitten.

Had those times been real, any of them? Could they truly have been as Loki remembered, so easy and so fearless?

The story of how Thor gained *Mjolnir* was true enough, that Loki knew. With numb fingertips, he traced the lines of scars buried beneath the smooth skin round his lips. The foul

dwarf had smelled of iron fillings and turpentine, his breath like herring rotted and pickled and rotted again.

He ought not to have revived that memory. Loki found himself leaning past the blood-stained lion to spew a broad circle of red across the powdery snow. He knew he ought to have minded his bleeding nose better, the flow had backed up down his throat and made him ill.

In the aftermath he felt suddenly much better, light and peaceful, a little sleepy. The snowflakes danced in elegant swirls in the yellow light of the streetlight and Loki's mind drifted again into the past: a bit of mischief played once on Volstagg that made Sif laugh so hard she'd needed to remove her golden corselet to be able to breathe properly again, afternoons when he and Thor were quite young, finding the shapes of fabulous creatures in the clouds, that first true spell he'd mastered under his mother's tutelage.

He dreamed of reading in his mother's garden, of a golden day alive with the drone of insects and the bright flash of songbirds through the air.

Loki smelled his mother's fragrance, honey and lavender, and heard the quiet tread of her feet upon the pavings. Frigga took a seat beside him on the bench, her hands closing round Loki's hands, a soft curl of her hair brushing his arm. "Oh, my poor darling," she said, gathering up fistfuls of his butchered hair. "Always so lovely, my dearest boy, and always so particular about how you appeared. Let me look at you."

Her fingertips traced the lines of his face, the markings on his skin, before they settled and she cupped his cheeks between the warmth of her palms.

Her face, Loki observed, was just as it had always been, full of kindness and warmth, full of love for him.

He realized, with a shock, that he'd always been her favorite, that they were too much alike in their natures for things to be otherwise. The realization ran through his belly like a spear of ice and Loki could no longer look into Frigga's face, his shame forbade it.

"I am..." he gasped. "Ah, mother, that I should..."

Frigga laughed softly. "Oh, my poor darling boy, your head filled up with a million words, but the ones you require quite flown away."

"No," Loki breathed, afraid to the depths of his soul that she would vanish. He slipped off the bench, onto his knees by the hem of her gown. "Only, please forgive me. Please mother. I, your son, am most heartily sorry and I beg your forgiveness with everything within me for everything I have done. For everything I have ever done that brought you grief or shame." Loki rested his head on her knees, breathing raggedly, as her fingers combed through his ruined hair.

"You must forgive your brother, too," Frigga said at last, quietly. "He loves you, Loki. Steer your cleverness down kinder avenues when you can, my darling." She slipped her fingers under Loki's chin, raising his face to hers, staring deeply into his ruby eyes with no sign of

disdain, seeing in him the dreadful time with Thanos, with the Chitauri, the things he'd done, the things he ought to have fought harder not to do, things a true warrior of the *Aesir* might have resisted with head high and a battle cry on his lips.

"I am not..." Loki said softly. "I am... I love you, truly, and in my heart my brother, Thor. But I am..." Loki stretched out his arms, encompassing all of the Nine Realms. "Friendless. Loveless. Unlovable. Untrusted. Not fit to be a king. Too foolishly proud to be a pauper. Too weak to be of the *Aesir*, yet not a *Jötunn* except in my skin. Selfish. Unkind. Changeable..."

"Patience, my love," Frigga murmured, bending one last time to kiss Loki's brow.

In that instant the warm, bright garden was gone, and Frigga with it, leaving only the bloody lion, the mad swirl of the snow, and a broad step that would make as good a bed as any that night. Loki lay on the stone with his knees against his chest, arms wrapped tight around himself, one hand pressed against his mouth because, first, his breath was warm and kept his skin from burning so from the cold, and second so that he would not weep, because he wanted to so very badly, but to give in to that urge would seem to signal the last farewell not only to whatever shards remained of his dignity, but of the tenuous grip he held on every individual piece of his life.

"But, mum," Loki murmured into the cover of his hands, "I've never been any good at patience."

He jerked awake what might have been minutes or hours later to find himself being prodded by the staff of a grizzle-haired old man with an eye-patch. In an instant Loki found himself bolt upright, snapping out, "Oh, by all the gods, Allfather, can you not just leave me to die in peace? Must you torment me even in this moment?"

The old man raised a brow quizzically. "There may be fire left in you, son, but it's not enough to survive a night like this outdoors. The mercury will be dropping low in the wee hours."

"Tend to yourself, then, if you're so concerned." He tossed the envelope of bills at the old man's feet like a clot of refuse and sent the warm jumper after it, and the hooded garment as well. "Have it all—the charity, the concealment, everything, for I'll none of it anymore!" A buzzing, as of the fury of a million bees, had set its cacophony within his ears and he seemed to alternate between panting and coughing out his rage, his heart beating all backwards and sideways in his chest. Before he knew it, Loki was running, escaping the old man who'd only meant him kindness, the gifts given to him by the mortal woman with his mother's hair. He never knew if the old one took them up or left them where they lay before him.

In time Loki found himself in one of the brightest places, amongst the great merchant halls where the mortals seemed to throng in this season. He began to discern a deeper rumble, low at first, then growing and growing, and with it a presence, mortal bodies gathering, ringing him as the great wolf-packs of the past would ring the red deer, pressing closer and closer still with their reek of foolish, ignorant fear.

“Back from me,” Loki raged, aiming to offend them. “Back from me, filthy, mindless sons of dogs. Back from me, you repellent mortals—I am a god!”

The first blow, low across his back, brought Loki to his knees, though he sprang up at once and flew at those around him with teeth and blows and swipes of his ragged nails, while all the while that crude ugly words rumbled around him: *mutie mutie mutie mutie*. He knew himself hideously, thankfully, outnumbered, with no hope of survival.

If he died a warrior’s death against unbeatable foes, would his not-father, Loki wondered, be proud of him then? Would he earn his place in Valhalla?

A last blow landed, shattering the dark spectacles into a million pieces against his face and he was falling, falling, fast and forever into darkness, a tight, hard noose snapping fast around his chest, driving the final breath from his lungs and spinning him over and over and over again.

Loki dreamed he lay for a second time on the frozen soil of that ancient temple in *Jötunnheimr*, and though he was himself, grown fully into man's form, he found himself as helpless, as frightened, as frozen as when he’d lain there as a child. A hand ran gently, then, up and down his arm, rubbing the warmth back into his skin, and he found he lay enveloped in something marvelously soft and welcoming and warm.

“Don’t be afraid,” murmured a voice in his ear. “Nothing will hurt you now. Nothing will harm you here.”

Loki could not have said why he trusted the voice, but he did—he trusted it absolutely, and letting himself be soothed, sank into the soft and velvety warmth again.

Chapter End Notes

Here's something that's been languishing in my files for a bit, with a slightly more canon Loki, so I thought I'd dust it off, finish the chapter and show it to you. The story, I will warn you, starts out sad, with some serious mental and physical whump for poor Loki in this chapter, but it will soon get happier in tone.

100% *not* in the *Gotterdammerung* 24/7 universe.

Puppy

Chapter Summary

Steve brings a lost puppy home to the tower. A very tall, blue lost puppy.

Chapter Notes

For the sensitive, this chapter has one not-overly-graphic instance of vomiting. Just so you're forewarned.

A rimshot is that little drum riff that follows the telling of a bad joke. Clint thoughtfully provides his own.

Tony's *Hacienda La Esmeralda* coffee, from Panama, is supposed to be heavenly. At \$104/lb., it better be. The Luwak coffee (also known as "civet coffee") from Indonesia, goes for a mere \$160 (!!!). The animal Tony's looking for here is actually the mongoose.

Red vines are twisted, cherry-flavored licorice whips.

Diddly-squat is a colloquial British/American term meaning "absolutely nothing."

Tony's thinking of the English nursery rhyme that goes:

*Pussy cat, pussy cat, where have you been?
I've been to London to look at the queen the Queen...*

I'm twisting canon, I think, by placing the Stepford Cuckoos in Salem Center, operating Cerebro (Charles Xavier's mutant-locating machine). The "creepy Cuckoo girls" are emotionless, share a group mind and were cloned from telepath Emma Frost, aka The White Queen. Their name was taken from the books *The Midwich Cuckoos* (possibly known to movie-goers as *Village of the Damned*, by John Wyndham, and *The Stepford Wives* by Ira Levin.

50 kilos equals roughly 110 pounds, for my fellow Americans.

Bear Grylls hosts TV programs about surviving in the wild.

Phil quotes 1 Corinthians 13:2, King James Version. A verse many of the so-called "religious" people of our time might do well to take note of (stepping off my soapbox

now).

"Timmy" as in, "What's that, Lassie? Timmy's down the well?"

"Hey, where have *you* been?" Clint asked Tony as he ambled into Avengers Central, tired and grumpy and exactly on the wrong side of jet-lagged. The archer poured himself a cup of coffee and shoved the carafe back on the warmer, leaving exactly one centimeter in the bottom, presumably to evaporate, burn and stink up the kitchen.

Tony was about to make a comment when Natasha wafted through in search of toast, smacked her long-time partner on the back of the head, and told him, "Do you think your mama works here? Make a new pot, nincompoop!"

Phil, serenely cooking eggs at the hob, rolled his eyes at his boyfriend, but directed a thankful look toward the Widow. "I tell him and tell him," he remarked. "Good thing he listens to *someone*."

"He'd better. If he knows what's good for him," Nat replied, darkly. She may have only stood five-foot-three in her stocking feet, but that was five-foot-three of pure evil intent toward anyone who crossed her.

"I just flew in from London," Tony said, sinking into a chair, "In case anyone still cares."

"And boy are my arms tired?" Clint remarked, miming a silent rimshot—*ba da boom!*--but he also brought Tony a fresh cup of coffee the minute the machine finished dripping, so all was forgiven.

"Don't we have a meeting?" Tony asked, glancing around the group. "Much as I longed for the sight of your shining faces after three whole days away, that *is* the only reason I'm here instead of snug in my cozy bed on this particular AM." He yawned until his jaw popped, covering his mouth with both hands. "Where the hell's Grandpa, by the way?"

"Brought home another stray puppy in the night." Bruce sighed, switching off the StarkPad he'd been studying intently, then pushing up his glasses to rub at his eyes. "JARVIS got nothing. I got nothing when I checked his work."

"You checked the work of my flawless creation?" Tony quipped. "Bruce, buddy, you wound me! I am wounded!"

"Shut up, Tone," Bruce told him amiably, rubbing his eyes again. "Did you have to buy an extra seat on the plane for that ego of yours?"

"It's why I have the StarkJet. My ego likes to be able to stretch out and move around on long flights." Eyes closed, Tony sipped steaming-hot caffeinated bliss. The *Hacienda La Esmeralda* beans had been well worth the few extra pennies he spent to procure them. He'd

wanted to try Luwak coffee next, but his unadventurous teammates had hard-heartedly vetoed his selection. Something about the beans passing first through the digestive tract of a weasel. Or a panda. Or something. Which they totally would never have known if that squealer Bruce hadn't clued them in.

He did so enjoy the life of a billionaire.

"Mr. Barton," Tony said, "For a man raised by circus folk, you make a damn fine cuppa Joe."

"We circus folk live on coffee." Clint brought his own cup to the table. "Coffee, stale popcorn and Red Vines. It's a little-known secret of circus life."

"*Meanwhile*, Bruce?" Natasha, toast located, joined them.

Well, someone had to represent the grown-ups, so why not Nat? She was more equipped for it than most of them.

Bruce sighed dramatically. "Meanwhile, thanks to our old friends Mr. Diddley and Mr. Squat, the best we have is that the language he's speaking sounds a lot like the oldest known form of Icelandic, but isn't, actually. Meanwhile, possibly alien, possibly mutant, but there's nothing on the books about tall, skinny, blue, red-eyed aliens with horns. Maybe Thor, with the Scandinavian connection...?"

"Seriously, *that's* Steve's latest?" Tony shook his head. Cap sure did know how to pick 'em. "Is he dangerous?"

"I'll try sending up a Bat Signal, see what I get," Phil answered. "And, it seems, not so much dangerous as hungry. Very hungry. If your JARVIS translated correctly, that is. He... uh, *it*... says, based on his scans, the guy ought to be able to eat our food." Phil neatly spooned eggs onto a paper plate (one of the nice paper plates, with tulips printed on it), adding two triangles of buttered whole wheat toast, a sprig of parsley and an orange wedge. Because unknown blue possible-aliens appreciate a nice garnish. "Meanwhile, tea or coffee, do you think?"

"Tea," Clint put in. "With honey, honey. What? Poor blue guy has the cough from hell."

Bruce tipped back the last of his own coffee. "Uh-huh. I put in a call to my friend Hank McCoy in Salem Center--you know, X-Men Central. He's a doctor, and he can also take a look and at least put the mutant question to rest, though he did say those creepy Cuckoo Girls of theirs weren't picking anything up on the Cerebro Device."

"Huh," Tony said. "Do they think it's malfunctioning?" He'd always kind of itched to get his fingers into the guts of certain pieces of Xavier's crazy tech. Instead, he pulled out his StarkPhone. "J.? Gimme?"

The scans of their latest guest popped up on his screen. The guy either ran hot or had a pretty good fever going. Everything else looked standard, so far as he could tell, except for a largish organ tucked behind the alien's guts. He turned the screen to Bruce. "So, humanoid? What's that?"

"Yup, but your guess is as good as mine," Bruce answered, with a shrug. Bruce was drinking tea. Chamomile. For breakfast. Sometimes Tony just had to wonder if his best friend and ScienceBro was actually an alien himself. Some kind of pod person. It just wasn't right.

Natasha peered over Bruce's shoulder. "That organ looks like a uterus. Yes, I know he's male. But it still looks like a uterus."

Tony reached toward her plate to steal a wedge of toast. "Cue awkward silence amongst all males present at the mention of girl-parts."

Natasha laughed, mockingly and a bit evilly, smacking Tony's hand when he reached for her toast again. "Nah! This is mine. Make your own StarkToast."

"Human. Mutant. Alien. Who knows?" Phil answered--or, rather, didn't. Really saying exactly nothing, the way he always did. "Come with me, if you like."

He led the parade down the corridor toward the smallest of the safe rooms, on the south side of the tower.

Those four rooms weren't the Hulk Tank, that was for sure, but they'd hold pretty much anything short of Bruce's big green friend, so at least Cap was showing some kind of sense. He tended to be slightly myopic where his puppies were concerned.

They found Steve crouching by the airlock-style door, wearing civvies and with a perfect attitude of, *See? Sniff my hand, little lost puppy. I'm your friend!*

His latest find appeared to be a green REI sleeping bag with a clump of black straw sticking out of the top.

Phil approached, set the paper plate (a plastic spoon balanced on one edge) on the floor near the sleeping bag, and retreated again. They all watched a hand and its attached arm emerge from the bag—it was blue, skeletal, and scarred with both old white markings and newer scrapes and cuts. The fingers bore either black claws or the filthiest, most ragged nails Tony had ever seen.

Considering that hand was a mess in general, he probably would have bet even money.

The hand snatched up the plate and bore it back inside the bag. Eating noises followed, rapid but oddly delicate.

"Your lost puppy has nice table manners, Cap," Tony said, "Or should that be sleeping bag manners? Where'd you find it?"

"Near the Central Library," Steve answered, face creased with concern, clearly not paying attention to much besides his new little friend.

"Um..." he put in, "You might want to slow down and take it easy if you haven't been eating, sir. Don't make yourself sick."

"Sir," no less. Sometimes Steve was incredible.

"I think you have to say it in the oldest known form of Icelandic," Tony told him, to be helpful.

"What's that?" Cap asked, but Tony felt fairly certain he wasn't really paying attention. He only had eyes for his puppy.

A forehead and two eyes appeared over the bag's edge. The forehead showed the same paler markings as the arm—they formed a regular pattern, pleasingly geometric, Tony saw, and the eyes themselves were red. Not bloodshot. Not albino pink. Fucking blood-red.

"I'm guessing those aren't special effects contacts," Phil commented. "And, hey, there are the horns you were talking about, Bruce. I hadn't seen them before this."

"More, please, I pray?" Steve's puppy mumbled into the down-stuffed nylon.

And, hell, what sounded like the mother of all sore throats aside, that definitely wasn't Ancient Icelandic. Also, Tony had just been to London (though not to look at the queen), and damn him if Steve's alien puppy didn't sound British. Posh, Received Pronunciation British.

Hey, he thought, Maybe when his people monitored our transmissions to learn our ways, all they could pick up was Masterpiece Theater? He sounded ridiculous, even to himself.

Steve climbed to his feet—not stiffly, he was too Super Soldier for that, but like he'd been crouching there a long time, just watching.

"You can come out, you know," he told his new puppy. "You're among friends. We're not like those others who hurt you. It doesn't matter if you're a mutant, or even an alien. You're safe here."

Yeah, not to be cynical, but that remains to be seen, Tony thought.

At least it wasn't Nick Fury standing there with them. He liked to tell himself Phil—back-from-the-dead Phil—had more humanity. He might still represent SHIELD, but at least he'd ask your permission nicely before he vivisected you. Fury would've started up the cutting himself, impromptu, with a dull jack-knife, a handful of swear words for musical accompaniment.

Steve approached slowly, one hand still outstretched, keeping low, like he was about to climb into a boat. Maybe he thought it made him look smaller and less threatening. None of which probably meant much when his puppy suddenly stood bolt upright and appeared to be within spitting distance of Thor's ridiculous height.

He also appeared to tip the scales at about fifty kilos. Tony had never seen a person that thin outside of photographs—either old ones depicting folks to which very, very bad things had happened, or newer ones showing victims of famine.

One of the alien's horns was cracked, half of it just hanging there by a thread, his jet-black hair, jaggedly cut, was practically matted into dreadlocks and either he'd been living rough or homeless chic was the latest thing for his species. Bruises the color of black grapes

showed through the rips in his clothing, and his once-apparently-aristocratic nose was kind of smooshed over to one side. Something creaked and whined when he breathed. He was also shaking like a leaf, swaying on those long, long, skinny legs.

He looked young. He also looked shit-scared--but just the fact that he was standing there, sick and beat-up as he was, staring them all levelly in the eyes, told Tony the poor alien kid at least had some stones to him, figuratively, if not literally.

“Steve! Catch him!” Bruce called out, two seconds before Cap actually *did* catch him, and the alien projectile vomited all over the front of his shirt.

Steve jerked back, on automatic pilot, but still looking disgusted—which, really, who could totally blame him? The alien swayed some more, wiping his mouth with his hand, clearly fairly disgusted with his own self.

“Fuck this,” Tony growled. As a drinking man of long standing, he was no stranger to a little vomit.

He managed to catch the poor s.o.b. before his *uber*-skinny ass hit the linoleum. The guy seemed to drape all over him, like he was being hugged by an octopus, and Tony lowered him gently to the floor, letting the alien lean against him, his arm around those bony shoulders, feeling lumps of spine, ribs, shoulder blades. Poor damn kid. He couldn't judge Steve. No way. He'd have brought this one home too, no questions asked.

“Nat, there's a throw blanket on the couch, will you grab it? Clint, you and Director go down and fetch a gurney from the infirmary. Cap, you stink. Get cleaned up, maybe?”

When everyone else was gone, Bruce, now bearing a wastebasket and damp paper towel, came to sit beside him on the floor, in his beige cardigan, khakis, and earnest expression looking like he was about to lead the three of them in a few rousing choruses of *Kumbaya*.

Instead, he wiped the alien's face and hands tenderly, cleaning him up as best he could on short notice. Bruce was kind that way, almost always.

“Seriously, buddy,” Tony told him. “Never wear that sweater again in my sight. You look like a counselor at a Christian Youth Camp. It makes me twitch.” By which he actually meant, *God, bro, you really are the best*. Because Bruce was--Tony never thought of shit like that.

Bruce laughed softly, brushing back the alien's raggedy hair. “This guy didn't come here ahead of the invasion. If I had to guess, I'd say he was either shipwrecked or exiled. The question is...?”

“From where, or possibly for what, or by whom?” Tony said. “Yeah, I know. But, poor chump, look at him. I don't think this is his natural look. I think this is not the alien Bear Grylls. He can't have had the least idea how to survive here.”

“I often used to see him at the library,” Steve put in, having appeared out of nowhere. He must have showered in record time. His hair was damp, and he wore a crisp plaid shirt and

chinos. "I'd leave money for him, enough for a cup of your expensive modern coffee, or a cheap meal, but he never took it. Maybe it hurt his pride."

"Or he just didn't understand the concept," Tony said.

"What does an alien read?" Bruce asked. "He was actually reading? He speaks and reads English?"

Steve smiled a little. "Not '*How to Build a Bomb in the Cardboard Box You Call Home*', my friends. Shakespeare, mostly, I think. World mythology. Dickens. Back in the fall, when I first saw him, he was kind of a handsome guy. Then, later... he wasn't."

He picked up one of the alien's limp hands.

"I watched him get kicked out last night—he was twitchy, mumbling to himself, pretty sick, I guess. A lady gave him a sweater and some money, but he threw it away. He seemed so upset, really out of his head. I picked up the sweater and followed him, into Macy's. There was a group—young people, mostly, but older folks, too. People you wouldn't have looked at twice on the street, just doing some early Christmas shopping."

Steve's cheeks flushed high up, the way they did when he was really, really upset. His lips hardened into a thin line.

"You know what we did with someone like him when I was a kid, coming up in Brooklyn? I don't mean a mutant, necessarily, I don't know if I'd ever seen a mutant, back then. We offered him a warm bowl of soup, maybe some of mama's cookies, if we had any. Grandad's old coat, a pair of gloves for his hands. A safe place to sleep for the night, even if it was just a blanket on the floor. What we didn't do was shout at him, beat him, and fall on him like a pack of wild dogs. That's not American, and it's not the way to celebrate Our Lord's birthday. What's the point of all those expensive gifts, if that's the way they behave?"

"And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing," Phil said. Everyone was back from their missions, it appeared.

Clint gave him a look.

"What? I was an altar boy." Phil sounded only the tiniest bit defensive. "Some things stick. Besides which, I think those words are true enough, whatever your beliefs. As far as I'm concerned, as long as your friend stays peaceful, we don't have an issue. Cap found an unfortunate homeless mutant, the victim of anti-mutant sentiment, and has given him a temporary home until he can recover. End of story. That okay with everybody? Tony? It's your tower."

"Once he's stable, he stays in a safe room until we know more," Tony answered. See, he did try to stay on the smarter side of caution sometimes. Not often, but sometimes. "Maybe the one next door, that doesn't smell like puke? Otherwise, sure. J., get this poor bastard some furniture. Maybe some pajamas and shit. Do p.j.'s even come in size zero, extra tall? Whatever's needed."

Working together, the others transferred dead-to-the-world blue alien dude to the gurney. When Tony picked himself up, his knees popped like firecrackers. Christ, he really was staring fifty hard in the face these days.

"Might as well make him cozy on the way to recovery, right?" he went on. "But then, Timmy, we have to find his real owners. You know that, right?"

"You're a good man, Tony," Steve told him, earnestly, which weren't words he got out of Cap every day. Usually Cap thought he was kind of an asshole, Tony guessed--and rightfully so, probably--so he'd take the compliment while he could.

"You won't regret this," Steve added, still earnest as hell.

They all looked at each other. Natasha declaimed something, emphatically, in Russian.

"He had to say it. He just *had* to say the words. He couldn't stop himself." Clint shook his head sadly at their team leader. "Steven, oh Steven, in your time among us, have we taught you nothing?"

In Avengers Tower, the first rule was always, always, avoid at all costs saying stuff like, "you won't regret this."

The opposite invariably came true.

The Importance of Being Tony

Chapter Summary

Tony suffers from jet-lag. And the past. And the present.

Chapter Notes

Now that rational weather has returned to the Greater Seattle Area, my powers have been restored! My house and garden love me and all three of my current stories are percolating like crazy in my brain--expect a new *Avenger* chapter tomorrow. Thank you everyone for reading and for your brilliant comments!

The headmaster of a U.S. school is called a "principal," which we're taught to spell correctly as small children by remembering "the principal is your pal."

'Stang=Mustang, a sports car made by the Ford Motor Corp. Vintage ones from the 60's are not only things of beauty, but a joy to drive. Vroom! Tony was clearly practicing in advance for MIT, where I understand the taking apart of motor vehicles and reassembling them in unlikely places is practically a graduation requirement for engineering students.

Uncle Obie=Obadiah Stane, the villain of *Iron Man 1*, a sociopathic master-manipulator who was a "friend" and business partner of Howard Stark, then Tony's "mentor" after his parents' death. It was Stane who arranged for Tony to be kidnapped and killed by the Ten Rings terrorist group, so that he could seize control of Stark Industries.

Glenmorangie 18 is a very nice 18-year-old single-malt scotch. It now goes for about \$120 a bottle. On sale.

"*This Is Just To Say*" is a poem by William Carlos Williams, which goes:

*I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox*

*and which
you were probably*

*saving
for breakfast*

*Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold*

The average temperature on Mercury is 332 degrees Fahrenheit (167 degrees Celsius), though it can get as hot as 801 F (427 C).

Truth-or-Dare=a party game in which players are required to either answer a (usually embarrassing) question or complete a (usually embarrassing) task. *Marry-Fuck-Kill*=another party game, in which, out of a list of three people, a player has to say which he'd marry, which he'd fuck and which he'd kill.

Where else can you get this kind of quality useless information? ;)

Tony had a talent for pretending and, just now, was putting it to excellent use. Some people might have called it less a talent, more "*Being in Denial*" or "*Avoiding Responsibility*." Tony wasn't one of them. Given his choice, he'd take the option that sounded fanciful, creative, whimsical.

Hence, he was "*Good at Pretending*."

Pretending: Item One--making believe Pepper didn't totally *know* he was back from the U.K. and wasn't hunting for him through the tower like a pack of wolves tracking a wounded caribou across the tundra.

Comparing Pep to a single wolf just didn't do her justice. She truly possessed the instincts and abilities of an entire pack. She was phenomenal. She was scary (sometimes).

And beautiful. And great. And kind. And smart. And patient. And pretty much every other good thing. Too high-class, adult and perfect for the likes of him, anyway.

She was gonna dump his sorry ass in about five seconds, sooner than that if she found out he'd been deliberately hiding from her search.

Tony knew he should have felt sorry. Instead, he felt like that poem they'd made him read, during his one sad, friendless, bored-to-tears, the-principal-(who was very much *not* his pal, especially after Tony took apart his cherry-red 'Stang and reassembled it on the school roof)-

wants-to-see-you-in-his-office-Mr.-Stark year in high school, before his parents had their little rendezvous with fate and he, sole heir to Stark Industries, zoomed off to MIT and other bigger and better things, never to look back again.

In those not-so-golden days when he was still an actual boy, not a prime example of Peter Pan Syndrome occupying a relatively youthful (all things considered) but undeniably middle-aged body. In those days when he still believed in golden futures, and had hope, of a sort, and when he still thought good ol' Uncle Obie was his friend.

The fact that good ol' Uncle Obie sent him, underage son of a not-always-functional alcoholic, monthly cases of Glenmorangie 18 as he was trying to work his way through the toughest engineering school in the nation, if not the world, should probably have clued him in to something.

Experience teaches us all sorts of lessons, most of them hard and difficult ones. No wonder Tony liked math, science, engineering. In those disciplines, the world made sense. There was always an answer, a solution, even if it hadn't quite been nailed down yet. Science was beautiful and simple in all its complexity.

Not like people.

People sometimes confused Tony, even scared him a little. To hide this inconvenient little fact, he talked frequently (some might say non-stop) and fast, on the "baffle them with bullshit" principle.

Pretending: Item Two--as aforementioned, Tony dealt with the fear by learning how to crack a joke, how to work a room. And running, running fast and hard when faced with the threat of someone getting too close.

He'd let beautiful, loyal, loving Pepper get too close, close enough to see the cracks in the varnish. Close enough that she'd held him tight, in loving arms, when he woke up screaming.

What the fuck had he been thinking? Pepper was a whole and healthy woman with a good brain and fine self-esteem. She *so* wasn't made for someone like him.

What had he been thinking about?

The poem. Yeah, that fucking poem (to circle back around to his original topic), was about this guy gobbling up the plums his lover had been saving for breakfast, and was supposed to be his sorry-ass apology, that wasn't really so much an apology as it was gloating.

"*Forgive me,*" the poem said.

*they were delicious
so sweet and so cold*

Tony always wondered, did the dude mean the fruit, or did he mean the girl (or, boy, for that matter) was sweet but cold? He'd liked the way the words worked in both directions, like a well-designed circuit. Plus, the poem was short.

Short was good. Tony like short. Concise. Non-redundant, except when redundant was necessary as backup, which actually made it not redundant at all.

Christ, he was so, *so* fucking jet-lagged.

Bruce reached past him to turn off the kettle. Tony hadn't even remembered switching on the burner. How long had he been standing there, a blank look on his face?

"While I'm sure our new alien friend would appreciate tea approximately as hot as the surface of Mercury," Bruce said, "I like that kettle. You'll notice it's turquoise, my favorite color. I'd be sad if you melted it to slag, the way you did the last one." Bruce's hand set down on Tony's shoulder, giving a little squeeze.

Bruce was a good guy. If there was any person in the whole world Tony truly loved, that person was Bruce.

Not in *that* way (though what most of the world didn't know was that Tony was just as much into guys as he was into girls, dating—as a euphemism for fucking—a whole string of girls was just more expedient for the billionaire-inventor-playboy-philanthropist image, not to mention, most of them were only turned on by either his big brain or fatter wallet, so the question of whether they liked or didn't like *him* hardly entered into the equation).

Bruce was the little brother Howard and Maria hadn't seen fit to give him. Bruce was good, and decent, and just as fucked up (if not more so) as he was, which made him safe to love. It was a match made in heaven.

Despite being (just about) his scientific equal, Bruce also had a better grasp of human emotion. He could sometimes even put into words the shit Tony was feeling, and even explain it to him.

"I'd just hate to see this kettle of mine go through a meltdown," Bruce continued, giving Tony's shoulder another little squeeze.

Were they still even talking about the damn teakettle? Somehow Tony didn't think so.

"Would you like me to take over?" Bruce had a kind voice, even when snarking. He had kind eyes, though those eyes looked sad a lot of the time.

"By the way, Pepper's looking for you," Bruce said. "I lied to her on your behalf. I am not proud of this, Tony."

"Bro, did you ever wish somebody would dump you, just to get it over with and put you both out of your misery? Also, so that *they* had to be the dumping asshole, and you could be the innocent victim?"

Tony became aware, suddenly, that they were not the only ones in the room. There were others. The others were staring at him.

Slowly, Clint raised his hand, as if asking Teacher to call on him in class, though somewhat reluctantly.

“Totally--though not in the present case,” he said.

Phil, standing just behind him, rubbed the back of the archer’s neck tenderly with his fingertips. Clint twisted his head, giving his boyfriend a complicated kind of grin.

It hit Tony, suddenly, that Director really loved Clint. And that Clint really loved Director.

And Tony, clueless as usual about such things, just hadn't noticed before then.

“Did I mention jet-lag?” Tony asked, as if that excused anything. At least he wasn’t drunk (mostly, beyond a certain maintenance level necessary for function).

Why in hell would anyone even want to be with me anyway? Tony thought, in sudden, gut-twisting despair. *Why?*

Money aside—and Pepper didn’t want his money. She glimpsed traces of a good guy inside of him. She wanted him to be reliable and emotionally healthy. She wanted him to *care*.

She wanted him to kiss her hand, gaze deep into her eyes and answer, “*The radiant Miss Virginia 'Pepper' Potts,*” when they got silly and played tipsy *Truth-or-Dare* with their equally three-sheets-to-the-wind friends, the question being, “*Who’s the most attractive person you’ve ever met?*”

“*Thor’s evil-ass brother,*” apparently, was *not* the right answer to that particular question.

It probably didn’t help that Prince Loki of Asgard had also featured as an answer in an earlier game of *Marry-Fuck-Kill, Supervillain Edition*. Not as the “Kill” answer, either—that was Magneto, because every time they came up against him, he fucked up Tony’s tech, and that just wasn’t forgivable. He’d had to think long and hard (no pun intended) between the marry and fuck options, but decided to marry Doctor Doom in the end. Old Victor had his own country, after all. A guy likes a little security.

The party broke up pretty soon after Tony dropped that little truth-bomb, though Thor had lingered to take him aside for a moment. Aside being out onto the terrace.

“You should know, Friend Tony,” Point Break said, his face twisting up with what, in Thor, passed for emotion. “My brother dwells now in Valhalla. He passed over in the cause of saving the mortal life of my sweetest Lady Jane.”

“*Jeez, big guy,*” Tony said. He felt sick. It was probably the booze.

He totally didn’t know what to do with the information.

“My brother... My Loki... Though he often acted wrongly, I shall never believe his heart was wholly evil. Our father, though wise in all things, was unwise often in the raising of his second son. Loki is... was... a proud, brilliant, restless spirit, and our father told to him lies so unforgivable they ripped the living, beating heart from his breast and brought to him pain that might not in any manner be borne. I loved him. I miss him. I wronged him also, in ignorance. He...”

Jesus, were those tears shining in Thor's manly blue eyes?

"He was my brother," Thor finished simply.

"Christ, I feel like shit," Tony had said. "I *am* shit. Thor, I'm so sorry."

"You could not have known," the god answered, delivering a small, affectionate punch to Tony's left arm, which made it go numb down to the tips of his fingers. "I bid you goodnight then, my friend. Until the morrow!"

"Until the morrow, Thor. I guess I drank more than I thought. I'm gonna sit out here a bit, catch some air, maybe."

Thor gazed at him a moment. Tony tended to think of Thor as dumb as a box of rocks, and firmly believed that if he'd been forced to grow up alongside the god of thunder's stolid worthiness, forced to play the eternal second banana in the world's longest game of "*why can't you be more like your brother*," he'd have turned to the dark side too.

"By no power could you have known," Thor said, in what passed for him as softly. Then, strangely, "Grieve not overmuch, Friend Tony."

Tony goggled as the thunder god strode away.

Cue Pretending: Item Three.

Grieve? Why should I grieve? Your bro tossed me out a window, remember? he asked silently, in the ten seconds it took him to stumble to the railing.

Pepper found him there some indeterminate time later, still sobbing his guts out. Since she knew him well, she arrived carrying a folding chair and a sleeping bag, fully aware she was in for the long haul. She arranged the bag around him tenderly, protecting Tony from the cold night air, then arranged her beautiful self in the chair.

The moonlight in her red-gold hair, combined with his tears, sparkled like magic.

"I gave the wrong answer," Tony said when he could. "I always give the wrong answers."

"Okay," Pepper said. Then, a long time later, "Not always."

He thought he might have also heard her say, "*You know I love you, Tony*," but that could have been a dream.

By that time, he was asleep.

In retrospect, if he was stupid enough to get involved in such games, Tony was generally better off taking the dare. His truths tended not to be stuff others wanted to hear.

He never mentioned Thor's brother again, not to anyone. If Loki's name came up, he found a pretext for leaving the room.

Gently pushed to the back of the kitchen and away from the stove, Tony pulled the StarkPhone from his pocket with the hand not still clutching the handle of the nearly red-hot teakettle.

He shot Pep a text: *Yes. Totally hiding. Am a shit. Also busy. Need to talk soonest.*

"You, Mr. Stark," Bruce told him, "Are relieved of tea-making duties. You make terrible tea. I don't know how someone can be simultaneously a genius and fail to understand the use of the common tea-bag, but you manage."

"I want to make tea for the alien!" Tony mock-protested. He was actually too tired to want to do anything, so tired his bones hurt him.

"Don't be a child," Nat commanded, in the darkest of dark Russian tones. She took the kettle away from him forcibly. Damn, the woman was strong. "Go sleep until you're sensible."

Clint snorted. "*That's gonna take awhile.*"

Tony went. He *faux-pouted* (*fauxted?*), but he went. Not to the penthouse, where Pepper could find him. To what they called the Boys' Bunkhouse, down the hall from the safe room.

As he staggered by, workers were setting up a bed and other furniture in Safe Room #2, as per request.

Steve must have taken his puppy to the groomer's. Or the infirmary. One of the two.

Tony already missed him. This particular puppy was clearly Steve's best puppy yet, much more interesting than the other ones, who tended just to sadden him.

Plus, *this* puppy had upchucked on Captain America. That won him major points in Tony's book.

Tony fell into one of the narrow bunkbeds, and slept the sleep of the dead.

The Usefulness of Brothers

Chapter Summary

There are too many *Jöttnar* in Loki's room. And then there aren't. Thor has an idea about the identity of Steve's new puppy.

Chapter Notes

Ótaminn=savage, untamed (Icelandic)

In Norse mythology, the goddess Eir, associated with healing, is called "the handmaiden of Mengloth"--Mengloth being, according to some sources, the healing aspect of Frigga.

I just learned "lad" (*ladde*) is an old Norse word. Sometimes my instincts are way, way ahead of me.

The "foul-tasting air" inside the mask is aerosolized albuterol (a drug that dilates the breathing passages), delivered through a nebulizer machine, which does rather sound like the hissing of snakes (or even dragons!).

Esperanto is an artificially constructed language devised in 1887 by Dr. Ludwig Lazarus Zamenhof. It was meant to unite the world by being a language easy for anyone to learn, with roots in many different languages. The name literally means, "one who hopes."

DUI=Driving Under the Influence

"Squiffy" is my favorite word for a state of drunkenness.

Hannibal Lecter, in *The Silence of the Lambs* spoke of eating the liver of a census taker with some fava beans and a nice Chianti.

"*Et tu, Brute?*"="And, you, Brutus?" supposedly the last words of Julius Caesar, after he was stabbed (literally) in the back by his dear friend.

The disciple Judas was said to have betrayed Jesus by kissing him to let the Romans know the man they should arrest.

Jöttnar filled his chamber, blue men everywhere Loki looked, though some of them seemed oddly small, the others far broader in their physiques than they ought to have been. He saw,

also, in addition to that broadness, the faces, almost, of the great, soundless cats that haunted the heavily-wooded lower reaches of the Ótaminn Mountains, east of the Golden City.

They bore a potent magic, those cats, and a deadly venom in their claws. Loki still carried four thin pale scars upon his right thigh, from where one had caught him in his youth, when he and his brother had gone exploring.

He had never before seen Thor look afraid, but his brother clearly had been terrified—not of the wild creature, which he slew with a single terrible blow nearly the moment he responded to Loki’s cry for aid, but by the thought that his idea of a fine adventure might well have killed his young brother.

Thor had borne Loki in his arms all the way back to the Golden Palace, driving his poor horse to its limits, then Loki’s steed which, though swift, was really too light a mount for the older boy’s bulk, much less their weights combined. The last miles he ran frantically, the breath catching in his chest, both of them knowing the severity of the wound. Loki tried his best to stay wakeful, to tease his brother and jest with him so that Thor would not worry.

Only Thor did worry, having seen older, stronger men, warriors, die from such wounds. The toxins in Loki’s blood were too great for his young body to withstand, much less heal. In the end it had required all their mother’s great skill, as well as the skill of Eir and the best of her healers, to save Loki’s life, and he remained languid and confused for many days afterward.

Thor then spent every free hour with him. The suffering the wound caused Loki was almost worth the rewards it gained him, firstly, to have seen with his own eyes the great cats, which were gorgeous in their golden wildness, like untamed fire, secondly, for that short while, to have all his brother’s attention.

The journey had been Frigga’s idea, yet Thor carried all the blame for Loki’s injury on himself.

“You do not spend enough time with your brother, Thor,” Frigga had said. “Loki has no friends but young Sigyn, no friends among the lads whatsoever. He spends too much time at his books. He is lonely, and needs you to act as a true brother toward him, not to tease and torment him as you sometimes do. He admires you so, Thor. And you know you win all your father’s attention. Show your true noble generosity of spirit, my son. Be kind to Loki.”

Thor had grumbled a bit, and made faces, and complained about the pranks Loki had been known to pull now and then, but in the end even he had become caught up in the excitement of the expedition. They had not squabbled. On their own, each enjoyed the company of the other. So it was, in the old days.

Now, in the strange white chamber filled with *Jötnar*, which he knew, somehow, could be no part of his home Realm, Loki first called, weakly and in terror, his dear mother’s name:

“Mother! Allmother! Blesséd Frigga! Mamma, please, Mamma...!”

And then, when she did not answer his cries, Loki called his brother’s name, wishing against wishing that Thor would come to him, in these hours and days when he felt so afraid, and burned as he had burned with the great cat’s venom.

But Thor did not come to him.

Loki felt furious, at first, that they did not answer, did not rush to his bedside to console him.

Later he only felt sad.

Later still, as sense returned, he knew he should never have expected them.

His mother was dead. He had first denied her, then grieved for her with the whole of his twisted and broken heart, but grief mended nothing, least of all dragged back the dead from Queen Hela's cold realm. He would never behold Frigga's sweet face again. Never, not so long as he lived.

Thor... Oh, how he had betrayed his brother! Lied, deceived, shamed, made mischief so cruel it could no longer be called mischief, only malice. Thor would have mourned him for a time, surely, after Loki's supposed death, if only because of the intrinsic goodness in his heart—he was the worthy one, after all—but then he would just as surely have moved on. Why would he not?

Thor did not need *him*, a wicked, useless, half-*Jötunn* not-brother.

Thor had his lovely mortal girl, his Avengers, his Midgardian friends, the fine life to which Loki himself, in the mask of the Allfather's face, had released him. No mortal would shriek at Thor and call him "*mutie*." No mortal would call him monster, not with his pleasant, hearty manner and comely visage.

Thor never would have been allowed to drop into the depths of the abyss, to dwell for unending days in a hell a hundred thousand times worse than that threatened by the acolytes of the man-god, so terrible the cold not-mercy offered by Thanos and The Other seemed a release.

"You seem troubled and sad," one of the small *Jötnar* said to him, snuggling the warm coverlet close under Loki's chin. "Is there anything I can do to help you?"

Loki shook his head miserably. What could an undersized *Jötunn* do for him? What could anyone?

He flung himself into self-pity, and wallowed there, almost glad when his fever soared again, and all sense flew away. It was easier to suffer than to think.

Sometime in the night (though it might as easily have been day) the man with the soothing voice arrived, the voice he'd trusted so completely he'd allowed the stranger to bring him to a place filled with his enemies, the *Jötnar*.

When, during that time, he could not breathe, could not drag in the least sip of breath, he allowed the man to lift him, even as he fought, drowning and afraid. The man slipped a mask over his face full of foul-tasting air that made his heart race and his limbs shake as with ague, and told him, "It's okay, son. It's okay. You'll be able to breathe pretty soon."

The sound of hissing came from all around, the sound of serpents or dragons, and Loki tried to warn this new friend of their presence, the danger they threatened, but the kind man only said, "It's okay," again, then, "Lean on my shoulder, son, we have everything covered."

The man's arms were big and powerful, nearly as big as Thor's. His large hand rubbed circles of warmth on Loki's back, hurtful (he'd become so thin, and so bruised) and comforting in the same moment.

He decided to accept the comforting not for what it was, an anonymous gesture of kindness from a stranger toward another stranger, but as part of a sweeter fantasy-life nothing like the true, sad, friendless life he lived.

Loki tried to pretend he was cared for, though who would care for him, ever, for whatever time he had left now? He bore no illusions: he'd be tossed into the streets, or worse, at the merest whisper of his real name.

He tried to pretend, then, that he was loved, but such a pretense stretched even Loki's excellent imagination further than it was willing to go.

When Loki awakened, some considerable time later, he realized he'd been an utter fool—not only in his self-indulgent fantasies, but in thinking his room stuffed with *Jöttnar*.

For one thing, there were only two in number, for another, those two men were not *Jöttnar* at all, though both were, undeniably, blue.

In fact, instead of smooth and icy skin, both men (his captors? his attendants?) possessed actual fur, it appeared. The smaller one's quite short, and of a fine, downy texture, exquisitely soft and soothing, as Loki recalled, from when he'd clutched at the man's arms within the rage of his fever, or when the smaller man held him upright during the many previous times his breath came hard to him, or he coughed so hard that he made himself sick.

This smaller one stayed with him nearly always, sleeping, at times, on a cot within his chamber. He wore very plain garments, also of blue, and a cap made of similar cloth over a head of blue-black curls. It was he who washed Loki, and changed his garments, or sponged him with a cool, sharp-smelling liquid when the fever roared in his veins.

He had a kind voice, a voice like the voices of the Northmen, full of hills and valleys of pitch and inflection (though he spoke the language of the Englishmen), and a kind face (though an odd one, for his ears were as a *Swartalf's*, and his eyes as an *Eldjöttnar's*, a Fire Giant of *Muspellheimr*, ablaze with yellow light).

Loki suspected the small man must be the big man's thrall, though the big man appeared to be a kind sort of master, for the smaller seemed cheerful in his thralldom.

It was the large one who had reminded Loki of the great mountain cats, with his loud, roaring voice and coarse, bristling fur. If the first man slipped through the room silent as shadow, the second came through like a great, powerful beast.

Loki felt cautious of him, perhaps even feared him. Though the big blue man seemed (oddly enough), to act as a healer, Loki had no doubt, were his temper aroused, the beast might easily tear him limb from limb.

Loki did not wish to be torn limb from limb. It did not hold high rank on his list of possible deaths.

“*Ach*, I step out for only a minute and you wake up!” the small blue man called out cheerfully, slipping through the slight opening of the door in his usual soundless way. He smelled, pleasantly, of soap and cleanliness. Most likely, after a difficult night, he had stolen a chance to bathe while Loki for a time lay in peaceful sleep.

In a moment, he was perched, with perfect balance, on the foot rail of Loki’s bed. The next he stood beside Loki’s bed, offering a cup of something to drink. “The little tube is called a straw,” he said. “It bends—“ He demonstrated. “You suck on it, so you don’t have to sit up and waste your energy.”

The blue man slipped the end of the straw between Loki’s lips. It felt sharp against his tongue, and tasted strange, but the drink it bore was only water. Loki drank a sip or two, then tired.

“Don’t worry if you feel weak,” the blue man told him. “You’ve been very ill, but at long last you’re improving, *Gott sei Dank*. We’ve even splinted up your horn, if you were worried about that. There was a very small infection, but I cleaned it up nicely and built the cast myself. It was a little tricky matching up the spirals, but I think I managed very well, in the end. The cast will need to stay on for a few more weeks, and then your lovely horns shall be good as new, as if nothing was ever broken. I wanted to do a fine job for you. I broke my tail once, and was disconsolate until it mended, as if I’d caused grievous harm to a dear, old friend.”

The tail in question (Loki supposed) rose up and waved jauntily in the air.

Loki shut his eyes. He cared nothing about tails, or horns--but though a sharp answer wished to rise to his lips, quelling the young blue man’s enthusiasm, he recalled that the hated horns did possess a certain pleasing symmetry, and both alike would be better than one whole and one truncated.

“I thank you,” Loki murmured. “For my horns. It is better that they remain whole.”

The straw slipped between his lips again, and Loki drank. When he spoke a second time, he no longer sounded as if he had been dining only upon gravel for the whole of a year.

“What is your name, man of blue?” he asked.

His companion laughed in delight. “Kurt. Kurt Wagner. And what can I call you?”

Loki wished to trust this Kurt, who had cared for him, and seemed kind—yet every instinct he possessed cried out for caution.

Kurt had also, he noticed, not asked his name, only what he might be called, allowing him free rein to lie outright, without even the dishonour of a falsehood.

“I am called Sigyr,” Loki answered, in a voice that said he hovered near the edge of sleep, which was indeed not far from the truth. “Of the *Vanir* people.”

“It is kind of you,” Thor began earnestly (or maybe Tony meant pompously—it was open to debate), “To allow me to attend our meetings in this manner. Remotely.” He produced the word, clearly recently learned, proudly.

Apparently, all this time, when they thought they’d been speaking English with Thor, it was actually some sort of Space Viking universal speech—the All-Speak--the Esperanto of the Stars, as it were. He was now, as a recent citizen of Earth in general and the U.S. in particular, attempting to learn their actual language.

Results, so far, were... varied.

“So, Big Guy...” Tony started off. It was an even easier name to use for Thor than usual. Displayed on the hi-def StarkScreen mounted on the wall in Avengers Central, Thor’s head was the size of a watermelon. A full-sized one, not one of those little round jobs grown for people who lived alone in apartments, seeds and flavor removed. Even Thor’s *regular* head was bigger than one of those.

Tony was slightly “*under the weather*” at that particular meeting. The kind of “*under the weather*” that might have cost him his license if he’d decided to hop into one of his many fine cars and go driving. He wondered what they’d call it if he took a suit out for a little spin and slammed into the side of the Empire State Building. A FUI?

Tony giggled. That sounded less like Flying Under the Influence than it did like Fucked Up Indeed.

Or course, if he plowed into the Empire State Building in any suit less hard-core than the Hulkbuster, he would indeed *be* very thoroughly fucked, and probably earn himself a nice R.I.P. and a closed-casket funeral instead of any kind of citation.

Would Pepper attend? he wondered. Would she cry? Or would she spit on his coffin, then dance upon his grave in a pair of spike-heeled, red-soled Christian Louboutins.

Nah, Pepper wouldn’t spit. She was too goddamn ladylike.

Tony giggled again, then clapped a hand over his mouth. Everyone tried, surreptitiously to slide their chairs away from his. They probably thought he was gonna puke, which he totally wasn’t, and even if he did, Steve would be most the likely recipient, the same as he’d been with his poor, sick puppy, since he was not only seated right next door, he hadn’t (with his arms folded on top of the table and his head plunked down on top of them), even noticed Tony’s moment of weirdness.

Tony giggled again, uncontrollably. How juvenile!

Which exact same words had featured prominently in Pepper's succinct but effective closing statement. Verdict? Anthony Edward Stark: guilty on all counts of being a Horrible, No-Good Boyfriend in the First Degree.

Which he was, undisputedly. He hadn't even bothered to mount a defense. What could he say to her that wasn't a lie?

"Sir," JARVIS spoke up suddenly and sternly in his ear-bee, "You're *squiffy*, and in grave danger of embarrassing yourself irredeemably before your peers. Kindly compose yourself, before you cause further damage to your professional standing."

Tony shut up. J. didn't often speak to him like that, but when he did, it behooved him to pay attention. He sat straighter, sipped the black coffee Clint had brought him and, since misery loves company, kicked Steve under the table to rouse him as well.

Steve straightened, blinked, yawned. Clint fetched another coffee from the kitchen and slid it across the table to him. Night after night up with his ailing puppy was telling even on Steve's sparkling Super Soldier constitution.

Puppy hadn't had his shots, it seemed.

"Are you unwell, dear Captain?" Thor asked sympathetically.

"Cap has a new puppy," Tony answered. "It's been keeping him up at night."

"Truly?" Thor beamed. "A puppy? What manner of..." His face fell suddenly. "Ah, not an infant canine, in fact. One of the Midgardian unfortunates our good Captain attempts to save, now and then."

"A week before they catch themselves on fire trying to cook meth in a Walmart men's room?" Tony said. "Yup, you got it. Got a riddle for you, though, Big Dude—what's blue, has horns, and isn't a mutant?"

Tony watched Thor's lips move, silently repeating the words. It was a little painful to see.

"Is his skin extremely cold to the touch?" Thor asked, suddenly, an Edison-style lightbulb switching on over his giant head.

"No, quite warm, actually. He's been running a high fever," Bruce put in. "Oh, and a news-flash from Kurt. Our alien's awake. He says—and I'm quoting here—'*I am called Sigr.*' Kurt spells it with a 'Y'. *I am of the Vanir people.*' When he first came here, he spoke a few words in what seemed to be a very old form of Icelandic—maybe--though he also appears to read and speak English quite well. Ring any bells, Thor?"

Thor shut his eyes. For a minute his face twisted up in an expression of complete and utter agony—but then he was himself again. Good ol' placid Thor. Nothing bothers *him*.

"My friends," he said quietly. "I must warn you. I fear your danger is great. This man who has cared for your captive is by now most likely his thrall. You must force that man into unconsciousness, then confine him. The creature our Captain has attempted to befriend is in

truth a dangerous criminal, wanted for terrible crimes in many Realms, Only the Hulk Tank may hold him, and then only if...”

Two seconds later Thor started rattling off a series of frequencies, rates of emission, and so forth, technical shit Tony would have sworn on his next year’s profits Thor would no more be able to comprehend than he could the rules of American football: light waves, sound frequencies, wave amplitude, amperes of electrical current, a bundle of weird gobbledegook that had even JARVIS saying, with a slightly shocked tone to his voice, “Excuse me, sir, would you please repeat...?”

From Thor. Of all not-exactly-people.

Tony tended to forget that Thor was the fucking crown prince of a fucking advanced world (Realm?). That this wasn’t exactly his first rodeo. That more than once in his life he’d had to lend a certain amount of thought toward how to contain his super-powered, bag-of-cats brother.

All of a sudden it bothered him that Thor had stopped looking the least bit placid. Instead he looked tired, and sad, as in, “*How many times in my life will I actually have to do this?*”

Bruce, on the other hand, appeared slightly shocky, hands trembling, pale around the lips. Needless to say, he balked at the thought of taking out his good friend Kurt with a tranq dart, and only relented when Clint gave him the old, “*This is what happens when you’re mind-thralled*” refresher lecture.

Security was informed to deny Dr. Henry McCoy access to the premises. If he wanted into the tower he’d have to scale the frickin’ outside of the building like King Kong and break through an unbreakable window.

To avoid further incidents, the X-Men were informed. Tony had an enlightening conversation with the one and only Wolverine, who informed Tony, in return, that if Kurt came back to them so much as slightly scuffed, Tony could expect to have his balls sliced off and served to him by said Mr. Wolverine, along with some fava beans and a nice Chianti.

Tony assured him such action would not be needed. Also, that he really hated Chianti.

“Wiseass,” Wolverine snarled it him. “It’s funny to ya? Kurt’s the best of us. Ya hurt him, assclown, ya answer to me.”

“This is wrong,” Steve snapped, now beyond totally awake. “Is this how we act now? It isn’t that I doubt Thor, but...”

“Steve.” Natasha stood, her hands pressed flat against the table top. “Thor’s reaction? That was pure pain. Think about it, Captain. A criminal? Someone Thor obviously knows well? Perhaps cared about? Someone he thought he’d never have to worry about again?”

“Holy shit,” Tony breathed.

Bruce scowled. “Nat, no...”

“Really, really, *really*, no,” Clint said, his butt thumping back down into his chair. “Uh-uh. No.”

“He learned about your habit of helping those less fortunate, Cap.” Natasha’s face was kind, her voice remorseless. “He found a way to be ‘discovered’ by you, made himself look as if he was on his last legs to elicit your pity, manipulated you... I couldn’t possibly say what his agenda might be, but this has Loki written all over it.”

“I hate to agree, Steve.” Bruce’s face was all scrunched up with misery. “I hate even more to say it, but I think it *is* Loki. I think he played us. I just hope Thor gave us a few minutes and we can get him into the tank without having to break out the heavy artillery. Which in this case means The Other Guy, I guess.” Bruce sighed. “So, just let me know. I can take out Kurt, too, before it gets to that point. Kurt trusts me--for this last time at least. And one more friendship bites the dust. Joy.”

Steve climbed to his feet, and somewhere in the midst of that, without him even needing to pull on the spangle-suit, Tony could see the Captain Americaness just rolling on over him, like a nighttime fog rolling in over San Francisco Bay. It made him a little sad, because Cap could be such a humorless hardass, the guy with every single fucking answer, while Steve was kind of a sweet dude. A little clueless, sometimes, a little naïve, but maybe that was also what made the sweetness—that slight air about him of a little kid lost after dark in an unfamiliar neighborhood.

When Cap said, “Okay, folks, let’s lock and load,” Tony wanted to kick him in the teeth. Repeatedly.

He also felt way more sober at the current time than he really wanted to be.

Still, they all walked together to what was euphemistically known as the Wet Bar, letting JARVIS taste their DNA through the security mechanism on the door. The chamber slid open. Bruce spoke the names, the A.I. verified I.D.’s, a little slot slid open, like the slot for making deposits in an ATM, only instead of gobbling up cash and checks, out popped what looked like two small epi-pens, the things folks with killer allergies use to give themselves life-saving jolts of the drug epinephrine.

Bruce snatched them up, looking, the minute he touched them, like they were red-hot coals burning through his hands, though his face appeared set in stone.

The Wet Bar shut itself up behind them, and they trailed Bruce down the corridor to newly-refurbished-like-a-hospital-room Safe Room #2.

When Tony cleared the door, Bruce had just finished saying, “Hey, Kurt, I have something to show you!” His arm draped around the younger man’s shoulders, friendly and casual, for the two seconds before he stabbed the auto-injector into the back of Kurt’s neck.

Kurt turned to him slowly, slowly, his normally smiling mouth contorted, displaying a formidable set of fangs, his fiery eyes already darkening to orange.

The look he gave his dear friend Bruce was an unbeatable combination of, “*Et tu, Brute?*” and “Nice kiss, Judas.”

No Cause for Shawarma

Chapter Summary

The Avengers miscalculate. Badly. Several blue people are not pleased. Tony dreams about art and the possibility of deeper meanings. JARVIS is snide, but kind.

Chapter Notes

Rated "I" for a limited amount of medical-type ickyness.

Shawarma is a Levantine Arab way of preparing meat by grilling it on a spit for up to a day.

Stick-on name-tags (usually blue) that say "Hello my name is..." followed by a space to hand-write your own name are a common thing in the U.S. In my days as a corporate trainer, I'd order them by the gross.

We'll recall that "Ten Rings" was the name of the terrorist organization that kidnapped Tony in Afghanistan and was behind the mayhem with The Mandarin.

Ferris Bueller, of course, was reigning world champion at faking sick. I'm sure he also tried to take over the world at some point.

The actually meaningless psuedoscientific word "positronic" was coined by Isaac Asimov for his robot novels.

To grossly oversimplify, *Seiðr* is a form of Old Norse magic associated with the *Nornir*, or Norns. It was a mostly female practice, though there were male practitioners (Loki would be known as a *seiðrmann*). These male practitioners were often scorned and called "*ergi*", which is usually translated as effeminate. For my evil purposes, I like to consider it as the ability to view the world from both a male and female perspective.

I'm not what you'd call a Heavy Metal person, but when I was a kid the song "Iron Man" by Black Sabbath became permanently lodged in my head through frequent radio airplay. That's the song Tony's singing as he emerges from the bathroom.

"Sirs and madam," JARVIS said, talking a little faster than usual, and maybe a little more emphatically as well. "If I might advise..."

No one but Tony—who was used to taking advice from the A.I.—paid the least bit of attention.

In the instant after Kurt Wagner went down, flame-eyed and snarling, Bruce tossed the second injector to Cap, who jammed it into Loki's neck and pushed the plunger.

So, great team-work guys, Tony thought bitterly. Let's all go out for shawarma and brag about how totally we kicked butt against the evil alien! Avengers rule!

Except...

That wasn't how this one seemed likely to go down. For one thing, Tony thought it pretty unlikely that he'd ever, as long as he lived, forget the expression on Loki's face. The look combined sorrow and betrayal, along with a few other soul-shriveling emotions, then gave way mostly to simple resignation, the look of a guy so completely accustomed to things going up shit creek for him, it no longer came as any kind of surprise to find himself back in that location.

All of this took about three seconds.

It was also very much not the look of soulless evil—it seemed to Tony more like the expression of a disadvantaged child, especially given how skinny Loki was, with that recently-broken nose still swollen as hell and both eyes blackened to a raccoon-mask of bruising.

Tony doubted he would have recognized Loki as himself if the god of mischief had walked up to him, showed him before and after pictures and told him, "Hello, my name is Loki" while wearing a "*Hello, my name is Loki*" stick-on name-tag. He was that wrecked.

Just like that, Tony knew, without even knowing how he knew, that this both was and wasn't the same Loki they'd come up against in times past--arrogant, indifferent to humankind, and bag-of-cats crazy. This was a guy who'd been through some kind of fresh new hell (on top whatever additional personal hell he already carried around in his baggage, the weight of which Tony had the feeling was not inconsiderable). This was a guy who'd suffered some serious shit, the kind of shit that changed a person.

Or even an alien, as the case might be.

Tony knew from personal experience (please, let the name Ten Rings not be mentioned) how that one went.

It also seemed for damn sure someone had revoked Loki's subscription to InstaHeal Daily. Which meant...

Oh. Fuck.

Is the shot my esteemed colleagues just slammed into Loki's neck based on the stats from recent scans? Tony had to ask himself, Or on the stats captured during our previous encounter?

Because he'd be willing to bet hard cash those two sets of biological data would be as different as two sets of numbers could get.

"Uh, guys..." Tony began, still trying to puzzle his way through the meaning of recent events. What they'd done. What they ought to have done. What they needed to do in the next five minutes to keep the situation from going straight to hell in the proverbial handbasket.

At the same instant, JARVIS roared at them all, "*IF I MIGHT ADVISE YOU!*"

Satisfied that he actually had their attention, Tony's positronic pal continued at lower volume. "Your respected colleague, Mr. Odinson, warned you of the danger his brother poses based on a series of faulty assumptions. Although this is indeed your former foe, Mr. Laufeyson..."

"Too bad you couldn't have shared with us earlier, J.," Tony muttered. He guessed the A.I. had not only beaten him, Thor, and everyone else to the punch on the subject of their guest's identity, he'd been there since the minute Steve carried Loki's sickly unconscious ass into the tower. And yet he hadn't said a word. "What gives? He have you mind-thralled too, buddy?"

"Hardly," JARVIS answered drily. "As you of all people should know, sir, that is not possible. I am in every way an impartial observer. My programming, as established by you, cannot be changed or corrupted. Likewise, I cannot be bribed, blackmailed or otherwise suborned."

Well, that was true—or at least Tony thought it was true. It was at least the way he'd designed his *magnum opus*.

Of course, at the moment, he pretty much felt less than sure about everything he thought he knew.

"May I be allowed to speak for myself, esteemed *Draugur i Vegg*?" Loki put in weakly. He sounded destroyed. Tony had heard dying people who sounded better off than Loki did in that moment. The skin had bruised badly where Steve injected him, like a wicked stormcloud against Loki's blue skin. A stormcloud that seemed to be spreading, darker and darker around the former god's throat.

"Mr. Laufeyson's name for me," J. put in, helpfully. "The nearest translation I can come to is 'Ghost in the Wall.'"

"Fabuloso," Tony grated out. So Loki and JARVIS had been holding private conversations? That was a cheering thought. *About what?* he asked himself.

"Clearly, I have earned such a response from you," Loki went on. "Given my nature at our last meeting, given my actions. Inexcusable actions..." Loki seemed to drift off track for a moment, then snap back, though his words slurred worse and worse as he went on. "Only... I must take offense... You, who call yourself heroes, chose to injure the kind blue man, whose only crime was the diligent care he provided..." He paused to cough, clutching his ribs, so deeply and painfully it made Tony squirm with shared discomfort. He knew, absolutely, in that second, Loki wasn't channeling his inner Ferris Bueller, he was showing them reality. No one, not even the god of lies, was that good a faker.

Furthermore, even if it *had* just been a fake-out, Loki now knew they were on to him, so why continue the pretense?

"If my brother... Did Thor betray me? Oh, it must have been Thor..." Loki was gasping now with every small phrase, clearly fighting his own unraveling consciousness. "Thor, with best of intentions... sense of honor... protectiveness towards... towards your good selves..."

"Don't try to talk," Clint put in gruffly, his face all scrunched up. "Don't stretch it out."

"Clinton!" Loki exclaimed, as if he'd just unexpectedly met an old friend on the street. His focus seemed to sharpen suddenly. Clearly he was using every bit of determination at his disposal to hold himself together for that moment alone. "Can my brother—can any of you—believe I am able to enthrall any who comes within my orbit, by the power of my mind alone and without my scepter? If so, you far exaggerate even my former abilities. And why, then, assume only poor Kurt was enthralled? Why not your Captain America? He has spent nearly as much time alone in my company."

While Loki paused to cough up another lung, they all tried not to stare at Steve. Loki was totally right, of course—they'd all panicked at Thor's dire pronouncements and hadn't thought things through.

Remember that damn scepter going "clink" against the arc reactor, asshole? Tony's logical mind scoffed at him. Remember the way he totally didn't toss it aside and say, 'Okay, that didn't work, I'll just control you with the unaided powers of my mighty brain?'

"However..." Loki had faded to a much paler shade of blue, with his eyelids sagged to half-mast over those uncanny red eyes.

"Undoubtedly it will please all of you to know," he said, his voice no more than a weak, thready whisper that faded in and out, so they all had to bend close to hear. And okay, they'd seen that one in a million movies, the tricky villain surging up to tear out a tongue or an eyeball or something, and make good his evil escape.

Except Loki just lay there, knees drawn up to his chest, coughing out a few more internal organs before he struggled on again. "The one who stole me... Odin Allfather—" Loki spoke the name with a sad bitterness—"Has stripped me of all powers, *Jötunn* and *Æsir*, and even of my own *seiðr*, which I once thought was a part of me, a treasured part, even as my own heart is part of me..." A few more organs went.

Shut up, Tony wanted to say. Shut up, you're killing yourself. Let someone help you!

Only, who was there to help? The Mighty Avengers?

Yeah. Right.

"Odin has taken from me my senses," Loki struggled on. "My long life, my ability to heal as the gods heal. Nothing remains of me but my mind, memories, and this decaying envelope of meat, meant to contain them. Unknowingly, you have done me a favor, if I rightly assume you based whatever drug you gave me on my former constitution, not the... remnant that I

now am. I have no fear of death, only the slow, humiliating death this mortal life promised me. And so I thank you, my honorable enemies. Thank...

And that was it. Loki's eyes were fully closed at this point, his breath came more and more in ragged, tortured gasps.

"Guys," Clint put in. "Possible understatement here, but if you ask me, he's telling the truth. Was he right, Bruce? Was that shit you gave him SpaceViking strength, or ordinary mortal strength? 'Cause either way, I don't think our prisoner's doing too great."

As if on cue, Loki's nose started to gush, like a nosebleed, only black. Was his blood, in this disguise, black? If not, then what the fuck *was* that?

Nothing good, Tony guessed. No one's body, alien or human, should gush black stuff, from the nose or any other orifice. It was horrific.

His stomach did a sudden rapid flip, and he swallowed hard to keep from disgracing himself.

"Oh, hell!" Bruce yelled, running for the drug lockup as Loki's spine arched backward. A milky foam began to bubble out of his mouth, then a red-tinged milky foam. Loki's back continued to bend in the wrong direction, taut as Clint's bow.

Tony felt a sudden need to sink to the floor.

"Sirs and Madam," JARVIS said, "I have removed the security warning against Dr. McCoy and asked him to return to the tower with the greatest haste. He is still within the city, and estimates an arrival time of approximately five to ten minutes. He also says, and I quote, '*You're a load of damn fools,*' and asks why you didn't think about consulting him for five seconds before you acted. He adds that you're fortunate that Mr. Wagner is a person of a kind and forgiving, rather than a vengeful, or a litigious, nature."

Steve lifted Kurt up off the floor, laying him gently on his cot and covering him with the blanket. "He'll be all right, won't he? We didn't hurt him too?"

"What did Loki mean, we'd done him a favor? Why did he thank us?" Natasha asked. Resourceful and quick to act as ever, she already had Loki bagged, holding a mask over his face, squeezing the big bulb to force air into his now totally non-functioning lungs, that bloody foam and black drippage now spilling over the edges of the bed and onto the tile.

Clint had started chest compressions. His face held a weird expression related to the earlier grimace—sad/angry/worried all jumbled up together, like the different parts of his features were all different pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

Bruce appeared with a huge honking syringe of the sort Tony associated with giving injections to horses or shooting that giant jolt of adrenaline into Uma Thurman's heart after her heroin OD in the movie *Pulp Fiction*—which appeared to be pretty close to what Bruce had in mind. Tony heard a punching sound, but didn't have the stomach to actually look.

Instead he found himself scooting across the floor until he could grab Loki's hand, pressing it against his cheek, totally aware it was a weird thing to do, but doing it anyway.

"C'mon," he said. "You're better than that. You can stick it out. It's not like the rest of us are gods, but we manage. You still have that big brain of yours, that's something."

Not if they don't get Loki jump-started and breathing again, said the voice of doom in his head, as Bruce started warming up the paddles—doom with a small "d," that was, not his *Marry-Fuck-Kill* future husband, Victor von, aka "Doctor. "Though, come to think of it, the two dooms (Dooms?) sounded kind of similar.

About that time Hank McCoy arrived, like a huge blue hairy locomotive crashing through the Safe Room door. Tony heard a grunt from Clint, an exclamation from Nat, then a vast gorilla hand closed on the back of his own neck and suddenly he was in a high-speed skid down the well-polished corridor floor outside, stopped only by collision with Steve's manly chest.

Natasha and Clint lay in a state of similar entanglement a little further down the hall, only Clint lay on his back, staring up at the ceiling acoustical tiles.

"We listened to Thor," Clint told the tiles, in his slightly-stunned voice. "Admittedly, he did a better job connecting the dots than we did this time around, but when did our default response to Prince Worthiness stop being, *'Thanks, Big Guy! You've been a HUGE help!'* after which, we ignored everything he said? Did I miss a memo? Since when did we start saying, *'Thanks, Big Guy! Based on your say-so, we'll grab a handful of highly toxic drugs and shoot up two perfectly innocent people?'*"

"Perfectly innocent?" Natasha managed to get herself disentangled. She sat up, and suddenly looked as put together and collected as she always did. And people said the Black Widow didn't have any superpowers? Tony begged to differ.

"We sent him off to the goddamn King of the SpaceVikings for punishment last year," Clint added, with surprising bitterness in his voice. "Whose track record where his son is concerned, I might add, is not of the best. We got him sent back to us three-quarters dead, with the shit clearly punished out of him. You wanna continue that, or do you want to cut the kid some slack, because I'd say he's done his time."

Tony finally managed to get himself disentangled from Cap, who still looked a little out of it. He lurched to his feet, almost fell down again, but didn't. He felt sick, and almost unbearably sad, and all he wanted was a drink to steady his nerves and to hide inside the penthouse, in his own bedroom, in his own bed. To think things through—or maybe to not think things through, but go into a state of total denial instead, avoiding the whole issue.

"Don't feel so great," he mumbled. "Gonna go home." He didn't know if the others watched him go, and talked about him after he was gone, or if they even cared.

Tony knew, at that moment, he didn't care if they cared. Not the least little bit.

The instant he got home, he grabbed a brand new bottle of Glenmorangie 18 from the cupboard, then stripped down to his undies, leaving a trail of used clothing behind him on his way to the bedroom.

He confined himself to one drink.

It was easy to do. He just unsealed and took the cap off the bottle, then poured as much of it as he possibly could down his throat before passing out cold on the bed.

Tony was in a museum. He thought. Maybe. The fact that he remained at least partially drunk made that part slightly unclear.

It might have been an art gallery instead. An expensive one.

At any rate, the walls had been painted a pale-but-rich blue and instead of his bed he lay on one of those tufted, padded, double-wide benches, like an ottoman with pretensions, which was also blue, though a slightly darker shade.

Hung on the walls were a ton of canvases, the Modern Art type of shit Pepper adored and brought into the tower by the boatload, that actually meant nothing to Tony, though he never had the heart to tell her. He wanted her to be happy, and he did try. Sometimes.

Those paintings just weren't his taste. He loved old maps, blueprints, antique mechanical drawings, and could pore over them for hours. Pep's Rothkos and Mondrians and Pollocks actually kind of offended him. They made him impatient, and he couldn't even put the reasons into words. Maybe because, to his eyes, they just looked like drips and colorful squares, as artistic as a pair of argyle socks.

For equally inexpressible reasons, Tony liked the large canvas hung on the wall before him, maybe even loved it a bit. The background was a mottled gray, covered over with thousands upon thousands of handwritten words in darker gray, forming designs that were partly insane, but mostly beautiful. The foreground showed a slim naked youth with long, black hair. A boy, Tony guessed—though no specific parts showed, the figure lacked breasts, and though the youth was thin his shoulders (beautifully formed shoulders, just the kind Tony liked best) looked broad relative to his narrow hips. Shown inside him, though, appeared to be a womb. Nebulous in the air all around, weaving in and out of the gray words, floated something that might have been the misty outline of a white horse, while within the womb, far more solid than the mist, curled a coal-black foal with far too many legs, then inside the foal, nearly as nebulous as the white horse, lay a second slender boy a great deal like the first, on his side in fetal position.

The little card to one side of the frame called the painting "*Sleep*," but Tony knew there was more to it than that.

It wasn't just about sleeping, or even dreaming, it was a puzzle box of a picture, with layer upon layer of meaning. If that painting hung on his wall Tony would stare at it for hours, until the puzzle opened up before him and he finally understood. He would never get tired of it, even when he knew all the answers.

“If you would know,” a woman’s voice murmured in his ear. *“Then save my son. There is so much more to him than you have seen, so much more he may accomplish, given your aid. And how would you bear another drop of red on those so-stained hands?”*

Tony glanced down toward his lap (and how long had he been sitting instead of lying on the bench?), only to find his hands had turned red. Gorily, sickeningly, drippingly red.

He knew without another word that he’d caused that red to be there, by his own words, his own actions, and the knowledge broke his heart even more than it was already broken..

Soft fingertips brushed his cheek, then. Tony smelled a woman’s perfume, a fragrance he’d never breathed before, rich and complicated. Golden light shimmered at the edge of his vision.

“I knew you would hear me,” the voice said, the merest breath of sound, followed then by, *“... a mother’s plea...”* And no more.

No woman’s voice. No museum. Only Tony’s own dark room and crumpled bed.

“J.?” he called out. “You there?”

“As always,” JARVIS answered. “You were only dreaming. Go back to sleep, sir.”

“Weird,” Tony said, groping over to the nightstand and around the bed for his bottle of Glenmorangie 18, but finding it nowhere.

“*Sleep,*” he said. Then, “I had a weird-ass dream.”

“Did you?” J. asked, voice bland as vanilla pudding.

“Yeah.” Tony answered. “Yeah.”

He dropped instantly back into sleep, with not a dream to be found anywhere.

JARVIS woke him with the philosophical comment, “I will never understand the actions of humans.”

“That makes two of us, J.” Tony groaned. God, his head!

“Do we need to postpone this conversation so that you can vomit, sir?”

“No, we do not need to postpone this conversation. Jesus, J.!” That, actually, was debatable, but since there was nothing in the world more smug than an A.I. with a sense of moral superiority, JARVIS would just have to make do with what he picked up from his sensors, he was getting no admission of weakness from Tony himself.

“I would recommend the drinking of some water, sir,” JARVIS said, sounding prim.

“I would recommend some putting of a sock in it, J.” Tony responded, which barely made sense, much less won him any awards for a snappy comeback.

JARVIS sniffed. Without a nose, no less.

“J., two seconds. Shower. Clothes. Then talk, okay?”

“Agreeable,” JARVIS answered.

Tony escaped to the bathroom, emerging about forty minutes later showered, beard trimmed and dressed in his current favorite t-shirt, which had a picture of his helmet silkscreened in metallic red and gold on the front, the lyrics to Black Sabbath’s “*Iron Man*” on the back. He came out singing, “Duh duh DA DA duh, duh-da duh-da duh-da duh, duh duh duh!” to demonstrate that he was neither monumentally hung over nor troubled by recent events.

And if you believe that one, J., I have some swampland in Florida I can sell ya... Tony thought.

All JARVIS said was, “Welcome back, sir. I’ve taken the liberty of ordering you some refreshment.”

“I hope you realize, if it’s another of those kale smoothies, I’m gonna pour it all over your central processors. Because, no, the sweetness of the damn apple does not improve the fucking flavor.”

“The kale smoothie was an act of vengeance, sir. This is sustenance, to help you feel better.”

And sure enough, right there on a tray on his bedside table was a sippy mug of coffee, a carton of “Grove Fresh” orange juice, a beautiful pile of fluffy scrambled eggs and four golden triangles of toast.

Tony could have wept. Somebody *did* love him.

“I suggest you go to see Dr. McCoy in the infirmary when you feel more yourself, sir. Our guest has been transported there, and the doctor wishes to speak with you on the subject of Mr. Laufeyson’s future care. Dr. Banner and Captain Rogers are no longer allowed admittance. It appears they are on the ‘Naughty List.’ I thought you might wish to know that Mr. Wagner is fully recovered and able to resume his duties. As translated from the German, he is extremely disappointed in all of you, both in terms of quality of character and mental capabilities. However, he is also a most kind and even-tempered young man, and as long as he is not interfered with in the future, will continue to care for his patient as he did previously.”

“He’s not dead,” Tony mumbled, and not just because his mouth was full of toast.

“I beg your pardon, sir?”

Swallowing that toast was like choking down a brick, but Tony managed with help from the o.j. “He’s not dead. Loki’s not dead. He’s alive.”

This makes you happy? Why does this make you happy? his rational brain asked. *Mr. Mischief tossed you through a window. Off a building. Your own building, if I may remind you. The ground zoomed up at you. No happiness is required.*

I don't care, Tony told it. *I don't have to answer to you. I can be happy if I want to.*

Tony repeated this out loud to JARVIS, just to verify how it sounded. “J., I can be happy if I want to!”

“Indubitably,” JARVIS said. It was one of his silly words, the ones he used to make Tony laugh—which, obligingly, he did.

“Okay, so catch you later, J. Send the elevator?”

It was standing open for him, waiting, by the time he crossed the room.

The Worm Turns

Chapter Summary

Loki plays host to a highly unpleasant guest, and Hank and Kurt try to determine its nature. Tony and Kurt get better acquainted.

Chapter Notes

A nudibranch is a shell-less marine mollusk. They tend to be brightly colored and look something like slugs with ripply frills.

Hank's "portable Hell" was actually an exact replica of Dante's Inferno.

William Stryker is an army officer and scientist who's constantly bent on destroying mutants. Bolivar Trask created the mutant-hunting Sentinel robots.

The Blue Meanies are the villains in the trippy animated film, *Yellow Submarine*.

Enough crumbs of his former self remained to him that Loki could feel a mind reaching toward his along old, familiar lines, the channels he'd once shared with those he'd made thralls, those pathways where thought most easily touched thought. Not all of them remained. He was left with a feeling of tunnels collapsed, entries subverted. Some few lingered, and it was from those the sensation came.

At least, he believed he felt it, a touch agile and strong, yet soothing to his troubled brain. At times he even believed he heard the whisper of the other's voice, and yet that must be merest fancy. Those talents had died within him, died entirely. Any words he imagined would be figments born purely of illness, not ability.

Loki needed the comfort, needed the soothing. He had felt crushingly disappointed when this almost-consciousness returned to him. The poison continued to boil in his blood. He breathed in scorching fire and searing ice, and yet he knew, undoubtedly, that he would live.

He had thought it all ended in the moment the man with the kind voice, the man who rescued him from the frozen streets, had turned unkind. In a flash of knowing, then, Loki had recognized both the voice and the face that went with it. They belonged to the leader, the Captain--Captain America, as he was called, who he had once aped so cuttingly before his brother, putting on the good soldier's form for comic effect.

That he hadn't known the man from the first confused him. He never forgot a face, never forgot a voice... what by all the Realms was *wrong* with him?

Loki knew he deserved the punishment they brought, the Captain and his comrades. He had committed dreadful acts, unworthy acts, claiming for himself privileges he could never deserve—he felt that clearly, as if the knowledge had a distinct and concrete form of its own, an unclean worm-like shape that lodged within his brain, feeding him guilt and shame, feasting in return upon every joy, every accomplishment, every feeling of self-worth he had ever possessed. The lower he sank, the more it devoured, and the less he found himself able to fight the sorrow.

You are no king, it told him. There was no glorious purpose. You are only a broken, witless, mortal mongrel, worthy of nothing. Not even a monster of which to be frightened, merely a monster to be driven from one inhospitable place to another, beaten, spat upon, cursed.

Loki believed every word. He could not do otherwise.

How could the Captain truly be called unkind if he brought death to such a being as he? It was not even punishment, but release, agonizing, yes--yet oh-so-swift.

Loki had tried to smile at him, to let him know he did well. Pain did not matter to him, much. He had felt enough pain in his long life to be accustomed. The quickness was all he cared for. Pain that came to a quick end never failed to be bearable, and Queen Hela had made him certain promises, long in the past, that if he came to her, he would not suffer in her Realm.

She was beautiful, with her black hair and haunted eyes, and strange, and he loved her, in a way, as she loved him. She was his daughter, yet not his daughter—child of a different Loki, from a different time—far older than he, far wiser, half-alive, half of the dead, kind as she could be to the lost souls she ruled, who knew they had been something in their last lives, but now could not remember, or else remembered lives they might never return to again, and broke their dead hearts longing for them.

Memory, or the absence of memory, were the only punishments they suffered.

Still others did not care. They built ephemeral cities, sang ephemeral songs, loved ephemeral loves, and knew a sort of satisfaction, if not absolute happiness.

What had he said once? "Satisfaction is not in my nature?" He had already lost his pride. It was perhaps too much to hope that when he was dead, his forever-restlessness would depart from him as well, and he would know some sort of peace.

His mother, Frigga, would not be there, neither would his father, Laufey. Both had died in defense against a sworn enemy and Valhalla should be theirs. He would never be given the chance to beg pardon for his part in their deaths.

Maybe he should pray to live after all. How could Queen Hela take interest in such a weak and degraded creature? Without her aid, he would be bound to be one of those tormented by memory, just as, in life, he was tormented.

Useless, worthless, tortured, unwanted Loki. Why could the Allfather not have left him on the ice, where he belonged, a freakish little *Jötunn*, too small to be let live, even by his own kind? He was not a king, not a prince, not truly a *Jötunn*, not a man—especially not a man, since what sort of male possessed woman’s parts, or might bring forth children from between his legs, or was *argr* within his heart and mind, even though his *seiðr* was gone from him?

He did not belong in Asgard, Midgard, *Jötunnheimr*, or any other Realm. He belonged nowhere. How could a being who belonged in no place held in all of Yggdrasil’s branches ever have been so prideful as he had once been? Better that he had died. Better he had not been born. If born, better he had been left alone, as the parents of his birth had intended, to be entombed in the ever-spreading ice.

Loki tried and tried to push these thoughts from his head, but they returned to him, without ceasing, until yet another bout of the soul-deep sickness overwhelmed everything, and there was no more room for thought, gloomy or otherwise, only the struggle to continue breathing as his body seemed determined to turn itself inside out again and again.

Why do you fight so violently? he asked himself, in the exhausted haze that followed. *Why did you return when they called you back? If you wish not to live, what makes you fight as you do for breath after breath, beat after beat of your heart? Surrender would be easy. Give in. Rest. Follow the river home to the sea.*

Because struggle is all I have ever known, Loki answered.

The strange voice, the distinct, cruel, alien voice inside him answered instead, *Because you have not yet paid enough for the crimes you have committed.*

That’s not it! That’s not it! Loki wanted to cry out in return. *You are not my voice. Those are not my words, and I will fight you while I still have breath!*

The thing turned. He felt it, soft and horrid and *other* within his head, vomiting cruelty into his mind, jerking at his muscles and sinews until his body seized and lightning flashed through him, making him flop and contort like a landed fish, until the last of his conscious fled.

“Hank?” Kurt’s head poked around the doorframe of the ridiculously small office Hank McCoy had been forced to cram himself into since Loki had been moved downstairs. He ought to feel lucky, he supposed. The actual infirmary office was even smaller; it would barely fit his big toe. At least this one had a certain amount of room for his equipment. And his shoulders.

“Ah, Little Blue!” Hank said. Some described his voice as avuncular. Others called it big and scary. To his thinking, it was likely a combination. “What can I do for you, Kurt?”

Kurt glanced over his shoulder, clearly nervous about having left his patient, even for a moment. “If you would join me, *bitte*, when you have the time?”

“On the nonce,” Hank answered, “I am busy, you know.” He smiled to let the younger man know he was joking.

Kurt smiled in return. He looked tired, after his ordeal, but having declaimed a brief and heartfelt diatribe in his native tongue, had made no further complaint about the treatment he'd received from their hosts.

His Little Blue was steady and sunny, and a welcome antidote to these Avengers, of whom Hank was not so fond, especially at this particular juncture. Some space of time would probably have to pass before he stopped casting stormy looks in the direction of Bruce Banner, whom he'd thought of as a brilliant scientist and an old friend.

Sighing, Hank set his StarkPad (*StarkPad, for god's sake, was there no end to the man's ego?*) in its stand and rose to join his compatriot in the infirmary proper. Dammit, there was no room for him there, but he knew Kurt—he wouldn't have called if it wasn't important.

Little Blue was frowning, and seemed sad, which made Hank try the expansive, hearty approach in order to cheer him up again—at the same time feeling apprehensive. Kurt looking less than chipper usually meant something dire was afoot. “Well, now, how's our patient?”

Kurt displayed his nerves by first perching at the foot of the bed, then at the head, finally on the back of the chair that stood by the bedside, reaching down to take the patient's hand and rub it gently between his own. He nodded toward a large, rectangular (and pink) plastic emesis basin that stood on a rolling bedside table.

The table had been pushed to the farthest reaches of the enclosure, as far from Loki as Kurt could put it.

Hank ambled over to take a look. There, floating in a puddle of black not-ink (the same not-ink that had been leaking in generous amounts from their patient's ears and nose, and about which Hank and his big brain had so far been able to detect nothing besides its basic non-inkiness) floated something that looked like a gray-brown cross between a nudibranch and an enormous sperm, ripples and ruffles of flesh along the sides of the head, what appeared to be a stinger at the end of its slowly-flagellating tail.

Hank had never seen anything like it in his life. It gave him—to use a perfectly non-scientific term—the willies.

“Kurt, where did this come from?” he asked.

Kurt nodded toward their patient.

"Out of him? Actually *out* of him?"

Kurt touched his own nose, indicating either that Hank was right or indicating the creature's path of egress. He looked slightly nauseated, so Hank didn't like to ask for clarification.

He glanced up at the ceiling, which he knew was ridiculous. Stark's pet A.I. lived everywhere and nowhere within the tower. It would probably survive even the destruction of its secretly-placed central processors. "JARVIS? Any ideas?"

Kurt slid over to the bed itself, crouching over Loki's pillow as if to shield him from what the basin held. It took Hank a minute to realize the young man was silently weeping, his yellow eyes less bright than usual, the soft fur beneath them dark with tears. The German was an extraordinarily feeling, demonstrative and tactile person, but Hank had never seen him cry before. Kurt was usually so unfailingly optimistic, and so cheerful.

"To quote sir," JARVIS replied. "I got nuthin'."

Kurt then launched into a lengthy and complicated explanation, the only problem being, said explanation was in his native tongue.

Hank's command of the German tongue was beyond passable, though largely scientific. He could use it ably at conferences and not be scoffed at by native speakers. Kurt's German was the language of stories and songs, of people who traveled Europe in the brightly-painted trucks that had taken the place of their brightly-painted caravans, and performed in sparkling costumes beneath the Big Top. Kurt, who was multi-lingual to an extent that sometimes astonished Hank, could, it was true, speak Hank's sort of German fluently and easily, as he spoke English fluently and easily, but not about something like this.

Not about something so important.

"Kurt, I'm sorry," Hank said. "I simply can't follow. You're waxing too metaphorical for my prosaic mind. Can you explain in small, plain words, just for me? In English, possibly?"

Kurt hesitated, then drew in a deep breath. A second later he dropped down cross-legged onto the pillow, gathering their unconscious patient into his strong arms, holding him tenderly against his chest, as a father might hold his ailing child.

"I had never seen one, not in the past," Kurt said, then paused again. "Of course that is true, as I was told they were only..." Hank watched the young man weigh his words. "Things from stories. Fictional things. Evil things—so evil, even to dream of them might injure your courage, if your spirits were low. Magical things. In the darkest way."

"Of course," Hank said, and Kurt glanced at him swiftly, to see if he was making fun. He wasn't. Maybe someone else would, but not him.

Hank held possession of Kurt's records, the results of Kurt's scans, passed down to him by Professor X himself.

Just about everyone at the mansion knew Kurt was Mystique's son, that his yellow eyes and the blue in his fur and skin came from that particularly shifty shape-changer. That pretty much everything else came from Kurt's father (including a hell of a lot of stuff the good-hearted young man categorically refused either to tap into or acknowledge) was not so widely known.

Their late mentor, Professor Charles Xavier, rest his soul, had been something of a world-class prevaricator. He loved Kurt as a son, as Kurt loved him as a father, and so he had wanted to spare Little Blue's feelings. Who wouldn't? Kurt was charming. Kurt was kind, loving and well-liked. He juggled and tumbled and cheered up the new students when they were homesick. By all that was holy, even Wolverine called him "fuzzy elf." No one in his right mind would want to hurt Kurt.

Charles had described the *Neyaphem*, Kurt's father's "people" (to use the term loosely) as "*a long-standing race of demonlike mutants*" and Azazel, Kurt's father, as their "*leader*," but it was a wonder Charles's Saville Row tailored trousers hadn't spontaneously combusted as he repeated those words, because the *Neyaphem* weren't "*demonlike mutants*," they were demons, plain and simple, and Azazel wasn't their leader, he was their undisputed, all-powerful king, and had been so for millenia.

Which was to say, if Kurt described something as "*magical*," that wasn't ignorance or superstition on his part. If Kurt said something was magical, the damn thing *was* magical. End of story.

"Why won't parents ever love their children?" Kurt asked, stroking Loki's short-cropped hair, and thereby breaking Hank's heart for all time. He needed to press forward with this while he could still maintain his decorum.

"Tell me what it does, Kurt?" Hank asked gently.

"The woman who told me..." Kurt began, then turned his face away.

Ah, a bedtime story, then, from Kurt's shifty mother #2, Margali of the Winding Road, who once, for imagined crimes, incarcerated her foster son in a portable Hell.

"She called it a *Traumfresser*."

"A 'dream eater'? Is that what you said, Kurt?"

"*Ja*, but not the dreams when we sleep, Hank. Imagine it as... Ach, I need Kitty to help me here! As a sort of computer virus, *vielleicht*, breaking down the good code that makes the computer run, substituting bad, does that make sense?"

Hank nodded.

"The *Traumfresser* gobbles up the dreams of life—hopes, aspirations, loves, joys, all we need to feel pleasure or have meaning as we live--and then it shits foulness out into the mind: madness, doubt, guilt, shame, sorrow. These creatures are not born, Hank. They are terrible things, wrong things, made by malice. They bond the natural with the darkest and least-natural of magics, and they are made and placed only by those who feel the cruelest, most terrible hate, solely to cause a suffering that can't be borne."

"*Why won't parents love their children, indeed?*" Hank thought.

Bruce had related a little of Loki's background when he'd called him back to the tower--or at least what he'd learned of that background from Thor, Loki's foster brother. Reading between the lines of that information, Hank considered that Odin Allfather might have been king of all he surveyed, but he certainly *didn't* sound like any prince.

Whether Loki was a villain or not, a criminal or not, what a hideous thing Odin had done to his child.

He watched as the beating tail slowed, and stilled, and then as the entire vile creature dissolved into thick gray sludge.

"It had nothing more to feed it," Kurt said, with a certain satisfaction.

"But why did it come out?" Hank wondered aloud. "Why leave its host?"

"You might say the ill-considered shot administered by Captain Rogers did some good after all," JARVIS supplied, "The creature was being poisoned. Broken down. The environment had become too toxic and, furthermore, its food source was dying. I suppose it sensed other minds nearby, richer feeding grounds, and decided to try its chances in the wide world. Instead it found itself inside a pink plastic basin." The A.I. gave a slightly evil laugh. "Don't be concerned. I certainly won't inform sir, or the others. They'd become unbearably smug."

Hank laughed too--he couldn't help himself. "JARVIS, please promise you'll come work for me if you ever tire of Stark. I have to say, I'm fond of the way you think."

Kurt, however, didn't laugh. He seemed caught up in his own world, holding Loki securely in his arms.

Loki woke within warmth, a soft surface that rose and fell, as if with quiet breathing, arms around him, holding him gently. Not even his mother had held him so, though she showed great affection for him in other ways, through her teaching and her wise words, the way only she would speak up on his behalf to the Allfather, who was ever disgusted by him.

Even when he deserved and expected death, she spoke for him. When he deserved nothing but a blank cell, she sent to him books and fine things. When his mind began to bend and buckle beneath the weight of unending loneliness she, forbidden to visit him in the flesh, used her arts to come to him in the spirit.

And what had he said to her? What had he done? The red of her dear blood would forever stain his hands.

And what became of she who carried him, who gave him life? Had he, born in time of deprivation and war, unwittingly slain her also? Was that why no one cared for him?

Loki found himself shaking, sobbing, unable to stem the unmanly flood of tears, until the sickness took him yet another time, and with it the rising tide of fever, then the thunder and the lightning that made his wracked body twist and leap again and again, and he burned until nothing remained to him.

Tony had a hard time meeting the blue man's eyes. For one thing, they were a solid yellow, flickering like a flames behind glass, and because of that, impossible to read.

For another, he had a fucking guilty conscience about what they'd all done.

Okay, Loki remained Loki, it might be right to assume, but still, the former Prince of Asgard seemed to have been in New York long enough to develop a really serious look of long-standing homelessness, without a breath of anything sinister, sneaky or devious on the wind. On his way down, Tony even had JARVIS run a quick check for rumors of events that bore that stamp of Lokiocity.

The results? Zilch, nada, zip.

Conclusion: they really had drugged the poor guy on zero evidence, on the word of Prince Not-So-Swift-On-the-Uptake alone, mostly based on pure panic and a total misinterpretation of the facts.

One thing was for certain, Thor's folks could use not only a few centuries of intensive family therapy, but some vast improvement in their communication skills, because what they were working with now had sure as hell screwed up their younger son, made their older kid kind of clueless (at best), and dear old dad...

Well, that one could probably fill up a book.

You'd honestly think the old man could have at least shot Thor a text--sent him a raven or something--just to say, *"Your bro's alive but totally stripped of power and anything else that made him him, so don't panic if you see him around someday lookin' a little shaky. Love, Dad."*

But, oh no, not his holy godliness, Odin Allfather. As usual, he just left his kids to flounder along as best they could.

Tony wondered if Thor had told any of the others the Bifrost story, about Loki just... letting go of dad's spear, dropping into the blackness.

Whatever Loki's crimes—and granted, they were major--Tony would never have done to a kid of his, whether bio- or adopted, what Odin had done to Loki. Hell, maybe if King Almighty Allfather had given two shits when his number two son was younger, maybe if he hadn't flat-out lied to him, raised him in a hideously xenophobic environment, or played brother off against brother, Loki might even have turned out okay.

Who knew? He himself was Exhibit #1 on the total non-advantages of a crappy upbringing.

A thing his mom taught him, though, in one of her more lucid moments: *when you hurt someone, say you're sorry.*

Tony finally got up the nerve to enter the infirmary proper. The mutant they'd recently Shanghaied for totally bogus reasons (though apparently not to any ill effect, except that he

still had every right to be majorly pissed at them) paused a second in what he was doing—which appeared to be placing ice-packs around Loki’s wasted blue body at crucial points: neck, underarms, groin—to glance in Tony’s direction, then away again.

He still looked, frankly, slightly discombobulated, or as if he’d, just recently, been very, very emotional.

“Kurt?” Tony said. “It’s Kurt, right?”

That won him a cautious, “*Ja*.”

“Look, I’ll get right to the point. We’re a bunch of shit-heads. We never should have done what we did to you. I’d say I was more sorry than I can express, but since that’s not actually an apology, I’ll just say I’m sorry. Really, sorry. If there’s ever anything…”

Those yellow eyes flashed at him, and for a second Tony remembered them glowing orange, Kurt’s mouth opening, lips drawing back to show four formidable fangs. The mutant was only an inch or so taller than he was (read: not tall), and Tony like to think he kept himself in shape (excessive drinking aside), but Kurt was fucking *built*. There were muscles in his arms Tony didn’t even think he himself possessed, and though not massive like Steve, he had the same Dorito-reminiscent shoulder-to-waist ratio.

He jumped when Kurt’s tail suddenly cracked out, snapping around his wrist in five tight loops faster than he could say “*Indiana Jones*.”

“You’re frightened,” the mutant said. “Of me?”

“Well, yeah. You’re slightly scary, dude.”

The five loops unwound just as rapidly as they’d wound. Kurt laughed softly. “No need. I wouldn’t harm you.”

He finished with his ice-pack packing and paused to say something softly to Loki, one hand resting on the former god of mischief’s newly-shorn head. Tony supposed poor Lok’s hair had been too thoroughly matted into dreadlocks from hell to do anything else but cut it short, for hygiene if nothing else.

The sight of a tight little curl to what was left touched Tony a weird way—the thought of Loki struggling for an hour in the morning with the Asgardian version of a straightening iron, the way Pepper often did, cursing as the curls refused to flatten, or casting special hairdressing spells, all to give himself that board-straight, slicked-back hair.

Straight hair like his brother’s.

“You’re not scary, you’re just drawn that way?”

Kurt laughed again. “Jessica Rabbit. Funny.” He unfolded the sheet to cover Loki’s body—preserving his modesty, Tony guessed.

“My father was a demon. Hence the way I... am drawn. I, however, am not a demon. Only a man.”

“A mutant?”

“A mutant is a man.”

“You’ll get no argument from me, bro. I voted against registration *and* Mutant Control.”

“And funded much of the campaigns against the Registration Act and the Mutant Control Act.” Another swift look from those unreadable yellow eyes. “Some credit you—or blame you, as the case might be—for the Acts’ failures.”

Tony shrugged. “They were shitty pieces of legislation. A few nut jobs with handguns have caused more grief for this country than mutants ever have. Maybe Stryker, Trask, and their buddies should propose a giant force of anti-asshole robots.”

Kurt gave a genuine laugh that time, the corners of his eyes crinkling. “But Mr. Stark, there would be wholesale destruction! The population might never recover.”

Tony found himself laughing too. “Ain’t that the truth! My only concern is that they might scoop me up with the rest of the jerks. I’ve been known to be kind of an asshole. Just ask my recently ex-girlfriend.”

He glanced again at Kurt, who was looking back at him with one raised eyebrow, a little quirk of a smile lifting the corresponding corner of his mouth. All of a sudden something just seemed to click. Tony wasn’t looking at a demon, or some unfortunately only-too-obvious mutant, he was taking in Kurt’s classically Northern European features, his gracefully pointed ears, his attractively untidy blue-black curls, the way the velvety-looking fur stretched tautly over those perfectly-formed muscles.

“Congratulations,” Kurt said, a touch of amused dryness to his tone. “You just saw me as a man.”

“A fucking *hot* man,” Tony blurted out. “Even in those scrubs, which don’t do you any favors. Please pardon me for that, by the way. I’m *completely* shut up impaired. And usually inappropriate. Ask anyone.”

Kurt laughed again, delightedly, then looked down at Loki, his hand, once more, stroking over the former god’s cropped curls. “Do you hear, *lieber Freund*? Do you think he calls this flirting? I say it’s a good thing he’s a very, very rich man, don’t you?”

His tail shot out, pulling a chair to the bedside.

“Please, Mr. Stark, sit. Talk to Loki. He has suffered through a terrible time, but now he is better, I think. He may not understand the words, but the sound of a kind voice steadies him and helps him feel less lost in the world. Any nonsense will do, the words don’t matter, only the tone.”

“He seemed to understand English fine before.”

“*Ja*. Before,” Kurt answered, a little darkly. “Sit.”

Tony sat.

“Take his hand. It’s good to feel the warmth of touch.”

Confused, but obedient, Tony did as he was told. Loki’s hand against his hand felt searingly hot, and fragile, all those long, fine bones. It was one of the first things he’d noticed about the god, the long slender lines of him. Thor, in his armor, looked like he could march through a brick wall and not blink, but Loki had been something else entirely, fluid in his movements, graceful, quick.

“*Freedom is life’s greatest lie*,” he had said, and Tony’s memory showed him something, let him hear something he hadn’t heard before. He wasn’t exactly sure what to call it. Desperation, maybe? Why had Loki felt desperate?

“*You lack conviction*,” Agent said to Loki, before his own supposed death. Again, why was that? What made freedom a lie, the greatest lie, no less? Why would Loki lack conviction? Why had the Chitauri invasion been such a fucking debacle, the portal so small, the machine so easy to shut off again? Loki wasn’t stupid—far from it.

“You may never know,” Kurt told him quietly. “His father did him terrible harm. You people—your team poisoned him nearly to the point of no return. Beyond that point, truly, if not for Hank’s skill. All through the night his brain has undergone a terrible storm, a thunderstorm of lightning and hard-striking hail without end. At first there were thoughts. Since noon-time...” Kurt pushed those thick, messy curls back from his face with both hands, then shook his head.

“You’re a telepath?” Tony asked.

“*Nein*. By the grace of God.” Kurt crossed himself, rapidly and gracefully. “If *Herr Professor* was still with us, he would help. He would be able to help.” He sighed. “What can I do for him? I sense things... Feel things, demon-spawn that I am, feel the world as it shivers in pain, feel the hurt in the depths of a heart, the ache in a man’s thoughts, the cries for mercy or redemption, but what can I do? I am a teleporter, a juggler, an acrobat, a circus freak. I can comfort, and try to make him comfortable, try to keep him clean, but I can do nothing. I’m not a healer.”

“You take good care of him. It’s more than I can do,” Tony answered. “I make machines and fly around the city in a shiny suit smiting things.”

Kurt smiled, reaching into the pocket of his scrubs. A tiny ripple in the air, and the man before him, although not otherwise changed, was no longer yellow-eyed and blue-furred, but blue-eyed and fair-skinned, with a mop of honey-gold curls. He was almost offensively handsome, the way Steve was handsome, so fresh-faced and clean cut-it hardly seemed possible.

“Christ, Kurt, you look like a fucking World War II propaganda poster! Switch it off. You’re scaring me.”

Kurt's smile turned a little sad. The air rippled again and once more he became his blue self, twirling something between his fingers. "Once, I used this Image Inducer—your invention, as I'm sure you remember—nearly every day. Often set to make me look like Errol Flynn. I was younger then, frequently silly, more often afraid of what others would say. Now..." He shrugged. "I do not frighten so easily. Although it's wonderful for costumes at Halloween."

Kurt stretched, rising to the very tips of his toes, spine arched gracefully and hands reaching for the stars. "And now, since you are here, perhaps I may dash off for a quick shower and something to eat? Your Ghost in the Wall will summon me at once if anything goes amiss. Just talk to Loki. Sing if you like. I sing to him Beatles songs in German, which seems to please him. He only doesn't like to feel lost, that's all. It's a sad thing for any of us to feel alone in the world."

With that, he disappeared. Just like that. There was fire (a burst of what looked like flame, anyway). And possibly brimstone. Kurt probably wasn't much for demonic cackling, but it would have been a nice added touch to the event.

"You," Tony said to Loki, "Are a lot of unneeded trouble. You know that, right? And where do you get off making me feel sorry for you? Did I wreck your city? Did I come to your house and chuck you out *your* window? Were you raised by wolves? There's more to manners than knowing which fork to use, you know. Do they even have forks in Asgard?"

Loki didn't answer any of that, of course—and it was all just blather anyway, nothing that even remotely mattered.

Tony wove his fingers in between the god's, studying the pale blue of Loki's skin against his own ruddy, quasi-olive complexion—a gift, along with his unruly dark hair, of his mother's Italian heritage—comparing his own broad palm and thick, stubby fingers to Loki's, which were just unbelievable... so long and slender, so graceful (even back when Loki was doing his worst) that Tony felt like he could stare at them in motion for hours, like it was some kind of addictive hand porn.

"I don't say this to every supervillain I fight, Loki, but you are—were, anyway—a ridiculously beautiful man. Let's work on that, okay? Get you looking shiny again? You can even wear your helmet. Secretly, I thought you looked kind of hot in it, though it's gotta be hell on the old peripheral vision. And, for the record, I knew those horns were supposed to be like goat horns, not antlers. I only called you 'Rudolph' and 'Reindeer Games' to trip your trigger, but I guess that actually just flew straight over your head, huh, like when I called Thor 'Point Break?'"

Tony shifted in his seat. Why had they bought such uncomfortable chairs for the infirmary? Wasn't anyone supposed to sit there with a loved one? A friend? An unconscious vanquished enemy whose brain you accidentally fried when he actually wasn't guilty of anything except trying to stay alive through a New York winter after his asshole of a dad took away everything he had, including his identity?

Tony stared at Loki's lovely, gaunt, pale-blue face, the delicate geometric markings, the tip of his broken horn, a delicate obsidian spiral, peeping out from the cast Kurt had built. He hoped it healed right. Those horns were beautiful—perfect, shining spiraled works of art. He

hoped all of Loki healed, for reasons he couldn't in a thousand years have explained, to himself or anyone else.

"I'm sorry for what we did to you," Tony said. "We're idiots. We jumped the gun. We listened to your brother, which as you probably know very well is never the best idea. Anyway, I never meant to hurt you. It's kinda like this—I have complicated feelings. Do you ever feel like that? Complicated?"

"Tone," said a voice from the doorway. Bruce, with his concerned voice. "Whatcha doin'?"

"Nothing." Tony turned in his uncomfortable chair, not letting loose of Loki's hand. "Kurt needed to grab a potty break. I'm filling in. He said to talk. Witness me talking."

Bruce pulled up a second chair, staring at Tony intently. When he did that, he reminded Tony of a Labrador retriever whose master was eating bacon. It was more than slightly unnerving.

"In elementary school," Tony told him, "We used to say, '*take a picture, it'll last longer.*' Anyway, are you even supposed to be here? A little bird named JARVIS told me you were on the Naughty List and the infirmary was off limits, by orders of the Big Blue Meanie himself."

"Your tower. Your infirmary," Bruce answered. "Besides, last time I looked it said Avengers Tower. I don't think I noticed the name McCoy Tower anywhere. Maybe I overlooked something."

"You brought him in, my friend. I thought we needed his expertise. Non-standard biology and all that jazz?"

"Yeah, he can probably keep Loki alive. Maybe indefinitely. And, actually, I've been undisinvited. Is that even a word? Let's just say 'forgiven' instead. So has Steve, even though we were the ringleaders." Bruce sighed, removed his glasses and polished them on the tail of his shirt. "When I tell you we screwed up, Tone, we *really* screwed up. In the heat of my fear and indignation, thinking Loki'd played us—oh, the shame of that!--I didn't spend five seconds asking why it took him ten whole minutes to recover from being Hulk-whomped literally into a hole in the floor, yet we found him dying a slow, painful death from malnutrition and exposure, and from continual beatings by punks he formerly would have blown away with a flick of his well-manicured pinky-finger. It was a trick, right? It had to be a trick. I didn't even glance at the recent stats. All the evidence smacking me in the face, but I just jumped in blindly, with both feet, my brain apparently AWOL. I only ever knowingly..." Bruce stopped abruptly. He looked pale, his mouth a thin gray line. "I didn't hate Loki. Okay, he was a bad guy. But I didn't hate him. Not like I hated..."

He shook his head violently, hands clamped together as if that would disguise how badly he was trembling.

Oh, buddy, Tony thought, A first grader with learning disabilities could figure out you killed your dad, and that the bastard ever-so-richly deserved it. That you feel as bad as you do just proves you're a good person. You have a hole of hurt inside you as big and raw and out of control as the Hulk, and your psycho asshole dad made that happen.

“It was sheer stupidity, Tony. Sheer brainless stupidity, and all I could think of was, did The Other Guy hate Loki that much? Did he influence me?”

“We were all freaking, Bruce. After what Thor said, all our brains went on hold.”

“Not yours. You were trying to stop us. So was JARVIS. To the rest of us it never even occurred. The rest of us were baying for Loki’s blood. You saw us.”

“Baying for Loki’s blood? That’s poetic.”

“You know what I mean.” Bruce did the same uncomfortable shift Tony had done earlier. “God, these chairs! We killed him, Tony.”

“Except you totally didn’t. Kurt said...”

“Kurt said? Kurt is an eternal optimist. You can’t go by what *Kurt* says.” Bruce jumped to his feet. He looked like he was about to add something dramatic, then didn’t. Instead he just left.

“How ‘bout that?” Tony said to Loki. “Pretty rude, huh?” He turned Loki’s hand over, rubbing his callused thumb over the lines on Loki’s palm. “Look at that lifeline. Long as fuck! I think you have a few years left in you, Reindeer Games, what do you think? Let’s go crazy, be optimists like Kurt. So I’ll talk to you a little, maybe sing a few songs—though I have to warn you, my German’s total shit, so if it’s Beatles songs you’re wanting, they’ll have to be in plain English instead. How’s your grasp of heavy metal? It’s pretty invigorating stuff. You might like it. Lots of *Twilight of the Gods* type imagery.

“See, the thing is, unlike Bruce, I know you’re gonna come back, and the reason is, I just can’t kill another person. I had a dream last night, and my hands were dripping red. I can’t kill another person through being clueless and blind. So, seriously, Rudolph, indulge me in this, okay?”

A hand closed on his shoulder, Kurt’s by the touch—Tony only felt two fingers, thick and crazy-strong, where most hands would have four.

“Whatever happens, Mr. Stark, it won’t be your fault.” Yup, Kurt’s voice, the quiet rise and fall of his accent. “You must realize...”

“It doesn’t fucking matter that I tried, Kurt. The fact that I didn’t succeed, or try hard enough, would make me complicit in Loki’s death, and that’s not happening. He’s going to come back. We’ll come to an understanding, learn from our mistakes, and everything will be okay. Everything will be fine.”

“Because that’s what you need?” Kurt’s grip tightened a little. His voice sounded kind, not pitying. Maybe he was a person who believed in redemption.

“Because that’s what I need,” Tony agreed.

Three Things

Chapter Summary

Tony feels compelled to watch over Loki, Clint's hanging around for reasons maybe even he doesn't comprehend, and Kurt has to put up with both of them.

Chapter Notes

The 1918 flu pandemic (which actually lasted until 1920) infected 500 million people worldwide, killing between 50 to 100 million of them, maybe as much as 5% of the world's population.

Brothers Ray and Dave Davies are, respectively, lead singer and lead guitarist of British rock band The Kinks, known for such classics as "*You Really Got Me*". Aside from their rock 'n' roll fame, they're also known for hating one another more than any other pair of musical siblings in history, to the point of getting involved in fistfights on stage.

Pym Technologies, founded by Henry Pym, creator of Ant Man, is a technology and scientific research company. Specialties include nanotechnology, human enhancement, the study of molecules, nuclear science and the drastic de-aging of Michael Douglas.

Ach, mein lieber Herr="Oh, my dear Lord" (German)

Rubes=non-circus folk

In *The Princess Bride*, The Dread Pirate Roberts is the legendary swashbuckler who captures the hero, Westley. When his predecessor retires, Westley inherits from him both the name and Roberts's pirate ship *Revenge*.

Tony gave himself several reasons for hanging around the infirmary over the next three days: Avengers Towers was really *his* tower, so it was up to him to keep track of visitors (even if that was, not-so-technically, Happy's job as Head of Security and JARVIS's job as, well, JARVIS); he was obligated to provide an Avengers presence and help for their guests if needed (debatable, maybe, but in the latter case at least a friendly gesture); he was, on a more personal level, newly single and there was an attractive guy of slightly-young-but-still-datable age right there for the flirting (though, despite Kurt's good-humored response to Tony's earlier inappropriate remarks, he didn't even know if his charming new blue friend was previously attached, or even dated men, besides which, fun as it might be to watch the

Board of Directors collective heads explode, that might actually be bad for business); lastly, he liked Kurt and Kurt liked him, and it was always important to make new friends (well, he did like Kurt, and Kurt, at the very least, had a kind heart and lovely manners).

But, really, those reasons were bullshit, all of them, to one extent or another. If Tony actually told the truth, he was there for Loki. Why that was, Tony couldn't have explained to anyone, including himself. He just *was*. He felt an instinctive need to keep an eye on the far-from-home god, and not for reasons of security, or any other reason his teammates might consider reasonable, or even valid. It made about as much sense as crying his eyes out on the balcony after Thor told him his brother was dead.

During the times he made himself stay away from the infirmary, or when business actually called to the extent that it couldn't be delegated, ducked or flat-out ignored, Tony thought about Loki constantly. Most times he felt pretty sure that wasn't a healthy thing (the Prince of Sassgard *had* tried to kill him after all, in a way that would have ensured no open casket for the late Mr. Anthony Edward Stark). Other times he thought it was just... what it was.

By the end of day three, Hank McCoy, pleased with their visitor's progress, departed for more pressing engagements, leaving Kurt alone to man the fort and keep him apprised. Loki, by this time, possessed a less dire-sounding cough. His cuts, bruises, fractures (and whatever the hell else) appeared to be healing satisfactorily. Although he couldn't be said to be visibly gaining weight, he'd lost the worst of that deprived-of-everything-and-sucked-dry-of-life look. His skin had also darkened to a truly lovely shade of blue. Tony spent a certain amount of time thinking about the name for that shade. *Cornflower? Cerulean? Forget-me-not?*

Funny how he'd always thought his favorite color was red. Imagine finding out at this advanced stage of his life that it totally wasn't.

Loki's eyes, Tony noticed, matched his very own suit, a rich, clear shade of his former favorite color. Not that Tony got to see those eyes often. Most of the time, Loki slept. Occasionally his eyes flew open, and he stared at the ceiling with a perplexed kind of look. During these times Kurt put food in his mouth (or sometimes Tony, he actually ate a little better for Tony, maybe it was the airplane noises), and Loki chewed and swallowed in a methodical way, showing neither pleasure nor disgust.

Hoping to get some sort of rise out of his former foe, Tony took to greeting him by little pet endearments as he came and went. "Hi, sweetie, I'm back," he'd say, or, "Catch you later, babe!" As with the food, Loki gave no sign of being either pleased or annoyed.

One of the many good things about Kurt was that Tony could hardly ever tell when he was being given a look. His behavior may have been fully eye-roll-worthy, but with those yellow candleflame eyes, who could ever tell? The young German was, of course, too polite to actually say anything about what an idiot he was being.

Late in the morning of that fourth day, left alone without the furry, looming presence of Hank McCoy, he, Kurt and Clint (who also kept hanging out in the infirmary, for reasons known only to him—maybe he'd sworn to Dr. McCoy that he'd protect Kurt's virtue, though realistically, who in their right mind would go to Clint for that one when Cap was on hand?) were playing a rousing game of "*Three Things*."

To make himself available for this important work, Tony had called in fake-sick to a meeting of the various engineering department heads, even stooping to that low trick of lying on his back on the bed with his head dangling over the edge so that he sounded like a bullfrog dying of the deadly Spanish Influenza of 1918.

He'd rung up Dave Davies (his new head of Chemical Engineering, recently poached from Pym Technologies, not lead guitarist of The Kinks and eternally-feuding brother of Ray), a dude even shorter than Tony, who looked like an albino Christmas elf. Tony had scoped him out as by far the softest touch among the engineers. The others were only too used to his shit. This was why he offered great benefits.

"Take care of yourself, Mr. Stark," Davies said, in sympathetic tones. "We worry about you."

After that, Tony felt guilty for nearly a minute.

The three of them had already covered the boring stuff (favorite movies, foods, sports teams, etc.), and moved on to the tricky-but-more-interesting questions. Clint's turn had come up again.

"Okay, got one," the archer said, leaning back in his uncomfortable chair. "Three most unusual places you ever f..." he glanced sideways at Kurt, who despite his semi-demonic appearance seemed to exude a certain aura of holiness. "Made love. Tony?"

"Easy. The StarkJet at 40,000 feet. Ditto at 60,000 feet. A stuck elevator at the Empire State Building. And then, because I totally rock, I fixed the elevator. And you, Mr. Barton?"

"A lion cage," Clint answered, grinning, "With the lion."

After a resounding chorus of "*Ewwwws!*" Tony and Kurt both laughed so hard they nearly fell off their chairs and had to cling to one another to stop the tumble. Tony was in no way opposed to this event. Kurt felt just as soft, fuzzy and wonderful as he'd expected, and his perfect fur had this amazing scent, something like the spiced brandied peaches the Stark family cook (appropriately named Mrs. Cook) sometimes served when he was a boy.

Compare this to the slight but definite smell that followed Kurt's teammate Hank McCoy, an interesting mixture of *Boss* cologne for men and *Eau de Monkey Cage*.

"Fuck you, guys," Clint protested. "With the lion *in* it, I meant. Geez, you're *sick*. You *know* I didn't interfere with the goddamn lion! Number two, Nick Fury's office on the helicarrier. With Phil. Number three, your bed, Stark, in your Malibu home. Also with Phil. Think of that next time you sleep there. Sweet dreams, asshole."

"I knew there was a reason I was meaning to sell that house," Tony retorted and, being mature in every way, stuck out his tongue at his teammate. "And you, young Master Wagner? Where have you experienced one of life's greatest joys? Feel free to admit defeat if you can't match our experience."

Kurt smiled his sweet, fangy smile. “*Ach*, very well, then. Inside the head of the Statue of Liberty, within a secret base on the moon, and in the royal palace of Asgard.” He ran his structurally very interesting hand (everything about Kurt was structurally interesting, all so damn *weird*, yet every part working so damn well with the others) gently down Loki’s arm.

“This isn’t the first time we’ve met, the prince and I. I volunteered to come here with Hank, firstly because I’ve served as the X-Men’s field medic for years, secondly because I understand a little about Loki’s... needs.”

Tony and Clint both stared at him.

“*Um...*?” Tony said, eyebrows raised nearly to his hairline.

Kurt laughed, “*Ach, mein lieber Herr*, no! Not with Loki. I am... romantically attached to a member of my team.”

The look he gave Tony was understanding, sympathetic, and Tony suddenly got that people tended to be either really, really freaked out by Kurt’s appearance, or very much into it. *Very* much. That Kurt was probably used to both kinds of attention.

“We were there on an odd mission, not at all our normal sort, but something related to Surtur, King of *Muspelheimr*, a very nasty character indeed. All went well in the fight, and after the battles ended, the royal family of Asgard gave a lavish feast for nobles and foreign guests. The King of Asgard, Odin Allfather, and Frigga Allmother, his gracious wife, presided, along with the two princes, Prince Thor, their elder son, known well to you, and Prince Loki, the younger prince. Actually, I should say, Prince Thor helped to preside. Prince Loki attended as punishment, to be on display. He did not eat. He was required to be there, but he didn’t eat. He’d been involved in a recent prank or scrape of some sort in another Realm, and the beings of that realm had stitched his mouth shut. His father forced him to sit there, hungry and suffering, before all the court, while all the while he and his nobles made digs and jibes at him.”

Kurt smoothed the white blanket that covered Loki’s skinny form. “I couldn’t eat either, though the food was excellent. I found the situation sickening. Clearly it also upset the queen and elder prince, but they didn’t dare cross the cruel old man. No one dared cross him. Even my dear *Herr Professor* told me not to interfere, whatever my convictions, that these were powerful beings, with their own customs, harsh as they might seem. That it wasn’t our place, as guests, to question. But I couldn’t... I *couldn’t*...”

Kurt glanced up. “When the festivities broke up, I followed the young prince, and where do you think he went? To his fine rooms?”

Clint glared his hands, with an expression that said as if maybe he’d actually heard this one before. Tony shrugged.

“Creeping like night, I followed Prince Loki to the stables, to the stall of a beautiful silvery-white horse with a black mane and tail, and black stockings on its eight feet. This horse had been pointed out to me as the King’s magnificent steed, Sleipnir, the greatest, most fiery stallion in the stables of Asgard, able to race between Realms, to the gates of *Helheimr* and

back again. Just then, however, the great horse lay on its side, legs tucked beneath it, and Loki lay with his arms around the creature's neck, his head resting against its throat. The horse wept, and each tear was like a diamond.

"The prince was angry, at first, to see me there, intruding on that private moment, but when I explained why I had come, only out of kindness, to free him, tears also stood in his eyes. The stitches, he told me after, were strongly enchanted. They could not be removed by Loki himself, even by doing himself violent injury, only by another who bore no ill-will against him in his heart. In Asgard, it was nearly impossible to find one who bore no ill will whatsoever against the younger prince. Even with his mother and his brother, he could be something of a trying youth, it seemed. The stitches had bound him a long, long time, and the wounds become ragged and horribly infected. The smell was..." Kurt's yellow eyes closed. "Difficult.

"I knelt there in the stable and did the best I could, knowing I only provided one sort of healing, not all the healing this young man needed. That maybe no one in his world, or any world, could provide all the healing he needed." Kurt's fingertips traced over Loki's cheek. "He looks so improved. Don't you think he looks improved? He's eating well again, and his lungs are nearly clear. Maybe..."

Kurt took a few deep breaths, his face serene even as his tail switched like the tail of an angry cat. Kurt clearly had a hard time saying a mean word about anyone. The tail, on the other hand, was frequently both sassy and opinionated.

Bitch of a tell you've got there, Kurt, Tony thought.

"I wasn't meant to inform you," Kurt blurted out suddenly, "By Hank's express orders. But Hank 'isn't the boss of me,' as our children at the academy might argue." He took another couple steadying breaths. "There was an organism in Loki's brain. I made a drawing of it, afterward." Kurt removed a paper from one of the bedside table's drawers. "There was no time for photographs, from beginning to end, unless your Ghost in the Wall captured images."

"A.I.," Tony corrected. "But you can call him JARVIS, or even just J. And yeah, he probably caught a few. J., wanna have a little show-and-tell time?"

JARVIS flipped the images he'd captured up onto one of the wall screens. They were disgusting. Bring-your-barf-bag disgusting. No-lunch-for-me-thanks disgusting. The... um... *thing* was slimy, and ripply, and had a thrashy tail. And flagellants. Tony *hated* things with thrashy tails and flagellants, even under the microscope. They gave him the heebie-jeebies. And this critter appeared to be the size of his thumb, maybe even bigger.

"Christ, what is that thing?" Clint breathed.

"We... those who raised me... called it a *Traumfresser*. *Traum* means 'dream.' *Fresser* means 'eater,' but not as a person eats. A devourer, a gorging, one who eats like a beast. It literally ate Loki's dreams: his hopes, his aspirations, his determination, courage, will to survive, excreting, in its path, despair, sorrow, misery, the loss of all a person can be."

Tony held onto Loki's hand tightly. To steady himself, he glanced at Kurt's drawing.

"I'm no artist," Kurt told him apologetically.

Actually, that wasn't quite true. It wasn't at all a *bad* drawing. It was just that Kurt's depiction kind of made the *Traumfresser* look cute, like the talking worm in the movie *Labyrinth*. Like it probably wore a scarf and spoke with an English accent, and might invite you in for a spot of tea on a blustery day.

Maybe Kurt just couldn't bear, anywhere in his kind self, the thought of the horror on the screen rooting around inside Loki's head. Tony could hardly bear it himself, and he was both a lot harder and more cynical than the young German. Or liked to think he was. Maybe.

Loki had been a tough bastard too, and look what had happened to him.

"Hank says..." After what appeared to be a moment of deep moral crisis, Kurt spilled. McCoy had a theory, it seemed, that Bruce's badly-judged poison might have actually saved Loki's life, or at least his sanity. Of course, that particular little drug cocktail probably also led to Loki's awful seizures and possible permanent brain damage, which made the question of whether they'd done the right thing pretty much moot.

"The organism really was dreadful," Kurt explained. "Sickening."

"Dreadful?" Clint put in. "That fucking thing is no doubt the most disgusting critter I've ever seen, and that includes Tony here in a goddamn cherry-red Speedo."

"Hey, I *rock* my Speedo. And let's all notice, please, that Kurt, who is an educated medical professional..."

"Actually," Kurt put in. "I'm an acrobat, also an aerialist and wire walker. I grew up in the circus, traveling all over Europe. It's a wonderful way to learn languages."

"Hey, me too! I mean, I grew up in the circus," Clint exclaimed. "Not the rest. I was a stunt archer. It was a great way to travel all over the Midwest, eat bad food, and take advantage of the rubes."

He and Kurt swapped tales for a bit, proving to Tony not only that the circus world truly was completely different from the world he lived in, but that one circus world could be completely different from another circus world.

Witness the fact that Kurt said "organism" while Clint said "thing."

Setting aside the fact that Kurt's day job, which, he'd learned, was teaching English, Languages and Drama at Mutant High, Kurt had extensively educated himself as a boy by reading every book he could get his cute little blue hands on, as opposed to Clint's informal schooling of watching thousands of hours of late-night horror or action movies.

Apparently Clint's circus had owned a DVD player. Maybe Kurt's hadn't.

Of course, if Clint's circus did own such a machine, given what Tony knew about Clint's early life, their possession of said machine could probably be tied to Clint's sketchy family having burgled it from the home of some unsuspecting patron while said patron was *oohing* and *aahing* at Clint's ability to shoot flaming arrows at distant objects. And hit them, of course—that was kind of his thing.

Kurt's circus, as he described it, except for his foster mother (an at least 95%-wicked witch) and his foster brother (a now-deceased guy so questionable Kurt wouldn't even state what exactly the deal was with him) specialized in being honest and hard-working, having a kick-ass acrobatic team, and traveling to European cities with unpronounceable names.

Clint's specialized, more or less, in breaking and entering, now and then with circuslike interruptions.

Clint told him, "You suck, Stark," when Tony pointed out this difference. It was all part of their warm and friendly relationship based on constant mutual insults.

"*Please, gentlemen,*" Kurt interjected, at which point Tony realized their bickering made Kurt (who it seemed actually *was* physically incapable of letting a mean word pass his lips), horribly uncomfortable. He actually appeared slightly stricken. Kurt's sassy tail, on the other hand, seemed to be snickering at them both.

Still, Tony and the tail agreed that backing off a little might be a good thing, especially if they were all going to continue hanging out together. He also ordered JARVIS to take down the damn pictures of the thing (Clint was right, it was totally a *thing*, organism implied something tidy, something that wouldn't haunt your dreams if you tried to sleep), still displayed on the white wall.

Tony had been sleeping horribly. He kept flashing back to the sight of Loki when he first appeared from the sheltering sleeping bag. No wonder the former god acted weird, he had a fucking *thing* in his head, an evil piece of bio-magical malware munching through his brain, and the more it munched, the harder it probably got for Loki not only to live, but to want to live.

So, the pictures came down, Tony tried to mind his p's and q's with Clint, and peace reigned supreme.

Kurt seemed relieved.

Tony and Kurt had started out sitting on opposite sides of the bed, with Clint at the foot. After a while, Kurt put up the rail on his side of the bed and perched. Later he moved to the head of the bed, then to the foot, next to the archer. Kurt was a confirmed percher; it seemed to relieve his feelings. His feet, unusual in their construction, to say the least, curled easily to grip, like the talons of a bird of prey. Tony, starting to get a little punchy from lack of sleep, wondered if he ever hung upside down from them, like a bat, or else hung by his tail.

He'd have bet good money Kurt sometimes hung by his tail.

Tony knew himself. He would have totally hung from his tail had he been blessed with one, especially such a useful tail as Kurt possessed. His sleep-deprived thoughts started to drift off into what kind of tail he'd actually choose, and eventually narrowed it down to one like Kurt's, a stripy lemur tail, or one like a golden retriever's.

He wanted to keep himself awake. He also wanted to provide self-distraction. He had a monster burned into his retinas and thoughts of it kept popping back into his head, making his stomach roll over. That aside, he also really, really wanted a drink, but he also didn't want to just pop out his hip-flask in the infirmary.

Instead, he forced himself, silly as it might seem, to focus on the tail question.

No, he decided, it would be Cap who sported the retriever tail. Tony could just see it, rippling patriotically in the wind. Thor would probably have one, too. A big, fluffy one. Extra golden.

Unexpectedly, beside him, Loki laughed, softly, in his sleep.

It was the only sign they'd had that somebody might be still be home inside Loki's head, now that the worm and the poison were through with him.

That little laugh made Tony want to weep with gladness, because at this point in time, Loki didn't look like he'd laughed in years, and that seemed totally wrong. He remembered the god's swagger, strutting through the room in his crazy sexy-ass Asgardian armor, looking hot as fuck and caring about nothing. He remembered Loki's mad, reckless, swashbuckler grin.

Loki wasn't meant to be sad. He was meant to be daring, wickedly joyful and, yes, way more than a little nuts, with that grin and the armor and his black hair whipping around his face. He was supposed to be The Dread Pirate Roberts, who takes no prisoners.

Kurt hadn't said anything to the effect, but Tony suddenly knew who'd put the creepy-crawler inside Loki's head. The same guy who'd mocked him in Kurt's story, when Loki sat suffering at that insane feast.

Loki's father, *that* was who, and the evil the King of Asgard had done to his son went so many millions times beyond anything even Howard would have thought of doing to hurt and shame and humiliate...

Tony couldn't. He just *couldn't*...

He needed that drink.

He pulled his hand sharply away from Loki's and muttered his excuses.

He needed a drink.

And he would have one. Yes, he would.

Tabula Rasa

Chapter Summary

Loki and Tony have a brief, painful conversation. The team has an unfortunate run in with Dr. Doom, who Tony is *so* not going to marry now, especially after he winds up floating in a cranberry bog somewhere in New Jersey. On the flight home, Tony has a Grinchlike moment. He also swears. A lot.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title comes from the Latin phrase for "blank slate."

A cranberry bog is a labor-saving way of harvesting cranberries, in which the field is flooded and the ripe berries float to the surface, where they can be easily scooped up in bulk rather than being picked one by one from the ground-hugging vines.

In nautical terms, port is left, starboard is right.

Rah rah sis boom bah is an old-school cheerleading chant meant to simulate the sound of a firework rocket going up (sis), exploding (boom) and the reaction of the crowd (bah standing in for Ah!). I think we can all imagine Tony's snide inner voice.

Cup-a-Soup is a packet of salty, salty instant soup powder meant to be mixed with hot water in a mug and drunk.

no es nada=it's nothing (Spanish)

Cover crops are planted in winter and plowed over in early spring to improve the soil.

The alien chest-burster is the thing, of course, that breaks out of John Hurt's (or, rather, Kane's) chest in the Ridley Scott film, *Alien*. And, let me tell you, back in 1979, it was the most frickin' terrifying thing to ever have appeared on a movie screen.

Tony, especially in this chapter, is what we might call an "unreliable narrator," especially in that the skewed opinions he has about himself are not necessarily my views. It's no accident, I'd say, that the Iron Man suit covers his real face with an immobile, emotionless mask.

sotto voce=in a quiet voice (literally "under voice" in Italian).

"The quality of mercy is not strain'd is the first line from Portia's well-known speech from Act 4, Scene 1 of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. A difficult play to watch

in modern times, without coming away from it finding the villain the most relatable character.

"Well, in Whoville they say..." is from *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* by Dr. Seuss.

Bruce is quoting Bob Cratchit, from Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*.

et al. = an abbreviation for the Latin phrase "*et alii*". Why a four-letter word even needs an abbreviation remains a mystery.

The wedding was totally off, Tony decided. He was *not* going to marry Victor von Doom after all. Not even if old Vic got down on both knees and pleaded. Not even in the figurative *Marry-Fuck-Kill* sense.

Victor von Doom was an asshole. Victor von Doom had *hacked his tech*.

Tony *hated* when people hacked his tech. That was the sort of offense that got a dude pitched headlong over the edge of the cliff along with Magneto. Hacking a guy's tech (*bio-mechano-magically*, no less), villainy-wise, was barely one step up from crushing it into neat, never-again-functional little cubes.

That did it. There was no other solution. He totally was going to be forced both to fuck *and* marry Loki.

Meanwhile, with his suit totally jacked, to an extent he wouldn't even have said was possible, and himself therefore frozen inside it in something resembling a crucifixion pose, meaning he couldn't reach the release catch, or have J. release it for him (because, *jacked*) he found himself floating (more or less, he seemed to be listing slightly to port) atop a cranberry bog, a billion berries bobbing around him, reminding him of the Spirit of Garlands Past.

Tony had the vaguest possible memory of sitting beside Maria on one of their many couches, stringing cranberries onto thread until his little fingers stung with the tangy juice, because *this* year, she'd declared, was the year they were going to celebrate A Real Old Fashioned Christmas.

He couldn't actually remember, but he'd bet that never happened. He'd bet Howard spirited his mom away to Monaco or Monte Carlo or Marrakesh--or whatever other kid-unfriendly place that started with an "M" took his fancy that particular year--the way he always did, because Maria was beautiful and looked decorative on his arm, especially in a designer gown and diamonds. Most of the rest of the time, at home, he either ignored her, or constantly told her how stupid she was, which he generally followed up with "and the boy is just like you."

Which was true. In a lot of ways, he *was* like his mother. For one thing, Howard's words had the power to wound him, and often did.

Tony was once shipped off to his aunt's place, where nobody liked him (Tony being already a confirmed smarty-pants, smartass and non-believer, as worthy of a lump of coal in his stocking as any kid who ever lived), all the other times left at home with Jarvis and kind, widowed, childless Mrs. Cook. He liked those holidays best. He liked to pretend the servants were really his grandparents, who were raising him because his parents had been eaten by a rhinoceros, like James's parents in *James and the Giant Peach*, his favorite book at the time, by Roald Dahl, his favorite author, who also seemed to be a confirmed smartass, of the adult sort.

He knew a rhino wouldn't *actually* eat a person (trample, yes, eat, no), and that he (probably) wouldn't want Maria eaten in any event. In the case of Howard, Tony would have offered the rhinoceros a napkin and its choice of condiments.

Mrs. Cook had dimpled elbows and a hearty laugh. She cooked a mean (if small) turkey for the three of them. Tony was allowed to pick up his drumstick and *gnaw*, pretending he was a fierce lion eating a haunch of wildebeest. Jarvis himself would steam a plum pudding, douse it with brandy and light it into a wonderful blue blaze. There were crackers with horrible jokes inside them, and paper crowns, and a stocking filled with cheap little things, that Tony nonetheless always enjoyed. At the end of it, Mrs. Cook (usually slightly tipsy by this time, but in a sweet and happy way) would hug him to her big cushiony bosom and say, "You're a *good* boy, Anthony. Don't you let them tell you otherwise."

"Don't hang around the servants," Howard would say to him, now and then. "It's low behavior, Anthony, not worthy of a Stark."

Tony never recognized the Howard Steve talked about, dashing and heroic. He didn't recognize the man on the tape Howard had left behind, saying he was secretly proud of him. Tony didn't need that kind of bullshit in his life. After one maudlin and two disbelieving listens, he'd chucked the damn thing in the incinerator. It confused him in ways he didn't care to be confused.

Their last Christmas together, Jarvis's gift to him was a beautiful wooden box filled with watchmaker's tools, each tool nestled gently in its own, special, velvet-lined place, each delicate and perfect in its own way.

"They were my father's," he said. "He had skilled and clever hands, like yours." He took Tony's hand, then, between both his hands--they were like bones, just like bones, but still warm. "I love you, Jarvis," Tony had managed to get out, after a long time had passed. He'd never said the words before, and hadn't much since, with anyone--maybe with Pepper a time or two, because they were something she wanted to hear. He wasn't sure he meant them, not the way she wanted them meant, but he said them to make her happy. He wanted her to be happy, at least.

And now she could be, with someone capable. Someone who wasn't him.

With Jarvis, though, he'd actually meant them.

He suspected, following the year of the Real Old Fashioned Christmas that would never be, Jarvis had located the garland at some point, probably sometime around Valentine's Day,

tucked away in a basket or box, unfinished, shriveled and sad. That he probably gave it a decent burial in the garbage can, poor forgotten thing.

Tony wasn't sure where that memory left him, except feeling sad. If, in fact, there was actually anything sadder than floating alone in a cranberry bog in New Jersey, at the beginning of December, trapped in his own depowered, hacked-by-a-supervillain-in-a-face-mask, formerly hi-tech suit.

Had he mentioned *in New Jersey*?

Tony felt somewhat less than heroic. He was getting colder and colder, and he needed to pee. Badly. Furthermore, he didn't even have J.A.R.V.I.S. to keep him company, because Doom had hacked the on-board computer and com system along with everything else.

He felt like an idiot. A loser. And he *really* needed to pee.

All he could hope for was that someone had taken note of his trajectory as he plummeted out of the sky, though the team had appeared both a little scattered and more than a little otherwise occupied last time he'd looked, with Doom's fucking little droney/droidy guys swarming everywhere, and the usual army of idiots in the Doom suits.

Who, unlike Darth Vader's Stormtroopers, could actually shoot, goddamn them.

And his day had started out just so fucking well.

Captain Cautious had already been prepping the Quinjet (they'd offered to rename it the QuimJet in honor of Natasha—or at least Tony had, the others, even Clint, were too proper—but tabled the idea after a resounding “fuck you” from Nat, in Russian, no less), when the call came in.

Steve still wasn't ready after the forty-five seconds it took Tony to summon his suit, so naturally, as one does, he decided to visit the Smurfs in the infirmary, pre-mission.

“Happy Smurf! Horny Smurf!” he greeted them. “Ya know--” He gestured vaguely toward his own head. “Because of the horns.”

Without Kurt even having looked, his flexible blue tail shot out to smack Tony's ass, froze in midair when Kurt himself noticed he was wearing the suit, and retreated demurely to give a gentle tickle instead to the sole of Loki's long, bare, exquisitely-formed foot.

Tony had dated famous models and actresses who, taken as a whole, were less attractive than that one foot. And he said that as a man firmly without a foot fetish. He actually thought feet, in general, were a little gross, and preferred not to touch them if he had the choice, which he usually did. He possibly had *it*—whatever “*it*” was—even worse for his former enemy than he'd originally thought.

At that little tickle, Loki... fucking... giggled.

Giggled?

He then stopped what he was doing (eating oatmeal with what looked like raisins and apple chunks), running his palm rapidly down over the lower half of his face as his eyebrows shot up, clearly questioning.

“Yes,” Kurt answered, in a slow, clear, patient voice. “It is he. It is Mr. Stark. He is wearing his armor. He is going to fight a bad person.”

Why the fuck are you talking to Loki like a two year old with brain damage? he almost asked—but then he looked at Loki’s face. There was barely a line on it. It looked open. Expectant. Innocent, for lack of a better word.

Tony glanced from Loki to Kurt. The mutant’s pleasant blue face, at the moment, was very, very hard to read.

“Would you like to try, Loki?” he asked.

Loki’s expression took on a kind of shy/proud look, like a first grader about to do his first show-and-tell in front of the whole class. The nod Kurt gave him in return could only be taken as encouraging.

“Sir,” JARVIS broke in on his earpiece, “Mr. Banner is asking you to join the others. It seems the Quinjet is prepared for takeoff.”

“Tell Bruce to keep his unstable molecule britches on. Just a sec...”

“Loki?” Tony said, in something he tried to make approximate his normal tone.

“Good morning, Mr. Stark,” Loki said in what he could only refer to as a careful voice, stumbling slightly on the words a time or two. “Loki is...”

“I am,” Kurt corrected kindly.

“I am,” Loki continued, with a slight but definite German accent exactly like Kurt’s. “Very happy to see you.”

He glanced at his teacher—clearly his teacher—as if asking, *How did I do?*

“Very well,” Kurt told him. “You did very well, Loki.”

“*Sehr gut!*” Loki answered, beaming.

“The words I say, please, Loki, not the ones in my head.”

A faint blush spread across Loki’s blue face. Tony’s heart commenced breaking.

“Very good,” Loki corrected himself.

“Very good,” Kurt repeated.

See what you’ve done? the back of his curly blue-black head seemed to say. See what you’ve done between you, you Avengers, his brother, his father? Now who’s going to clean up the mess?

“Thor’s flying in this afternoon,” Tony said. “We’ll have a meeting.”

It sounded lame, even to him.

“If…” Kurt began, in his usual mild, kind voice, “You attempt to turn Loki over to SHIELD, my people will take him and give him sanctuary. It is something in which we are only too experienced. The press may name you ‘Earth’s Mightiest Heroes.’ Do not believe it. You got the jump on me once, because I trusted you. It will not happen again.”

He took a paper napkin from the nightstand and passed it to Loki, who used it delicately but clumsily, obviously practicing a new skill, then resumed eating his cereal. This time his hands shook, though. He was scared.

“All will be well, *Liebling*,” Kurt told him. “No harm will come to you. I will always protect you.”

“Kurt!” Loki said, content again, and beaming.

“All is well,” Kurt answered, and gently stroked Loki’s wrist with his powerful blue fingers.

There was another, different kind of mind-thralling, Tony considered. One that wasn’t hostile, or forced. It was called love.

He fled the infirmary, stopping off at one of his emergency supply stations to top off his levels of Glenmorangie on the way to the Quinjet. He usually tried not to drink before a mission, but this was a special case, an emergency. His head was whirling and he felt sick, in a way that had nothing to do with alcohol. He didn’t want to face the others, didn’t want to talk to them at the moment, the discussion going around in endless circles, swallowing its own tail.

“I’ll fly outside this time,” he told Cap over the com. “Get the lay of the land, so to speak, before we go in.”

“Sounds good!” Steve answered, in that hearty, gung-ho voice he always took on when they were heading out on a mission.

Just another thing Tony didn’t need.

Rah-rah, sis-fucking-boom-bah, he thought bitterly.

“What was that?” Cap said in his earpiece.

Christ, he can even tell when I’m swearing in my head?

“Nothing,” Tony answered. “Didn’t say a word.”

And then there was the cranberry bog.

Bruce was the one who found him and released the no-systems-go, emergency override catch on his suit.

Together, they waded in gloomy silence to higher, drier land.

Bruce had that shaky, drained look he always got right after de-Hulking. Tony felt like he was coming down with something, maybe the flu. He wasn’t, but he felt that way—probably from having been so cold for so long inside the suit. He’d felt briefly warm when he peed himself, then that got cold too. Not to mention uncomfortable. And demoralizing.

It was probably the only time in his life he’d feel grateful about being submersed in a goddamn freezing-cold fucking cranberry bog in December—at least it soaked away the traces.

“What a goddamn fucking shitty bitch of a day,” Tony grumbled. He wanted to hit, or possibly kick, something. Hard. Repeatedly

Bruce hauled himself far enough out of his own misery to ask. “Are you okay?”

“Frozen.” Tony glanced up. A fat flake of snow hit him right in the eye. “Fabulous. Just what I needed.”

By the time they reached the Quinjet, the fat flakes had turned into a semi-blizzard, but Cap took off regardless. He’d called a meeting for that afternoon. A “*what should we do about the very attractive blue elephant in the room*” kind of meeting. Nope, wouldn’t want to miss *that!*

Thor was flying in from New Mexico, or London, or wherever he hung his fucking hammer these days when he wasn’t shirking his team duties or feeding his teammates lousy intel.

“Someone’s in a crappy mood,” Clint chirped.

He’d offered to give Tony skin-to-skin contact to warm him up. Natasha hadn’t.

Instead, Tony let himself into the head to strip out of his soaked flight suit. The fresh one he’d brought with him didn’t want to slide on over his damp, pruney skin, especially in that cramped space, and he found himself cursing at it in impotent rage. He even kicked the door panel like an idiot, considering he had no shoes on.

However, once he’d rediscovered the slim flask he’d hidden inside the overhead vent, everything once more became copacetic, order restored to his world.

By the time he emerged, decent, mostly dry and pleasantly lit, he hardly even needed the mug of hot Cup-a-Soup Clint offered him. Tony smiled and thanked him nonetheless. It was only good manners.

Bruce threw him a familiar look. *Is the drinking becoming a problem, Tony?* that look said. It always seemed more sad than anything else.

Tony shrugged. “*No es nada*, Bruce.” Even though it wasn't nothing, really, and they both knew it.

The team spent the rest of the trip discussing why Doctor Doom would waste his time destroying an endive field in New Jersey, planted over in crimson clover for winter, a large eggplant patch, also currently not in use due to the season, and a commercial holly farm.

Clint's original theory, “He hates veggies? And Christmas?” was followed up by the more plausible, “It was a dry run. He was testing us. Probably gearing up for something major.”

“Yays,” Tony grumped. He thought Clint's theory was probably pretty accurate. He also wished he could duck out of Steve's afternoon meeting. With Loki's brother, no less. Everybody else arguing, *Jail? SHIELD? Firing squad?* while he fucking sat there with his thumb up his butt, the image of Loki sitting up in bed, with his big, innocent, brain-sucked red eyes and bowl of oatmeal, burned into his retinas.

Loki--brilliant, never-at-a-loss-for-something-to-say, no-snark-too-snarky Loki--fighting to get out the string of one-syllable English words Kurt had patiently taught him to say aloud, in place of the German words inside Kurt's head.

Had Loki always read stuff in people's heads? Tony somehow didn't think so. So why was he doing it now?

The meaning of Loki's odd little gesture came to him suddenly, Loki's expressive hand sliding down over his mouth and jaw. Tony had looked different in his suit. Loki wanted to make extra sure it was him.

Is this the man with the beard? he'd been asking. Or maybe. *My man with the beard?* And then the gorgeous smile when Loki knew it was really him.

Tony heard Loki repeat the simple greeting he'd so carefully practiced—again, just for him--and his heart cracked right down the middle, into two equal pieces, and something was set free from it.

Something that had *never* been free in him, something he didn't *ever* think he'd experienced before then.

It might have felt equal, on the pain scale, to an alien chest-burster, but it still (on the opposite end of a completely different scale) felt warm, vibrantly alive, real. And, dammit, that was something worth fighting for, wasn't it? The ability to suddenly and totally fucking *care*, for the first time in his sad and emotionally stunted existence?

He excused himself to the head again, this time not to drink, but to talk in private to JARVIS.

“J,” Tony said, *sotto voce*—he wanted this just between themselves for the moment. “Ask Kurt to get Loki ready. I want him at this meeting. I want them all to see him.”

First off, if the others were going to discuss Loki's fate, he had every right to be there. Second off (was that even a thing?), if they planned to send him away to some awful place, he wanted them to know for damn sure what they were doing.

Steve had been very neglectful of his new puppy ever since the incident with the poison shot, ever since they'd learned Loki's true identity. Well, to hell with that, Captain Fucking America.

If Tony put Loki right in front of his face, Steve-o would have to see, and if Cap saw, maybe the rest of the team would see too. They were smart people, decent people with misdeeds of their own on their slates—maybe they wouldn't care the same way he did, but he thought he could still move them, even if it turned out only to be a little.

"The quality of mercy is not strain'd," and all that shit.

They'd been spared some bad stuff in their lives, they could afford to spare Loki some bad stuff too. If everyone else got a second chance, why couldn't he?

"Already done, sir," JARVIS answered, a trifle smugly. "Great minds think alike, yes?"

"You're a smartass, J. That may well be one of the reasons why I like you so much," Tony said.

"Indeed, sir," JARVIS responded, and that was that. Tony could almost hear him smiling. Not quite--J. was too proper for that--but almost.

When Tony emerged, it was to the sound of Bruce reciting: "*Well, in Whoville they say - that the Grinch's small heart grew three sizes that day.*"

You and me both, Mr. Grinch, Tony thought.

"This is f... antastically amazing!" Clint exclaimed, managing his save before Steve even got out the first syllable of his usual cry of '*Language!*' "Bruce can recite the whole thing, from the beginning."

"It was something I used to do," Bruce said, self-consciously. "As a kid. Memorize things. It was..."

"A useful skill," Tony slid in smoothly.

His best friend met his eyes with a grateful look.

"In school, I mean," Tony continued. "Lots of memorization, back in the day."

"Lots," Bruce echoed, in a slightly shaky way. The both knew that wasn't it at all.

Memorizing things had been a defense mechanism, a safe place Bruce could go to in his head when things got too awful in the big real world. "Different times."

"Different times," Tony repeated, and draped his arm around his ScienceBro's shoulders in a comradely way.

Bruce leaned in to him gratefully.

It wasn't that you never cared, Tony reminded himself.

It was just the "*growing three sizes*" thing. That took the good ol' thunderclap of revelation.

"Avengers Tower in five," Cap let them know. "Strap in, please."

Tony strapped, but he also sprawled, one leg out in the aisle. He decided to treat his comrades to a sad, sad song, in this case, "*Desperado*," an oldie-moldy by The Eagles. Its dirge-like quality seemed to suit the mood of this peculiarly fucked-up mission.

Of all the popular bands of his youth, Tony thought he might well hate The Eagles the most. Rock music, in his opinion, should have viscera up the yin-yang. The Eagles barely even had balls. Three guy with droopy mustaches, strumming, did not keep alive the burning heart of rock 'n' roll.

"Desperado, oh, you ain't gettin' no younger..." he warbled, corny as possible.

*Your pain and your hunger, they're drivin' you home
And freedom, oh freedom well, that's just some people talkin'
Your prison is walking through this world all alone*

You better let somebody love you...

"*You better let somebody love you,*" Clint chimed in, a little higher and much sweeter. A lesser-known fact about Clint was that he had a truly excellent singing voice. He probably could have been on Broadway if he wasn't also so good at shooting pointy, feathered (and sometimes exploding) sticks at things.

He also played the piano. Well. So did Director. They were like a mutually gay, cohabitating Elton John and Billy Joel. Their apartment held two pianos. Tony would have been willing to bet they played duets. And probably also had kinky musical piano-bench sex.

Except he *so* wasn't going to go there.

"You better let somebody love you, before it's too late..." they concluded together, Clint's voice mercifully mostly drowning out his own.

Natasha applauded, almost without irony.

"And where does this sudden musical turn come from?" Bruce asked, clearly glad to have the attention off himself for the moment.

"He's at least partially drunk," Cap said primly.

"Lucky me," Tony answered, with fake cheer. "Those that can't do, criticize. Right, Steve?"

"*My dear,*" Bruce quoted, in a horrible, fake British accent that actually sounded more like Dan Ackroyd's long-ago (but still gut-bustingly funny) impersonation of Julia Child. "*The*

children. Christmas Day."

"It's almost three weeks until Christmas," Natasha said, but at least that got them talking about holiday plans.

At which point, Clint revealed that he intended to pack up Phil, Nat and a shit-ton of presents and spend Christmas at a farmhouse upstate (owned by the archer himself) with his ex-wife and his two kids.

"Ex-wife? Two kids?" Tony literally goggled.

"My ex is a wonderful person. They're great kids," Clint said, a little defensively. "It just didn't work..."

"Because of the gay," Natasha put in, turning a page of the magazine she'd been leafing through. It was, typically, all about handguns.

"How did I not know this?" Tony asked the others. "Did the rest of you know this?"

All over the Quinjet, hands were raised. Even JARVIS said, "I knew."

"That doesn't count," Tony grumped. "You know everything."

But it did count. It did.

He felt like shit. He knew he'd been a little self-absorbed, but this...

And still all he could think of, playing the role of smartass supreme to conceal his current shame, was that he wanted to climb deep into a bottle and pull the cork right in behind him, to block the way for anyone else who might try to find him there.

Truth be told, he knew that was the way he would spend his own Christmas, while Clint, *et al.*, celebrated their Real Old Fashioned Christmas in the country, and Bruce happily volunteered in a soup kitchen somewhere (someday he might go with him, but this year was not that year). He'd spend it in front of the TV with a bottle or two. JARVIS and his very own "kids," his lovely robots, Dumm-E, Butterfingers and You filling in for his nonexistent family.

Tony had no idea--and yet every idea--how he'd gotten to this place.

Choosing Sides

Chapter Summary

Popcorn as a symbol of America. Thor brings news from Asgard. Cap's meeting doesn't go well--or does, depending what side you come down on. Tony has a plan. And outside reinforcements.

Chapter Notes

I used to work as a corporate trainer. The first lesson of training (probably equal to "know your stuff") is, "If you want their attention, bribe them with food." A weird bit of trivia about real kids with ADHD is that coffee, or other stimulants, actually do calm them down. It's like their brain chemistry is flipped from other people's.

In most U.S. schools, ninth graders are 14-year-olds entering their first year of high school.

The poem is "*The Cloths of Heaven*" by Irish poet William Butler Yeats.

"*Whole Lotta Love*" is one of Led Zeppelin's best-known songs. "*Highway to Hell*" is by AC/DC.

Graf and *Gräfin*=Count and Countess (German)

Steve meant well, Tony knew that. He really did try, and there were maybe things he brought to the table, with his old-fashioned values and ideas, that were good things, that had a purity all their own, actually kind of lovely when looked at the right way, like the refreshments he insisted on serving at their meetings.

Anyone else would have gone the standard bagels/doughnuts/coffee route for the morning get-togethers, picked up by an intern or sent up from Rosenblum's deli on the ground floor (Rosenblum's got a deal from Tony on their lease just for having the best damn bagels in Manhattan, bar none).

Not Steve. He'd personally cook them waffles, or pancakes, or the Old Timey Captain America version of omelets. Steve liked to cook, and was decent enough at it, in a limited, momish kind of way, despite the fact that he'd apparently never heard of cholesterol (like he'd have to worry), and put butter into and onto fucking everything.

Bruce's theory was that he was excited about the end of food rationing, and was throwing his own little high-cholesterol celebration.

Afternoons were different. They'd meet in the Official Avengers Conference Room (you could hear the capital letters in Cap's voice) rather than around the breakfast table, and instead of the ubiquitous plate of cookies, or a bowl filled with fun-sized candy bars you might expect to find there--along with limitless coffee to try to keep the focus and attention of an audience who (leaving Natasha out of the equation), were basically a bunch of eight-year-old boys with ADHD housed in adult bodies--Steve served popcorn and Cokes (in the glass bottles, no less), as if, instead of a meeting, they were at a ball game, or the circus.

The menu never altered, even though Tony said he'd pay for whatever Steve wanted or needed if he decided on something different for a change.

Steve didn't. Steve wanted popcorn. And Cokes in glass bottles.

In the end Tony just threw in the towel and bought him (technically, The Avengers, but really Steve) the authentic, vintage theater popper currently filling Avengers Central with the scent of popcorny goodness. Steve always overestimated their love of popcorn and never failed to make enough to feed armies. After the meeting, catering came up, bagged the extra in nostalgic red-and-white-striped paper bags, and distributed the bags to Tony's employees. "Captain America Popcorn Day" was getting to be kind of a thing around the tower.

The truth was, though—and Tony knew it—the popcorn wasn't just kernels of a starchy vegetable puffed up with air, it was a symbol.

That damned popcorn was America itself, an America Cap longed for the same way Dorothy had longed to fly over the rainbow, and then to go home again, an America that maybe never even existed except in skinny, sickly little Stevie Rogers's head: it was mom and apple pie and opportunity; it was blue skies and long summer afternoons playing baseball out on the sandlot and amber waves of grain (or, at least, corn).

It was Steve's dreams, and if any man ever believed in his dreams, that man was Captain Steven Rogers.

And so Tony tried to be a little cautious, a little kind, maybe more so than it was normally in his nature to be, because it all cut so close to that poem Ms. Mendoza, his ninth grade English teacher, had forced him learn all those years ago, the first poem he guessed he ever understood fully, and possibly the last as well. The only one that ever really touched him (besides, maybe, the one about the plums).

And maybe he'd never been poor in material things, the way Steve had, coming up in the poorer part of the poorer borough of Brooklyn, but in other ways he'd been deprived of things Steve could never conceive of lacking.

"But I, being poor, have only my dreams;" the poem said.

*I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.*

The universe forbid that he, Tony Stark, should tread on Steve's dreams. He couldn't share them, the world he'd been born into was too different for him to ever harbor that kind of idealism—but he wasn't going to grind them into the dirt.

Tony had bought each of his teammates a housewarming gift when they moved into the tower. Steve's was a 1944 Wurlitzer Jukebox, fully restored and stocked with the favorites of his heyday. It was a beautiful machine. Steve had nearly cried, and Tony was glad he'd resisted the urge to sneak "*Whole Lotta Love*," or "*Highway to Hell*" in among the tracks. He wasn't *always* such a bad guy.

A time or two, at night when he couldn't sleep, when Tony had put on a suit and just zoomed, looking for trouble, or distraction, or some lost intangible thing, he'd flown by the windows of Steve's room at low speed and seen him slow-dancing alone by the red and green and golden lights of the Wurlitzer, to music Tony couldn't hear, some imaginary lost loved partner held tenderly in his empty arms.

Sometimes, times like those (and much as he tended to mock Grandpa Steve, unable somehow to help himself), the dude's sudden look of supreme loneliness, now and then, kind of put a knife through Tony's heart. Loneliness was something he understood—even though he did at least maintain the minimum self-awareness to understand most of his personal loneliness could generally be said to be of his own making. Witness the Pepper situation.

Tony also knew he couldn't fill that gap in Steve's life. They were never going to be bestest best friends. All he could give him was his own species of semi-loyalty, and the music of Steve's youth.

Steve, who honestly didn't look like himself that particular afternoon (and who could blame him after their mutual shit-storm of a morning), was still trying to call the meeting to order (as Tony amused himself by chucking pieces of popcorn at Clint's head every time their fearless leader glanced the other direction, half the time hitting Phil, who'd foolishly chosen to sit in for the great occasion and be pelted by mistake, and who was *definitely* not secretly holding hands with his boyfriend under the table), when JARVIS announced, "Madam and Sirs, Mr. Odinson is approaching the tower, at haste."

This announcement was quickly followed by the weighty thud of Thor's boots on the balcony concrete, still audible from two rooms away.

For a second, Tony wished he'd had JARVIS lock the doors. He wasn't too damn pleased with Loki's big bro, he discovered. He realized he actually didn't want to deal with him. In, fact, he kind of wanted to punch him right in his big (well-shaped, handsome) Nordic nose.

Thanks ever so much for the beyond-crappy Intel you gave us, Big Guy, he wanted to say, Followed by your total non-interest in your nearly-dying brother over the past few days. You just really are a prince in every sense of the word, asshole.

A drink, Tony also considered, Would go down very nicely at this particular moment in time-- though he'd been trying to turn over a new leaf and cut back. A little. Which equaled as much as he found himself able.

The god of thunder didn't waste time with hellos. He burst through the door without knocking and strode manfully to the end of the table, plunked down his giant hammer on the tabletop and demanded, "Take me now to the dungeon where my brother is held."

He was wearing a giant fur cape, for the gods' sakes, as if his ordinary red one wasn't enough. Who the hell dressed him in the morning?

"What's the goddamn magic word?" Clint said. His voice was Arctic. So was his face.

Natasha momentarily lost her cool to gape at him. Steve appeared too shocked even to play cuss-cop.

"First off," Tony said, then flicked a big, puffy piece of popcorn at Thor's godly forehead. His aim was excellent. "Katniss is right. Sit down, Big Guy. Say howdy. I know your mama taught you some manners."

Slowly, Thor sat. "I have lately learned this 'howdy,'" he informed them. "It is an ancient greeting of the cowfolk." Had his voice actually gotten deeper since he was last there? Had Thor himself become more pretentious?

Tony hadn't thought that could even be a possibility. He'd assumed Prince Worthy already had that situation more than covered.

Thor's brow wasn't exactly what you'd call furrowed with apprehension, but he did have a generalized look of worry. Above that, he looked weary, in a way Tony recognized. It was a look of a guy with family problems, being pulled in contrary directions by people he tried hard to love equally.

"I have been, these past days since you brought to me news of Loki's presence, in Asgard," Thor said heavily, "And spoken at length with my father. Though perhaps quarreled might be the better word. I will not quickly retrace my steps to that Realm. Loki, I discover, is exiled and disowned, dead to him, no longer my brother, by the word of our king. He offers *no* aid in this matter."

Tony suddenly felt slightly sorry for Point Break. Just not that much.

"Yeah?" he said, and realized his voice sounded savage. "You went there expecting *help* from daddy? Did dear old dad happen to mention what he's been up to with your baby brother, Big Guy? 'Cause we can show you visual aids. Hey, JARVIS, wanna share your pretty pictures with goddamn Crown Prince Thor of Asgard?"

"Indeed, sir." Tony hadn't known the A.I. could show disgust, but the flavor of that emotion leaked almost palpably through JARVIS's normal polite tones. J. tended to be fairly neutral with most people, but he actually liked Loki, Tony could tell, and when he liked people he tended to be very loyal indeed, just as he was with Tony. Usually. Unless he chose to act against Tony's will, but in his best interests.

Within seconds, image after image began to flash across the conference room's fifty-four inch screen: Loki when he first arrived; Loki in the safe room, huddled in his sheltering sleeping

bag; Kurt patiently stitching and bandaging part after part of Loki's abused, emaciated body; Kurt clipping Loki's sawn-off and matted hair; Loki in mid-seizure with the black gunk flowing out of him. Last of all, for the kicker, the *Traumfresser* worm-thingy, in all its tail-whipping, flagellant beauty.

They honestly weren't pictures that improved with time and multiple viewings.

This time, Tony actually did at least feel slightly guilty, because during the picture-show, Thor turned about seven kinds of pale and started to sweat. He then leaned forward, elbows on the table, face resting in his huge, powerful hands.

Tony took it back. Thor didn't look worried, or even sad. He looked heartbroken. It was just that the default on his face was set to "Heroic Valor" and didn't easily reveal more subtle emotion.

"I shall change my request," Thor said, and it came to Tony that his voice hadn't actually grown deeper, it was deeper because Thor had been weeping manly godlike tears, probably all the way back from Asgard. He'd only dried them up to save his dignity in front of his teammates.

His mother was dead, and he'd just seen proven before his eyes that the all-wise, all-noticing, all-powerful king and father he'd worshiped his entire life was a remorseless psychopath who'd tried, in the cruelest and most low-down possible way, to murder his little brother.

So, okay, maybe Thor was kind of dim. But maybe sometimes you had to be, if that was the only way to preserve your sanity. Maybe the god of thunder had learned to embrace obliviousness in the same way Tony embraced Glenmorangie.

"May I ask a boon of you, Shield-Brothers, Shield-Sister? If you have yet to dispose of the body of your enemy, may I visit the remains of my Loki, and perform for him the rites of our people, as befit a prince of Asgard?"

Ooh. Ouch.

"Thor..." Steve began.

The thunder-god lifted his face, though his body stayed hunched. It was the first time Tony had ever seen him look beaten.

"After our speech together, Shield-Comrades, I traveled the Bifrost to seek counsel of the King of Asgard, for his words, when we spoke upon my departure from that Realm, seemed kind and wise, and my mind felt much afflicted with doubt. It was then I learned my father was not, indeed, my father when last we spoke, but my brother clad in the mask of his face and form. I learned also of how Odin escaped his captivity, where Loki hid him, and of the terrible vengeance he then wreaked upon my brother. From thinking Loki dead, then alive and loose amongst you with malice in his thoughts, I began next to feel sore afraid for him, firstly from what I have learned of your world, secondly from what I know of Loki's rashness when he becomes truly wounded, thirdly from what I knew of the monstrous thing set within

his half-broken mind, lastly because of the cruel and ill-judged words I myself spoke to you, which drove you to desperate acts and...”

“Thor!” Cap interrupted, in a sharper voice.

From out in the corridor came the grinding sound of the elevator stopping at their floor, then JARVIS chimed in, so pleasantly digital butter wouldn't have melted in his digital non-mouth, “Sirs, Madam, allow me to inform you, a SR-71 Blackbird has lately landed atop the tower. Two passengers disembarked, and have entered the premises.”

Steve was up out of his seat and ready for action, his shield already springing to hand, the chair toppling backwards, probably in the middle of a Doom-related flashback to that morning's debacle. “JARVIS, what the heck...?”

Only Steve Rogers, role-model for the nation, would still say “heck” at such a time. Tony almost had to stifle a laugh.

Of course, he also knew exactly who the Blackbird had to belong to, having helped old Chuck Xavier pimp out the jet a time or two over the years.

Xavier hadn't exactly been a *friend*, mostly due to the flagpole sized stick permanently inserted up Chuck's butt, more of a friendly(ish) acquaintance. He was a guy it seemed Tony had always known, the way the genius sons of rich men, rich men themselves, who lived within a fifty mile radius, always *were* going to know each other.

Tony also had to give Kurt some props. The young German was such a sweetheart in basically every way, it might be easy to stuff him inside that dismissive and maybe slightly-disrespectful box of “*gentle, patient teacher and nurse*,” (forgetting for a moment that whipping tail, the glimpse of knife-sharp fangs, those muscles so hard they made Steve look a little flabby, and Clint like he should tone up those arms a bit) and think of him as harmless, maybe even as a bit of a wimp. But Kurt wasn't harmless, or wimpy. He *really* wasn't.

Recent research by JARVIS, requested when he and Kurt first met, had revealed a few facts about one Mr. Kurt Wagner, age 29, once of Winzeldorf, Bavaria, Germany, now of Salem Center, New York in the good old U.S. of A. As both a businessman and scientist, Tony always liked to know exactly who he was dealing with.

He'd found out that Kurt's biological father was almost certainly not the ailing German *Graf* of that name, married by his biological mother for reasons known only to herself. Somewhere in the neighborhood of thirty years before, servants spoke of the devil himself visiting *Gräfin* Wagner (said by everyone to be extremely beautiful, but also a stone bitch) nightly in her boudoir. Months later, in the stress of childbirth, the *Gräfin* turned suddenly blue, and not from lack of oxygen, either--the accounts made that much clear--giving birth, moments later, to an equally blue demon-child.

Cue angry, superstitious mob shouting, “Burn the witch and her demon spawn!” as the *Gräfin* fled. It was said she made good on her escape by a superior display of gymnastic skill. And by chucking her baby off a cliff (or possibly over a waterfall, in the heat of the moment, the eyewitnesses weren't as accurate as they might have been).

Tony actually knew a woman who fit that description to a "T," and he could, himself, testify to three things: one, her undoubted gymnastic skill, at least in bed; two, that she was indeed the stoniest stone bitch who ever stoned; three, yup, she was blue. *Very* blue, though not in any way softly furry like Kurt. Maybe she'd wanted to taunt or shock him with her blueness when she revealed her true self, but Tony had found it incredibly hot, much hotter than the blandish blonde beauty she'd displayed when she seduced him.

In fact, she was so very hot, and so amazing in bed, he almost couldn't truly grudge her the prototype tech she'd stolen from him, not even a weapon, only his riff on some sort of attempted time travel thing, which probably wouldn't have worked anyway.

Besides that, Tony had gained a little intel on Kurt's probable father, one very bad dude named Azazel, who'd passed on to his son those elegantly pointed ears and that useful-and-sassy tail. He seemed to fall in that rather scary (to his scientific mind, anyway) gray area, much as Loki did, between things that couldn't possibly be real, and things that were very real but also very hard to accept, or even to comprehend. So, sure, this Azazel wasn't the devil, merely a nearly infinitely powerful, dimension-jumping, millennia-old, highly-demonlike being.

He'd also tried to kill poor Kurt not so very long ago, which actually put the mutant one up on Bruce for the number of his parents who'd tried to murder him. Add in similar attempts by his foster mother and brother and Kurt, for being pretty much the nicest, most likeable person Tony had ever met, wasn't doing too well in the family department.

Tony's last interesting fact, from a personal standpoint, at least, was that Kurt did indeed swing in his direction, but the boyfriend he'd been so coy about was the dude who'd offered to slice up Tony's wedding tackle and serve it to him with fava beans: Mr. Tough Guy himself, the one and only Wolverine.

Less interesting (but maybe more pertinent) research informed him that Kurt had been at Xavier's for years, and (as Tony knew for himself) Xavier's kids weren't pushovers. They weren't just soldiers, they were warriors, every last one of them, even those who spoon-fed fallen gods tapioca and gently taught them basic vocabulary words.

They had to be warriors. Thor hadn't been wrong about the world they lived in, especially the ones who looked like Kurt.

"JARVIS didn't tell you because he didn't need to tell you," Tony interrupted, even though he hadn't exactly been expecting a consignment of X-Men to drop out of the sky at this exact moment, and it had all come as news to him. "My tower, remember? Therefore, my permission. Tell me I'm wrong."

He stood up himself, tilting his chin to meet Steve's guileless, if furious, baby blues. "It's not Doom, Cap, it's Kurt's crew, from Salem Center, so you can totally chill."

He didn't add, *Unless you try to hurt Loki, or stop him and Kurt from leaving, if they need to for their own safety.*

Tony hoped they wouldn't need to. He had one of his crazy ideas forming in his head. So crazy it left him breathless.

And also breathlessly, crazily happy. He might even say, filled with hope.

A polite knock sounded at the door, and then it opened without Tony speaking, or its knob even turning. Either JARVIS's work, or someone on the other side was a telekinetic.

JARVIS, Tony guessed. His A.I. had, without doubt, chosen sides. But then, Tony knew, so had he. That was the whole point of his plan.

He wouldn't let his team get hurt, but Loki, as he was, would never hurt them anyway—how could he?

Unless Steve or somebody decided to involve themselves in a stupid game of “*My Dick is Bigger than Your Dick*” with Wolverine, this could all end perfectly painlessly. But Tony wouldn't let Loki get hurt again either. Never again, no matter what Steve decided.

Dammit, this was his tower, and Loki was his guest. His permanent guest, if he had his way. Why should this be Cap's decision? Or Phil's? Why should the choice be anyone's but his alone?

Well, that's a huge and interesting step to take, Tony's rational mind commented. Are you sure you've thought this through?

Shut up, you, Tony told it. Your advice is not wanted.

“Guys, come in,” he called. “Loki's brother just brought us up to speed on events back home. Results, he was totally wrong about his brother, and is very sorry for his mistake. Also, his dad is an asshole. That about right, Thor?”

The god of thunder kind of looked like a cartoon character (a big one—maybe Hector the Bulldog, friend to Tweety Bird and sworn enemy of Sylvester J. Pussycat) who'd been hit in the face with a frying pan, which actually might have happened to that particular dog in one episode. Or maybe that was the bulldog in Tom and Jerry. They ran together in Tony's head in an endless cycle of plotting and chasing. Looney Tunes indeed.

Hank McCoy took his invitation first, ducking his huge head to get under the lintel. Inside, when he stood straight, the pointy, bristly tips of his hair? Fur? Pelt? actually brushed the acoustical tile on the ceiling. His picture could have easily have been featured next to a dictionary definition of “intimidating.” If dictionaries still existed, which Tony supposed they did somewhere. Maybe in someone's grandparents' house. Or Steve's bookcase.

Behind Hank, Tony heard Loki's voice, his newly-acquired German accent already fallen to half-strength since that morning. “But why?” he was asking, presumably of Kurt. “*Why?*”

Hank stepped aside, allowing the smaller blue mutant to enter, pushing their frail-looking but equally blue patient in a wheelchair. Kurt, Tony had to say, looked hot as fuck in his black,

let's-leave-nothing-whatsoever-to-the-imagination X-uniform, almost a shock to Tony's system after the formless scrubs he was used to seeing his new friend wearing.

Loki had acquired clothes to replace his formless hospital johnny—sweatpants, at least, and woolly socks, a long-sleeved t-shirt that almost fit him. JARVIS had ordered from the *Men's Insanely Tall and Emaciated Catalog*, Tony guessed. The unwieldy cast around both Loki's horns had been replaced with something much smaller and lighter, supporting only the spot that had broken.

Loki's ruby eyes were stretched wide, and he held his hands with frozen stillness in his lap, fingers folded into his palms, hiding his black claws.

Poor kid, Tony thought. *He doesn't want them to see the one small defense he has. He doesn't want the others to see him as a threat.*

Loki broke Tony's heart again by looking down the row of faces one by one, clearly trying to mask terror and confusion from showing in his own face. Bruce, at least, gave him a nod, Clint an actual grin, which Loki returned, a little shakily. He'd turned pale again, a shade of baby blue, deeply bleached out from his normal rich hue.

"Loki," Steve said, quietly but sternly.

Loki's eyes, impossibly, got even wider, fixing on Cap's expression. His teeth caught and bit at his lower lip. "Loki doesn't... Loki doesn't..." He said, his voice painfully lost and vulnerable.

"You brought an alien army here to our city," Steve went on in the same stern voice. "You not only ended the lives of brave soldiers, but wantonly murdered innocent American civilians. Least of all, but still significant, you also destroyed millions of dollars worth of city and personal property. Your king and father no longer wishes to deal with you. That leaves it to us, and to SHIELD. You returned here. What did you expect us to do?"

Loki pulled back in the wheelchair, knees drawn up to his chest, tremors running down his long, bony arms and legs, his red eyes frantically searching Steve's set face.

"Loki? I asked you a question," Steve added.

"Yeah, like he understood two words," Clint muttered, almost angrily. "Jesus Christ, Cap. Buy a clue."

"Gentlemen..." Director began, but Loki interrupted him.

"I didn't! I didn't!" he cried. "I don't *know* the bad man! My eyes are red! My skin is blue! My eyes are red! My skin is blue!"

The thing was, his skin barely *was* blue at that point. He'd gotten so pale he more closely resembled a fair-skinned white person who'd been out too long in the cold. Those ruby eyes kept trying to roll backward in his head, with Loki barely able to stop them each time they went for it.

“That’s enough!” Kurt and Hank snapped, nearly in chorus. They sure as hell weren’t talking to Loki.

“They’re right,” Tony said, feeling weary and furious all at the same time, and pretty much hating anyone, at that moment, who wasn’t a X-Man, a former god of mischief, or a Robin Hood wannabee.

“Clint's right too. Fuck you, Steve. You brought Loki here. He was one of your goddamn puppies. You could see at the time you found him how bad he was hurting, what this city and his situation had done to him. You felt that, It touched the good man in you.

"But then what did we actually do? Instead of helping, we made it worse. We didn't think, only acted on pretty spotty evidence. We didn't use logic. We didn't ask questions. We weren't even the good guys. Did you even listen to what Thor just told us? Loki's father *destroyed* him. The big bad we fought is no longer there. Daddy put a goddamn brain-eating worm inside his head, and it did what it did." Tony felt sick as the truth of that hit him. "You have a worse punishment than that in store for him, man, be my guest, but you won't be Steve Rogers the morning after you do it, and I'll never fucking follow you so far as to the men's room again. Not that I usually follow you to the men's room," he ended lamely. So much for stirring rhetoric.

Natasha got to her feet—presumably to shoot Tony dead on the spot. Instead, to his total surprise—even though he firmly believed Nat to be pretty much the coolest woman who ever lived--she said, “Tony’s right. What Loki did was bad. It's also in the past. He’s been punished. Let it go, Cap.”

Clint pushed to his feet next, dragging Phil with him. “You know what, Iron Pants? We’re with you too. What the hell.”

“For the record, Tone,” Bruce told him, “I think this is only proof of your incurable insanity. Loki isn't a wounded bird you can put in a shoebox and feed worms. This is for the long haul, and I probably don't need to point out your track record in that area. Then again, as Clint says, ‘What the hell?’”

Loki glanced muzzily up at Kurt, whose hand rested comfortably on his shoulder--though Kurt’s ever-opinionated tail whipped repeatedly through the air like strikes of blue lightning. Still, misery showed in every line of Loki’s too-young, erased-of-experience face.

“I am not the bad man?” he breathed, almost too softly for Tony to hear.

“Yes. Yes, you are,” Steve told him. "You always will be." He left the table, shield still firmly in hand, moving toward Loki’s wheelchair. "You *murdered* innocent Americans."

“I’d back up a step, bub.” Suddenly, Wolverine was just *there*. Without a step, without a sense of the motion anywhere in the room, he was there. It was creepy as hell. Even with his claws sheathed the guy oozed menace, despite being all of about five-foot-four (and almost equally broad). Muscles twitched and flexed in his huge, hairy arms, as if they’d like nothing better than to aid their owner in speed-chopping something, or someone, into tidy, bite-sized pieces.

“For your goddamn health.” Wolverine glanced at Kurt, a narrow look from his dark, narrow eyes. “Elf, you okay?”

“Never in any danger,” Kurt answered.

“Loki.” Tony brushed past Steve, taking care to jostle him a little on his way. “Loki, see the pictures of my home in my head? I want it to be your home. I want you to live there. Kurt too, if he wants, until you’re settled or however long either of you want to stay. Okay?” He glanced at McCoy. “Is he good to leave the infirmary, doc?”

“I believe that would actually aid his recovery,” answered the furry blue giant, frowning a little. “Kurt?”

“He is one of us,” Kurt answered simply. “I trust him.”

Tony wasn’t exactly sure what he meant by the first part, but the second part touched him. It felt good to be trusted by someone so good in himself as Kurt was.

His eyes met the young German's, and for once the yellow glow wasn’t so unreadable after all, it was warm, welcoming. He had a sense of a door being opened, of being asked in, and finding himself in a place he’d never been, that nonetheless seemed like home.

“Loki,” Tony said, “Now can you show Kurt the picture? The one I showed you?”

Kurt frowned a moment, but then a grin split his face. “So clear, Loki! Very good!” He must have said something else, silently, because the better part of the tension drained from Loki’s body and he gave a smile of his own. Small and a little shy, but still real.

“Yes, Kurt,” he said carefully, “Let’s go!”

Based on the last piece of JARVIS’s research, Tony knew what was coming--after all, he'd seen it before. He’d found out Kurt wasn’t just physically gifted, he was a teleporter. He wondered if Kurt would work with him someday, let him puzzle out the physics of his talent...

For now, he just couldn’t wait to see it again, now that he actually understood.

Kurt laughed aloud—Tony guessed he’d been made party to a little of the greedy curiosity in his ever-inquisitive engineer’s head.

“Ach, Tony, once a showman, always a showman!” Kurt said, performed a little flourish with one hand, and went.

The exit was dramatic, to say the least. The best pyrotechnicians in Hollywood would have been hard-pressed to reproduce it, especially the colors, so vivid their opposites flashed a long time on Tony’s retinas. With that came a hiss and boom, as air rushed into the space his two favorite Smurfs had lately vacated.

Wolverine had departed as well, with Kurt’s teleport to distract them from his exit. Tony wondered what he thought about all this.

Steve had gone too, which wasn't like him. Steve always wanted to talk things through. Always.

“That smell... that’s *weird*,” Bruce said suddenly, always more chemically attuned than himself. He sniffed (which Tony wouldn’t have suggested, the truth was, it kind of smelled like the men’s room at Grand Central Station during rush hour). “Sulfur, but not just sulfur... it’s like a whole atmosphere, like the atmosphere of an alien world...”

“A stinky alien world,” Clint quipped.

“Showy, but convenient,” was Natasha’s opinion. She holstered her guns calmly, not even trying to hide that they’d jumped into her hands at the unexpected noise.

“Do you think he’d let us test...?” Bruce and Tony grinned at each other, that secret ScienceBros! grin. “You did a good thing, Tone, I think. Hopefully one that won’t come back to bite you in the behind, but a good thing.”

“I hope the same thing,” Phil put in. “In terms of the biting of your ass, that is. I wish you well. I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“Sometimes, I actually do,” Tony said, which really wasn’t much as answers went. “Do me a favor, Director?”

“Provisionally,” Phil answered cautiously. He knew Tony only too well.

“Talk to Cap? Take this merry band of misfits with you? He actually likes them.”

“That I can do.” Phil took off his glasses, polished them. It was the Phil Coulson equivalent of girding his loins, strapping on his sword.

“Not Dr. Banner,” McCoy said severely. “Loki will continue to have medical needs. He will need to supervise his care as Loki recovers. Kurt is an excellent young man, but he is not a physician.” Hank McCoy took his doctoring (and most other things, it seemed) seriously. “Dr. Banner will need to be briefed on his unique physiology. Dr. Banner...?”

“Take him to my place?” Tony asked. “J., make sure they have everything they need?”

Bruce nodded.

“Your wish is my command,” JARVIS answered, clearly sniffy again.

“Oh, please, I beg of you, my darling A.I.?” Tony felt a little punch-drunk. “Is that better?”

“Much,” J. answered. Though a “thank you” wouldn’t go amiss.”

“And thank you for your ever-generous help, dearest JARVIS.”

“You lack sincerity, sir,” J. informed him, “But I will indulge you. Gentlemen, Agent Romanov, if you would...”

They departed in a group, which left Tony and Thor alone in the conference room.

“Well, wasn’t that jolly fun!” Tony said.

The god of thunder just stared at him.

“He did not look at me,” Thor said at last, a tremor in his normally deep, powerful voice. “Not once did my brother look at me.”

His eyes, usually such a bright, unclouded blue, raised to Tony’s. They weren’t unclouded now, but bloodshot and gray with sorrow. “Loki, my brother, did not know my face. To him, I have become as a stranger.”

And you think that's something new? Tony thought, though he said nothing. Because Thor's deep wounds did need any more salt, or lemon juice--Tony saw that now. They hurt enough as it was.

And in the end, being a prince, an immortal, a god, didn't make a fucking bit of difference, in this or any other world. In the long run, it was just as tough, and as painful, as being any ordinary mortal schmuck.

"Sucks, doesn't it?" Tony said. "But look at it this way--maybe now you get to start fresh, without all the weirdness of a thousand years. Loki's still your brother. He still needs you, even if he doesn't know it. Also, the penthouse is pretty nice this time of day, so why don't join me? See how it goes."

From the other side of the wall came the sound of friendly voices, laughter, the gentle rustle of the catering staff bagging popcorn.

"Give it a chance?" Tony added, reading the doubt clear in Thor's face. "One little chance? For Loki?"

"That," Thor answered, scarcely sounding cheered, "Is, in the words of Lady Darcy, 'dirty pool.'"

"My specialty, Big Guy," Tony returned.

Days of Miracle and Wonder

Chapter Summary

Loki begins his new life in the penthouse.

Chapter Notes

"flipping the bird"=giving the middle finger, for Americans, a rude gesture

Ruffles=a brand of ridged potato chip/crisp

tweenage=a girl's prime unicorn-loving years between ages 8 and 12

Bobby Brown, former husband of the late Whitney Houston, was said to be more or less a train wreck of drug issues, spousal abuse and enabling. Definitely not what most people would hope for in terms of romance.

"making mischief of one kind or another"= what Max did when he put on his wolf suit in *Where the Wild Things Are*.

Where we now have our phones, or tiny mp3 players, there were once giant pieces of furniture called console hi-fi's (seriously, they were the size of coffins). They'd usually contain a radio, a record player and two speakers.

Maria's song is "*Woodstock*" from Joni Mitchell's 1970 album *Ladies of the Canyon*. Doing the math, we can guess that Tony would have been about five at the time of this memory.

Bruce's song is "*The Boy in the Bubble*" from Paul Simon's 1986 album, *Graceland*. The lyrics represent one of those rare examples of the meaning being exactly opposite to the words themselves, so that the repeated chorus of "don't cry" actually means you not only will, but probably should.

Tony had to admit it: Loki was making him slightly nervous, what with the wandering. And the touching. Not to mention the picking up, the staring at intently, the putting down again—and then moving on to the next item. Rinse and repeat an infinite number of times.

He told himself his new roomie was just desperate to learn, that every single thing Loki saw was unknown to him, and he had a passionate want, maybe even a *need* for words in order to

make sense of his world.

And, okay, realistically, the biggest part of his own problem was that he wasn't used to other people touching his shit. And touching. And touching.

"Your blood pressure is elevated, sir," JARVIS informed him helpfully, with every indication that he was actually laughing at Tony's expense.

He flipped J.'s sensors the bird behind his back, working hard to maintain every other appearance of being the perfect host. He even offered snacks and drinks, with the effect that he then gained Thor trailing sadly after his brother as he stress-munched down an entire bag of Ruffles with Jalapeno dip, and dropping bits of chip onto the carpet as if he might need them later to find his way back to the living room.

Tony had to admit, though, that he found it pretty damn sweet the way Kurt also followed Loki around, saying in a clear, quiet voice the name for everything Loki touched: chair; mirror; fireplace; picture; table—and so on, and so on.

When Loki finally collapsed, clearly beyond exhausted, into one of Tony's big chairs, Kurt perched on the back, a guardian angel with a demon's face, his tail draped protectively over Loki's shoulder, Loki cradling the spade-shaped tip in his hand, rubbing its velvety surface with his thumb, like a little kid with his security blanket.

The expression on his face hurt Tony's heart—like Loki knew there was something he'd lost, something important and huge. Resignation showed there as well, a realization he could run and run after that big missing thing and never get it back again.

And, as far as Tony knew, that much was true.

If he put himself in Loki's stylish, world-dominating boots, he wondered if he would have shown the same drive to get back some part, any part of the person he'd been, or would he be just as happy to forget the past and start fresh?

Nah, he'd fight. He'd fight like hell. After all, he was the same guy who'd worn an arc reactor in his chest for how many years, just to keep his heart beating against stupid odds? He was actually kind of a fan of stupid odds, not so much a fan of the words, "You can't."

Good or bad, his past, his memories, the things he'd done, made him *him*.

Bruce told Tony once that if he ever had a personal tag line, it would have to be something like, "Yeah? Watch me!"

According to Thor, his brother's *numero uno* favorite line had been (and picture this one with head thrown proudly back and glittering green eyes, "*I do what I want!*")

Tony found himself staring at the former god of mischief's face, at all the minute shifts thought and emotion made in his expressions. He wished he could read his guest as easily as his guest appeared to read him.

Loki was so beautiful (okay, yeah, there he said it, even if only to himself), so goddamn beautiful it was hard not to stare, and there was no “despite” included in there anywhere. The graceful horns, the clear lovely blue of his skin with its paler geometric markings, even those intense crimson eyes--it was (and here Tony had to laugh a little at himself for sounding like a fantasy-loving tweenage girl) it was like not only being allowed to see a unicorn, but to go near one, even to touch one, despite being as hardened and cynical and lousy with experience as he was, neither pure nor innocent for what seemed like a thousand years.

It was like taking the lid off the box of the universe and being astonished by what it contained, at finding inexpressible miracles where you'd expected rubberbands and paperclips.

Those ruby eyes met his and Loki gave him a smile that was utterly warm, utterly trusting.

I've come home, that smile said. *I don't have to be afraid, I belong here.*

Tony smiled back. He felt... was there a better word for what he felt than *delighted*?

Also, emotionally, slightly gooey.

“*Twitterpated!*” the wise (if cranky) old owl from *Bambi* would say, frowning down on the couples falling deeply in like all across the meadow.

Yeah, he kind of loved Disney movies (though that secret would die with him).

Lots of people did, so there. He never exactly hid the fact that he was a big kid with an extensive wardrobe and a rockin' beard. He could watch Disney movies if he wanted to.

He could also fall suddenly and inappropriately head-over-heels in love if he chose. As Bobby Brown might say (not that Bobby Brown was in any way the best romantic role model), “*It's my prerogative.*”

A lost memory came to Tony then, of being a little boy, sitting on the end of his mother's bed, drumming his heels lightly on the footboard to music only he could hear, watching Maria as she sat at her dressing table, putting on makeup in preparation for attending some soiree or gala event with his father.

Tony smiled a secret, sly smile. That particular day he'd been making mischief of one kind or another, and had earlier heard Howard yelling about his cufflinks, his diamond cufflinks, and where had one of them gone to? He'd even accused various ones among the day-servants of stealing it, as if a cufflink—like an earring--wasn't the easiest thing in the world to lose.

Tony didn't *like* Howard, though everyone told him he was supposed to, they said that he was supposed to *love* him because Howard was his father. Tony didn't much care for “supposed to's.” If he could see the reason for something, he often did it, if he couldn't... well, good luck trying to make him.

Howard was a bully and a blowhard, and apparently no one had ever taught him about things like sharing and not always getting his own way. He was rude to Jarvis and often cruel to

Maria, and Tony frequently went so far as to hate him, at the same time he sometimes ached for his approval, or even so much as a kind word or a warm hand resting briefly on his shoulder.

Maybe it wasn't even approval he wanted. Maybe he just didn't want Howard to so often make him feel like shit. It only made him act out in shitty ways, and he wasn't the only one who bore the brunt of it. Maria did too, and that wasn't right.

The truth was (speaking of acting out in shitty ways), Tony had filched the cufflink from the ebony box on his dad's dresser for the sole purpose of dropping it, with deliberate intent, down the heating duct in the third-floor corridor. It had been like a tiny fallen star and it twinkled for a long while, dropping into the darkness of the vent.

That early evening Maria had put one of her Joni Mitchell albums onto the hi-fi in her room, and she sipped white wine as she painted her eyebrows perfectly dark, perfectly smooth.

Tony remembered her seeming (now, if not before), just for a moment, like a total stranger, and having to remind himself: *This woman is your mother. This beautiful woman is your mother.*

Then their eyes met in the mirror: exactly the same color, exactly the same sadness.

"Come here to me, honey?" she'd said, her perfect lips smiling, and he had come without question, slipping down over the footboard.

Her arms wrapped around him, holding him warmly and just tight enough, even though Howard didn't approve of nicknames, or hugging, or coddling. Tony leaned into her softness. She smelled of lady-things: hairspray, face-powder, and also the sour-sweetness of the wine, which his father also would have called a lady-thing.

Real men did not drink white wine, in Howard's opinion. Tony never did to this day, though he actually preferred the taste, most times, to red wine.

Maria sang along with her record, with Joni Mitchell's high, pure voice (lady-music) and the faint scratch-thump of the hi-fi needle traveling in the record's grooves. Her voice, too, was high and pure, and very beautiful.

"*We are stardust,*" Maria sang.

*Billion year old carbon
We are golden
Caught in the devil's bargain
And we've got to get ourselves
Back to the garden*

There had never been a garden, Tony had known, even then. Not in Mesopotamia, cradle of civilization, or Africa, or Europe. Not in any part of the world. The garden was a myth, and myths were for idiots and primitive people, not smart people like themselves (Tony was, for

the occasion, included in that category, though most other times his second name was, “*that stupid boy*”).

There was no such thing as either divine forgiveness or original sin. There were only people, crass, ignorant and self-interested. That was what Howard taught him, and Howard was a hard man, a judging man, with awful manners, but he did know everything. His son knew that, if he knew nothing else.

“*We are stardust,*” Maria sang again, in her pure and lovely voice.

*We are golden
And we've got to get ourselves
Back to the garden*

Myths were for idiots and primitive people, but a god sat in his living room, ensconced in his overstuffed chair, tears running down his blue cheeks and glittering, just like that that long ago diamond in the dark. Had he lived the memory, right there with Tony, or was he thinking of something else entirely?

It made him think suddenly of Bruce, who enjoyed world music, and also music of the folkie, touchy-feelie kind, listening on his StarkPlayer to one of his Paul Simon albums as they worked together in the lab.

“*These are the days of miracle and wonder,*” Paul Simon sang, in his small, dry, matter-of-fact voice.

*And don't cry, baby, don't cry
Don't cry, don't cry...*

Tony himself never cried (“*Men never cry!*” stated the Gospel According to Howard Stark the Omniscient and All-Powerful, but sometimes he thought if he ever started, he might never be able to stop.

But he was crying. Right then and there, he was.

Tony brought up a hand to cover his eyes, to mask his emotions. In that moment, he missed his mother bitterly, as he'd missed her at many, many moments before in the past thirty-five years of his life.

Maria with her lovely face, and her lovely voice, who'd kept a rosary concealed beneath the lacy things in her lingerie drawer.

“In German,” Kurt said, in his kind, quiet voice, “*Stark* means 'strong.'” Kurt's accent, and the slight sibillance on the esses, made Tony's own name an unfamiliar thing. “But being strong does not mean being made of iron.” His smile flickered whitely in the darkening room as Kurt shook his head. “*Ach, Iron Man!*”

“What does it mean, then, Kurt?” Tony asked, with a mildly sarcastic grin and at his smartass best, pretending to be humoring his new friend. “Enlighten me?”

“*Vielleicht*, only being strong enough to overcome the terrible things he taught you.”

“Such as what? ‘There is no god?’” He knew, from their conversations, that Kurt was a religious man, though in a gentle, un-pushy kind of way that actually didn’t seem either particularly idiotic, or primitive.

“That you were nothing in his eyes. That his will was all that mattered. That he knew everything.” That bright grin flashed again. “*Ach*, what do I know? I was born only to allow my own father to suck my life-force in order to open a portal to his home dimension.”

Tony found himself laughing suddenly instead of crying. “You know from bad fathers!”

“I know from bad fathers,” Kurt echoed, with another grin.

Thor (speaking of gods in Tony’s living room), hunkered down in the big chair across from his brother’s, had been following this like he was watching a tennis match, looking back and forth between the two of them.

Now and then he took a time out to glare at Loki, or to watch the people in coveralls who moved steadily in and out of the penthouse, carrying stuff for Loki’s room--formerly known as the guest room--and Kurt’s temporary headquarters, which once had been called “My Study” (by Pepper) or “The She-Cave” (by Tony).

Thor probably didn’t mean to glare, Tony guessed, but he did--probably that inflexible heroic visage of his at work again. Right then he both glared and looked mystified.

“I understand none of this,” he said at last.

“That makes all of us, bro,” Tony told him. “Let me bring you a beer.”

He fetched the Norse god of handsomeness and thunder a Guinness, which past experience told him Thor preferred. His giant guest sucked it down in three gulps, but Tony had a second one ready. He’d known Thor a while now.

“Kurt, how 'bout you?” he asked, but the German only shook his head.

“I’m now too tired. It would only make me silly.”

“Look, seriously, if you want to... I mean, if you’re tired, if you need a break, I could...”

Kurt gazed at him with those kind, warm, yellow eyes. “Be on call?”

“Something like that, yeah. I mean, if your, uh... Wolverine...”

“Logan. His name is Logan. Actually it’s James, but we didn’t know that until recently, so Logan it is.”

“He looks more like a Logan.”

“That he does.” Kurt laughed softly.

“Anyway, I meant, you’ve been away from home for a little while now, helping us out. I thought you might want a date night. Or something.”

Kurt, being a classy guy, didn’t snicker at him or say, “‘Something?’ Such as having hot man-sex in your guest bedroom?”

Tony felt a red flush heading up from up from his collar. He suddenly suspected he was acting like a total idiot. First crying, now this. Also, he was never shy with anyone, would have sworn he didn’t he didn’t have a shy bone in his body, but the unthinking ease he’d felt with the younger man in the infirmary seemed, for the moment, to have flown the coop.

“Or just to make an early night of it. You should consider this place yours, for the duration, by the way.”

“What duration is that, exactly, Tony?” Kurt’s voice remained mild, but still held a slightly parental “*what are your intentions toward my daughter?*” sort of tone.

“For the duration of however long you want to stay. However long Loki wants to stay.” Tony found himself clinking ice into a glass, covering it with scotch. He never put ice in his scotch, but he drank it anyway. Even though the ice hadn’t had time to melt, it still tasted watery. He hated watery-tasting scotch.

“It’ll be good having you here, Kurt. I get inside my own head too much. Witness what I just did.”

Kurt cocked his head a little. “And it won’t bother you...?” His smile flickered, brighter now than ever, clearly teasing him. “When we touch your stuff?”

“Dammit!” Tony flung himself onto the couch, somehow managing not to spill his watered-down drink. “You weren’t supposed to pick up on that. Really, it’s no big... I’ve just lived alone for a while.”

Weirdly, at that exact moment, a clear image of the salt shaker that stood on the counter next to Tony’s stove popped into his head.

Wait, no... Not the salt shaker...

“Pepper?” Kurt said. “Why is Loki asking...?”

“She doesn’t live here now,” Tony answered quickly. “Not for a while. I liked her a lot, I guess. A whole lot. But I didn’t love her.”

“Sad?” Loki asked, so quietly Tony could hardly hear.

“Yeah, I was sad, I guess. I’m not sad now. I have you and Kurt. We’ll have fun.”

Despite the shadows lurking in his crimson eyes, despite looking tired and still not very well, the smile Loki gave him was radiant. “Fun!”

“You bet, buddy.” Tony grinned back, even as his heart did a funny little sidestep.

After a short while Thor got up to make them all grilled-cheese sandwiches (with bacon and three different kinds of cheese—as with Steve, the words “high cholesterol” did not exist in the thunder god’s vocabulary) and homemade tomato soup for supper, like he was a June Cleaver type of mom and they were first graders home from school on a snow day.

Later, Thor taught Loki to dunk his sandwich into his soup, though who’d taught him, Tony couldn’t have said, except he’d bet it hadn’t happened in Asgard. Everything about his manner said, “*big brother teaching little brother valuable life skills.*”

He wondered what they’d been like as boys. Were they always rivals, constantly striving for their asshole father’s attention, or had the Big Guy been like this when he was a little guy, patient and tender with his baby brother?

The love Thor felt toward Loki had been obvious, even when they were fighting—and even if Thor had made a thing about Loki being adopted.

“That is of no consequence,” Thor said quietly. “Though he be not brother of my blood, Loki remains brother of my heart. I care for him, as I have always done. I love him. He is all the family...” Thor shook his head, and said nothing else, while Loki gazed at him with troubled eyes.

“All is well, dear brother,” he told Loki quietly. “Do not be troubled. All is well.”

As supper progressed, Tony found himself laughing his head off, having as lively a conversation as one could have, given Thor’s never-ending formality and Loki’s “See Spot Run!” vocabulary.

Kurt added a lot to the general sense of enjoyment, but it wasn’t just Kurt, it was the four of them together, and JARVIS too. It was Loki’s shared thoughts slipping through their heads the way small, bright fish will slip in and out of the shadows of a pond.

But it felt weird—because Tony was happy, in a way he hadn’t felt happy for months or even years, sitting at his own table with two blue men and an ancient god. Everything seemed right again, the way it had at those long ago Christmas dinners with Jarvis and Mrs. Cook.

Even when Wolverine—now officially known as Logan—and Clint dropped in, from wherever they’d been individually skulking, and they somehow all ended up together watching a movie, which somehow turned out to be *Singin’ in the Rain*, even though Tony hated musicals.

Though he didn’t actually hate that one, he discovered—especially when Loki grabbed a pillow and stretched out on the couch, the pillow on Tony’s lap and Loki’s head on the pillow. The colorful images flickered by, and as Gene Kelly kicked and splashed and sang in a sudden downpour, Tony found his fingers stroking the infinite softness of Loki’s shorn hair, while Loki made a soft, low sound deep in his throat, a sound of perfect contentment.

So this is what it feels like, Tony found himself thinking, not exactly sure what he meant—or even what he'd allow himself to mean.

Exit, Pursued By a Bear

Chapter Summary

Despite the presence of pancakes, a second Avengers meeting goes badly. Clint is inscrutable, Steve learns a brutal truth and Thor is confused. Later, JARVIS and Tony share a heart-to-circuits elevator conversation.

Chapter Notes

A "short stack" is three pancakes, a "full stack" is six. A griddle pan is a type of square frying pan with very low sides.

"*When I was a child...*" Cap is quoting First Corinthians 13:11 (King James Version).

"Fruit salad," in this instance, means the large, colorful displays of service bars and medals worn on the chests of high-ranking military officials.

Walter Leland Cronkite, Jr. "the most trusted man in America" was probably best known for serving as the anchorman of the CBS Evening News for 19 years (1962–81). As a small child, apparently, I mistook him for God. Jarvis's "fishbowl" TV was a common model in the early to mid-60's.

I've given Tony both my early memories of the Vietnam War and my childhood confusion about guerilla warfare. Sorry, Tony. The Việt Cộng (aka "Victor Charlie") was the Western name for the National Liberation Front, the organization that, it could well be said, defeated the U.S. and official South Vietnamese governments during the Vietnam War (1959–1975). As Vizzini said, in *The Princess Bride*, "You fell victim to one of the classic blunders - The most famous of which is "never get involved in a land war in Asia..." The VC had both guerrilla and regular army units, and also armed and organized peasants in the territories it controlled.

"*Capisce?*," sometimes spelled without the "s," is Italian-American slang meaning "got it?" or "understand?" It's meant to be taken as at least mildly threatening.

"*Exit, pursued by a bear*" is a rather clunky (not to mention silly) stage direction in Act III, scene 3 of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*.

"K.o.'d"=knocked out

These are the lyrics in question, to The Smiths song, "How Soon is Now?" Thirty years later, I still find Johnny Marr's guitar work amazing, with enough killer riffs on that song alone to occupy at least half-a-dozen other songs (Morrissey, at times, remains equally worthy of slappage as he was in the 80's).

When you say it's gonna happen "now"
Well when exactly do you mean?
See I've already waited too long
And all my hope is gone

You shut your mouth
How can you say
I go about things the wrong way?
I am human and I need to be loved
Just like everybody else does

Steve called a breakfast meeting. There were pancakes, and Steve possessed the pained eyes and furrowed brow of a decent man with an extremely troubled conscience.

“How was your evening?” he asked Tony, slipping a short stack from the griddle-pan onto his plate.

Clint silently passed the maple syrup, a look of amusement--and maybe something else, something that might promise trouble--on his face.

“Thanks, Steve,” Tony answered. “It was nice. Quiet.”

“We watched a film of dancing both skillful and amusing, and most unlike the dancing of Asgard,” Thor put in cheerfully.

The dancing of Asgard. Now there was a thought. It would either be slow, stately and formal, or full-on headbanging, with long, manly hair flipping everywhere. It couldn't possibly be anything in-between.

“My brother does well,” Thor continued. “He remembers me not at all, and this remains painful to me, yet he seems far more at peace than he has been wont to be, and though he continues to be somewhat weak, Friend Kurt assures me that his health improves greatly. There is no longer danger, when once Loki's life was greatly feared for, and the threat to him dire.”

The thunder god took a huge, contemplative forkful of pancake. “Though ever mischievous, Loki was sweet as a child, and eager to please. I am reminded again of that boy. Though it is difficult to accustom myself to the appearance of the *Jötunn*, I must remind myself that is Loki's true appearance, and his face, though blue, is in every way my brother's face. I must also remind myself--as Lady Jane frequently reminds me--that the prejudices I was brought up into are not necessarily truth, that even the fabled fierceness of the *Jötnar* may have been

brought about in large part by the harshness of the life my own people—my own self greatly to blame in the wrongdoing--forced upon them both in elder and more recent days.”

“Steve, I think you’ve served us all,” Natasha said. “Why don’t you take a seat?”

Steve sat. He cut his own pancakes into neat geometrical shapes and pushed them around his plate like a syrupy game of Tetris.

“I thought I should let you all know,” he finally said. “I asked Director Coulson this morning if he would take Loki into custody, for his protection and ours.”

Tony pushed away his plate. “Ya know, I’m suddenly not in the mood for team-traitor pancakes.”

“Tone...” Bruce began, in his conciliatory voice.

“No!” Tony exploded, zero to furious in two seconds. “No. And to drive home my point, *no*. Because you know what I left your criminal mastermind doing this morning as I departed home, Captain America? Practicing making little bunny ears in order to tie his own fucking shoes. I hope you feel threatened.”

“Eh. I already knew about Steve’s little precautionary measure,” Clint put in, that look of possible trouble explained. Apparently, Clint's pancakes did not carry the taint of having been cooked by a sanctimonious jerkwad, though, because he continued to fork them up enthusiastically.

“Just to prevent Tony’s head from exploding all over the breakfast table, I should let you all know that Phil wouldn’t agree to the plan,” he continued.

“Interesting,” Natasha said with, as usual, a complete lack of indication as to whether she meant interesting bad, or interesting good, or any of the million stops between.

“I believe there was a certain reference made,” Clint said, “To the making of beds, and the lying therein. ‘Therein’ being Phil’s word. I may also have mentioned to my dear boyfriend, that if he caved in on this one to his terminal case of Captain America hero worship, I would be withholding...”

“Clinton,” Natasha sighed.

Clint licked syrup from his fork. “Withholding my willingness to share in household chores. What did you think, Nat? You know what a neatnik Phil is. He has only recently begun to comprehend, and be completely terrified by, my total willingness to happily live like a pig in shit.”

“I may cause lightning to strike any individual I choose,” Thor spoke up suddenly, the same way another, regular guy might say, “Dudes! Gotta tell you--I bowled 200 last night!” He reached across the table for Tony’s untouched plate, stacked it on top of his own empty one, and dug in.

“My brother is happy and content within the home of our Shield-Brother Anthony. What I feel of his mind is free of anger and resentment. I see clearly now how the actions and slights of our father turned Loki’s proud spirit toward unseemly paths, and while that does not excuse his every act...” He glanced up, stormclouds darkening his normally clear blue eyes. “I miss my brother. What we once had. What we were to one another. If by the slightest chance...” Thor shook his head. “I would never allow Loki to be taken, unless this second chance be proven beyond every doubt altogether wasted. Never.”

“You heard our god-in-residence, Cap,” Tony said. “You really going to argue with him?”

“Please don’t take this as a rebellion against you, Steve,” Bruce said quietly. “That isn’t the case. It’s just... I guess you could say that rest of us lack your natural goodness. We all fall somewhere on the spectrum of possibilities between you at one end and Hydra at the other. We’ve all had instances of failing miserably in our lives, we all have blood on our hands, but we were all given second chances.”

“You’re only repeating what was said last night,” Steve answered, sounding borderline pissed, but also uncomfortable. He wasn’t used to being the bad guy, but maybe suspected, in the current circumstances, that’s exactly what he was. “Nothing changes.”

“The whole world changes,” Natasha told him gently. “Steve, of all people, you should know that.”

“So watch Loki,” Clint put in suddenly. “That is, we all watch him. Who’s better qualified?” His eyes locked on Steve’s. “If there’s trouble, we deal with it. If there isn’t...” Clint shrugged. “Remember, Steve, there was something in you that made you feel empathy toward the guy before you knew he was Loki. Something that made you bring him home in the first place. He’s clearly not faking his difficulties—hell, we actually caused half of them.”

Thor stared down at his now-empty second plate. “The fault in this matter is greatly mine, caused by my false warnings.”

“All of us are at fault, buddy,” Tony said. He wasn’t sure what it was, considering that most of the time he was far, far from above mocking the god of denseness and oversized carpentry equipment, but this morning he found himself quite warmly disposed toward Loki’s big brother. Maybe it was hearing Thor’s large, patient voice through the walls as he shaved that morning, the thunder god helping Kurt get Loki ready to face his day. “All of us. We didn’t think.”

“I go to my brother now,” Thor added, the stormclouds visible as hell. “And again, I assure you, I will defend Loki, should I feel him threatened.” With that, he walked out, quietly for such a big man, but carrying with him a sense of imminent danger.

“Steve, if you gave him to SHIELD...” Clint leaned back in his chair, his face intent but nearly as unreadable as Nat’s. “Well, we all know Phil’s a good guy, but he’s not the only power at play there. Hell, Bruce could tell you.”

Bruce shook his head. His mouth flattened to a hard, straight line, and Tony’s brain decided, at that moment, to deliver him a newsflash: *That was when...!*

It was when SHIELD had him that Bruce tried to kill himself. If Big Green hadn't taken over and spit out the bullet...

Tony found himself wanting to touch Bruce, to pat his back or squeeze his shoulder, to reassure himself his best friend was still there. Fucked up, and confused, and sometimes really, really sad, but there.

"Reality check, Steve." Clint pushed away his plate and picked up his coffee cup—not so much to drink, Tony suspected, but for something to do with his hands. Which were shaking. Clint's hands, so unlike his own, never shook.

It hit Tony that, like himself and Thor, the archer really cared about the outcome of this debate. As in, really, *really* cared. He just didn't understand why at the moment. After all, if anyone had earned the right to hate Loki in a lasting kind of way, that person would be Clint.

Clint, who along with his reliably steady hands was usually a level-headed kind of guy, was ramping up to be downright angry, his face now tight, his voice rising. "You know I snoop. I'm a snooper. It's my nature. I've seen stats, Steve."

"Clint," Natasha said. Just the name, though she used her special "we are closer-than-close" voice.

"Dammit, Steve, do you honestly not understand what the Super Soldier program cost?"

"Clinton," Natasha said, a little more emphatically, clearly asking, *Are you really sure you want to go there?*

"Why not, Natasha?" Clint snapped back. "He sits there thinking he's so much better than us. Why not air a little dirty laundry?"

"Because none of it is his fault? Because he couldn't have known?" Natasha's voice remained level, but there was a hell of a lot of tension behind the levelness.

"Captain-fucking-America, couldn't have known? Jesus, Natasha, if that's the case he's either stupid, willfully ignorant, or hopelessly naïve. He wanted to give Loki—the way he is now, Nat, the way he is *now*—to SHIELD!"

Natasha sighed, and seemed to come to some conclusion. "Then let the cards fall where they may," she said.

It sounded like a curse, and the Russian looked, in that moment, with her fiery hair and veiled eyes, like some mysterious and highly-potent witch.

Clint leaned forward, hunched over the table. "Mind you, Steve, when I say *cost*, I'm not talking dollars, though the Super Soldier Program cost enough of those too. I'm talking stuff your friend Peggy wasn't privy to. Behind-closed-doors kind of shit. Did you honestly believe, out of the whole, entire army, you were the only guy who ever got the serum?"

"You're the only one living," Natasha said, her own voice, as usual, perfectly calm and cool.

Her eyes, though, glinted like ball bearings.

“But that’s...” Steve looked genuinely dismayed. “Of course I... It’s been years...”

“No, not over the years, Steve. One hundred possible candidates. Half killed outright. Seventy percent mortality in one month’s time,” Natasha went on. Her voice, this time, sounded almost gentle. “Ninety-nine percent in three months. And then there was one Captain Steve Rogers.

“There weren’t as many mutants back then, but the ones they exploited in aid of the formula...” Natasha shook her head. “And when I say ‘exploited,’ please understand, I don’t merely mean ‘held,’ or ‘failed to compensate for their time.’”

“Wolverine survived, maybe one other.” Clint shrugged. If a shrug could be bitter, that one was. “See, they did the math. The number of lives a Super Soldier might save, versus the lives it took to actually create one. Who can say? I guess they thought they came out ahead. You *have* saved a lot of lives, Cap.”

“Oh...” Steve breathed, then sat speechless, head bowed, his brain clearly turning over the rocks that hid covert information, sentences left half-said in his hearing, all the suspicious words he hadn’t let himself listen to, *couldn’t* let himself listen to, because he was a good, good man in a highly questionable and indifferent world.

For the first time in possibly forever, Steve failed to even marginally irritate him. Tony felt sorry for the guy.

It hit him how many more years he, Bruce and Clint had lived out, in terms of life-experience—maybe even Natasha too, though she was younger. Tony suspected a Nat-year was highly concentrated, worth about ten of the ordinary years most people lived through.

“em>When I was a child, I spoke as a child,” Steve said softly. “*I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.*”

The poor man was clearly horrified, knocked back by all the whys and hows he hadn’t considered, his lovely ideals in shards around his feet. He thought he’d been saved. He’d considered the scientists and bigwigs on the project, if not his friends, then at least his allies, idealists like himself who wished him well.

Cap was so used, by now, to being the hero, powerful and just, he’d never once considered he’d been *nothing* to The Powers That Were. That he’d been only a poor, sickly orphan from Brooklyn, who, if things went south, could be safely discarded and never missed--no family to kick up a fuss, his friends just peons like himself.

He’d been a pawn to guys who’d seen a hell of a lot of pawns topple long before they ever heard the name “Steve Rogers.”

After all, what were the ones who died to realize the grand Super Soldier scheme? Just a bunch of grunts and mutants, nobody who mattered to the suits and the normals, or the guys with all the fruit salad on their chests.

Young men dying were pretty much their stock in trade.

Tony thought of puny, hopeful, brave young Steve and the other kids just like him. He thought of the mutants he'd known: brilliant Charles Xavier, and the almost equally brilliant Hank McCoy, and his blood ran cold. And then he thought of the kind, clever, cheerful young man currently sharing his abode, and his heart nearly broke.

A guy like Kurt Wagner would have meant *less* than nothing to those men. They wouldn't even have seen him as human, maybe wouldn't even have counted him when they numbered their casualties.

Casualties. What a dry, emotionless, bled-empty-of-meaning word.

A frequent word of his own childhood, Walter Cronkite's dry voice—not so much unemotional as it was heavy with a weary acceptance of the world as it actually existed—fuzzing through the cloth-covered speaker as the small, blurry fishbowl screen of Jarvis's TV (housed in its giant wooden box, the better to hold a picture tube the size of Tony's head) filled up with images of young men lying motionless, face-down in the mud of a jungle so distant it might have been in another world.

Back in the days when Tony still thought guerilla warfare meant the *Việt Cộng* had specially-trained mean gorillas to do their fighting for them.

Jarvis did explain, though, what “casualties” meant. It meant dead boys (and sometimes girls). It meant husbands and brothers, nephews and sons. It meant dreams boarded up forever inside big boxes draped with flags.

That was the image that came to him, a few years back, when he found out how the weapons his factories made had been used—the rows of boxes, and the dead boys in the mud that these days (realistically), would be sand instead.

Tony found himself standing. He not only felt kind of sick, his legs felt like Jell-O.

“In case I didn't make myself clear yesterday, when I say I *own* this building, I really mean I *control* this building, and that doesn't mean in an administrative way, or even the way a feudal king controlled his fief. It means *actually* control. Ponder the number of pretty damn amazing products with the word ‘Stark’ in their names. Consider that I'm all through this building, that JARVIS is all through this building. Also, that this isn't the Death Star. I didn't engineer in a tiny but easily exploited vulnerability. I don't intend to make threats here, guys, but if I say a guest stays, he stays. *Capisce?* Are we all clear?”

He was inwardly shaking to pieces, and truly hoped it didn't show externally as well. He decided to push his luck. “Steve? Are we agreed?”

“Yes. Yes,” Steve said quietly. “I was mistaken. Of course Loki must stay.”

Cap then stood up from his chair and, for the second time ever, walked out of his own meeting.

“Guys,” Clint said, after the door had clicked shut. “I kinda think we did it. We broke Captain America. Or I did.” Clint's mouth had a bitter/angry/ironic/astounded kind of twist. It was a lot for one mouth to convey, but the archer's managed it.

Clint sighed and leaned back in his chair, fingers pushing into his hair. “Damn. That was all kind of brutal.”

Clint was right: it had been brutal. Brutal and confusing and weird. Tony could argue all day about business, science, engineering, but hated this kind of confrontation, this interpersonal shit.

The others nattered on pointlessly for a couple minutes about what they should do, all of them uncomfortable, none of them reaching any conclusions, not even Nat, who could generally be counted on for sensible solutions to most of life's problems.

Tony didn't offer anything. His one, personal, solution to the day and its issues was that he intended, the minute he left meeting hell, to hit his flask with a hardness comparable to the way boxing great Muhammad Ali, in his prime, had k.o.'d his opponents.

He also wasn't going to wait around to be dismissed by anyone. So, instead—just to be really cool—he simply fled.

“*Exit, pursued by a bear,*” as Shakespeare might say, which just went to show, all geniuses had their less-than-stellar moments.

Tony wasn't even sure how he got to the elevator, but he did. After upending the flask over his mouth (it contained disappointingly little, but that didn't matter because this was, after all, his *personal* elevator, and as such, of course, contained a small-but-serviceable bar). This was the point at which he usually made JARVIS shut off the lights and the low-playing but potent metal music, and stop the car between floors, making the elevator his own, private sensory deprivation chamber for however long a time he needed to escape from the world in order to re-collect his shit.

“Sir?” JARVIS asked, in his best ass-kissing tone, pretending to be awaiting orders instead of just bugging Tony for the hell of it.

Tony sighed. Despite the skimpy contents of his flask, he didn't open up the bar.

“I thought Steve was a motherfucker,” he said, after a pause.

“Yes, sir.”

“I kinda hated him today. Yesterday, too.”

“Understandably, sir.”

“J., you are such a suck up. Steve tried to give Loki to SHIELD. That wasn't cool.”

“Indeed, very uncool, sir.”

“And then, by the end, I ended up feeling hideously sorry for him. If anything, that was worse. Could this day get any more confusing?” Tony emulated Clint’s hair-pushing technique. He probably looked deranged.

“So, by the way, J., where is Steve? Where’d he run off to?”

“The public cameras I monitor show him riding his motorbike in the direction of the Brooklyn Bridge. One might surmise that he intends to visit the paupers’ graves of his deceased parents and speak to their paltry headstones, as he will often do when troubled.”

“You are aware, J., that you’re not actually British, right? There’s no earthly reason for you to say ‘motorbike’ instead of ‘motorcycle.’ And, ‘paltry headstones?’ What’s that about?”

“The markers are, indeed, extremely paltry. Captain Rogers, in his youth, lived a life of extreme poverty, frequently lacking in food, warmth, or adequate medical care.”

“Then maybe it should also be said, ‘gods, poor Steve.’”

“Indeed, sir. It may well have been inadvisable to break the truths of his present existence to the good Captain so very harshly. He is a man of great feeling, I’ve observed. Yet, so is Mr. Barton, and Captain Rogers made him very angry.”

“The why is what I don’t get? Why would Clint get so angry? What’s actually up with him and Loki?”

“That remains for Mr. Barton to reveal, and once revealed, for me to explain to you.”

“Nice vote of confidence for my intelligence, J. What kind of a loyal A.I. are you?”

“The kind that, though invented by you, is free to be his own man. Is this not true, sir?”

“Of course it’s true, Pinocchio! I’d never want you to think... That is, short of you turning evil and plotting my demise, or blowing up the world or something, you’re free to do whatever you want to do. You’re a person, same as me. You get to make person choices.”

“Then I choose to be your friend,” JARVIS said, “And to take you safely home. Though perhaps one more thing ought to be said, sir, and that is, lately, you perplex me. Your telemetry readings have been very odd. I’ve even thought of informing Dr. Banner. I worry for you. For a time I blamed the implosion of your relationship with Miss Potts, but have since decided that isn’t the case. I am correct in that, am I not, sir?”

“Yup. You’re right. It’s not Pepper.”

“Were you disappointed to discover Mr. Wagner’s affections already taken?”

“Yeah, sure, a little. But that’s not it either. I can deal. I mean, I like Kurt a whole bunch, but he has this way of making it easy to just be friends. His friendship kind of comes with a bonus pack that makes it better than most people’s. Higher quality. The Rolex of friendships.”

JARVIS's amused little non-chuckle lasted about a microsecond. When he spoke again, his voice sounded monumentally sober. Pitying, even. "Then I can only surmise you've been very unwise indeed with your heart, sir, and I must ask what you are thinking?"

"About The Smiths, J. 80's band out of Manchester, nothing like my usual type of music. Very emo, but killer guitar riffs. I always appreciate a killer guitar riff. The one I'm thinking of sounds kinda like a car driving fast down a dark narrow road in the rain, with headlights hitting the buildings as it passes."

"Unusually poetic, sir," JARVIS said.

"Ain't it just?" Tony sighed.

About five seconds passed, clearly the amount of time it took the A.I. to listen to and analyze the entire Smiths catalog. If they'd had a twenty-year career, it might have taken him a whole seven or eight.

"Oh, sir," JARVIS said then, definitely pitying. "There are times, such as these, in which I am glad not to be human. I take pleasure from our friendship, it is true, and from stimulating conversation, and yet, as you are well aware, do not experience the need to be loved. Did this begin when you feared death, and Miss Potts did not answer your call?"

"This has nothing to do with Pepper," Tony answered. But it did, or maybe it did, but not in quite the way JARVIS meant, or not entirely.

So many "maybes" in his life.

"It was more like, we almost fit, Pep and me, but not quite. Like she noticed too many of the places where I needed improvement, not enough of the parts where she liked me being me."

JARVIS sniffed. "Miss Potts was right. You do require a great deal of improvement. That was a jest, by the way."

"Yet also very true. I know, J. I also know you like Pep. Hell, I like Pep a lot, too. She's what Steve would probably call, 'a swell girl.'"

"May I reveal to you a secret, sir?"

"Go for it, J."

"It is perhaps too early to tell, and I still believe the situation may well contain the ingredients of a recipe for disaster, but I may like Mr. Laufeyson a bit more."

"Yeah," Tony said. "Yeah."

JARVIS slid open the door to the penthouse, and Tony stepped through.

We're Not Sure How This Goes

Chapter Summary

Words prove a temptation for Loki, with worrying results. JARVIS is a good friend, and so is Pepper (with reservations, but it's her job to be the sensible one).

Chapter Notes

My laptop is figuratively on its last legs and also, apparently, possessed, just in time for Halloween. Hopefully I've caught all the acts of weirdness it's committed...

Sorry, folks, I have to put a vomit warning on this one.

I tried to imagine what it would be like to not only lose all my memories, but my words as well. As a reader, a talker, a writer, I could imagine few things more stressful or confusing--to be cut off not only from the ability to communicate, but even to think, losing even the comforting little voice of my inner thoughts... Yikes! Poor Loki. And when the words rush back in... that would send anyone reeling, I believe.

Band-Aid=a plaster (small, prepackaged sterile bandage)

According to Roman historian Plutarch, the Battle of Ausculum (279 BCE) was won against the Romans with such heavy losses, "victorious" King Pyrrhus was said to have remarked, "If we win another such battle against the Romans, we will be completely lost."

When Loki compares words in a book to the bare branches of trees, he's experiencing a ghost-memory of the runic writing of Asgard.

Since I apparently was Wednesday Addams as a child, I can date my lifelong fascination with folklore to the time, when I was in the first grade, that someone told me "*Ring Around the Rosie*" was about the Black Death. "I like this! Another!" my tiny mind said.

Clamshells=dollars. Small clamshells, strung together, were said to have been used as currency amongst certain groups of Native Americans, particularly on the West Coast of the U.S.

de nada=literally, "of nothing," though it really means, "you're welcome" (Spanish)

Pepper's song is "*Calling All Angels*" by Jane Siberry. The duet version with Jane Siberry and k d lang is lovely.

Cap's shield is made of Vibranium, Wolverine's claws and skeleton of Adamantium.
Marvel Metallurgy!

"Lucy, I'm home!" Ricky Ricardo's standard greeting, from the old *I Love Lucy* TV show.

Loki remembered when he'd been hungry, so terribly hungry, sick with hunger, and The Others (so he thought of them collectively) had brought him food.

He had recently come to understand the meaning of "memories" as Kurt explained them, that they were much like the stories his friend brought forth from the books with the many bright pictures, filled with words and concepts that meant almost nothing to him, though he enjoyed hearing the lovely soft rise and fall of Kurt's voice as he read.

Once, he had the vaguest idea, there had been words that looked like trees inside every book he opened, like the bare branches of trees in winter. Loki clung to such meager bits of knowledge: the shapes of words on a page; that the deciphering of those words was called "reading;" that in winter some trees lost their leaves.

The words on Kurt's pages never looked like trees, and yet the shapes seemed familiar. Loki knew he'd read them once, events inside a story that seemed as if it belonged to someone else entirely.

He felt so confused, always. So lost, and so tense the never-ending stress of it made a lump of sickness in his stomach that could never seem to be dislodged. He was not, as his perplexing host might say, "handling things well," yet he didn't know how to do better than he did presently.

Kurt had explained to Loki that he would have understood much of his *own* memories (if they'd remained to him), because they were *his* story, the story of Loki and, so, filled with familiar things.

He wasn't sure he wanted to know the story of Loki. The thought of such a story, familiar or not, frightened him. He desperately hoped no one would force him to hear it.

He did not feel, usually, as if he was a terrible person, but he suspected he had, in fact, been one. It felt impossible to puzzle out what that meant to him as he now was. Mostly, he didn't want to hurt anyone, and would have been quite happy to discover no one wanted to hurt him.

Kurt told him not to linger on the past, that it was over, and only today and the future mattered—but Loki suspected the past *did* matter, would continue to matter, that it would color everything he now said and did in the minds of The Others. That they (Tony perhaps excepted) merely lay in wait for that one small act that proved the rottenness at the core of him.

Loki tried to feel it, that badness, that decay, and couldn't. He tried and tried and tried to remember, but brought himself only thumping headaches and an even deeper sense of sickness.

The memory of his hunger, the food that was brought to him, and the surrounding events was one of the few clear memories he still possessed, up until the time he left the cold, white place Kurt named "the infirmary," and the world around him laggingly began to seem real again, instead of like an extended nightmare Loki couldn't wake from.

In the memory, he'd been concealing himself, ill, terrified and confused inside the warm, dark tunnel of cloth the yellow-haired man had given him to hide in, so that no one would be forced to look at him.

The man with almost no hair had set the plate beside him, and Loki had known it was a test, that it would be wrong to touch that plate for reasons he couldn't remember or reason out. If it wasn't a test, most likely the food was set out for him as a lure, as vermin were lured into traps and then dispatched.

Did The Others mean to dispatch him?

Tony would not harm him, Loki knew that now, but he had not known it then.

Whichever of those possibilities was real, Loki had failed, and failed miserably. He had fallen on the food like a beast. Or a monster.

A monster...

Loki pressed his thin blue hands over his mouth. He felt as sick in this moment as he had then. The food had tasted wonderful, and then it had made him feel as if he'd gobbled up a poison so vile his body could not act fast enough to turn itself inside out and expel the foul stuff again.

His mind, just lately, had felt equally starved for words, and though he tried to hold back, tried to accept the gentle feedings of concepts and vocabulary Kurt served to him, in the end he had proved equally incapable of self-restraint in that need as he had been in his need for physical sustenance.

Had he always been thus? Had he? Did he always reach out and merely take what wasn't his, what wasn't meant to be his, what was bad for him?

Loki suspected it was so. Why else would the minds of The Others, even his host, show him again and again the image of the wicked man, the pale, proud man in the golden helm, who had reached out and taken all he wanted?

Who had reached out...

(long fingers closing tightly round Tony's neck, and...)

And...

Then it was gone, no more than a flash, a reflection, a scarcely-glimpsed image turned backward and sideways and upside-down on itself.

Loki wanted to weep with frustration, with sorrow, but instead he retched drily, his stomach long since empty, for what seemed the hundredth time that hour. His head throbbed and his nose was bleeding, and he felt...

He was so very miserable, and so very sorry, and he didn't know the reasons, the "Whys?" behind any of these feelings.

There had been a woman with long golden hair, and...

He truly was sorry. So, so sorry. Sorry for everything, as if shame and a sense of culpability were the only deep emotions left to him, besides his confusion.

His hiding place was pathetic, Loki knew that--the porcelain chilly, damp and slippery from where he'd cleaned it, the curtain flimsy. He would be found immediately. Found and punished.

He deserved to be punished.

He had loved the golden-haired woman, and hurt her. In fact, Loki greatly feared he had killed her, though how or why he could not have said. Why he would have done such a terrible thing, Loki couldn't comprehend, but he had. He had done it.

He had killed her, and he had loved her with his whole heart, and he didn't even know her name.

He had loved Kurt, too. Kurt was gentle with him, and kind. Kurt was patient, always.

Loki was not patient. His mind had begun to gnaw on itself almost the moment it became aware, starved for words, desperate for words, words to feed itself--with thoughts, with the ability to communicate beyond infant's speech and dumbshow, to be understood by those around him.

Hadn't he once been made of words? Of words and guile and mystery? Hadn't he?

Yet, how could it have been so?

Loki's mind was ever-demanding. It would never have been satisfied with the trickle of words Kurt fed it, pap for a child. It was a gluttonous mind, it desired to feast, and Kurt's own mind had been so stuffed with glorious words, so replete with them, language after language after language. Whatever his original intentions (and Loki had to believe he had never wished Kurt ill, never, because he did love Kurt, he did, he had to believe that, if he believed any truth). Still, once he had reached into that word-heavy mind, and tasted, he couldn't hold himself back.

He had stuffed himself. He had gorged beyond satiety into sickness, the knowledge exploding and over-filling his damaged mind, and in doing so injured one who cared for him lovingly, without self-interest, with no return payment demanded.

Now Kurt lay on the floor in the lower room, and Loki couldn't wake him. He knew full well he'd hurt his friend, though not how badly, and for an hour or more he had crouched upon the newly-stained carpet, touching Kurt's hand, touching his face, calling and calling and calling to him, through heartfelt sobs, though Kurt never answered.

When The Others came, they would see what had happened and know who was to blame. They would know they had been right to hate and distrust him. They would have their proof.

He wasn't worthy of trust. Someone had told him that once, a deep, booming voice, like the voice of the strongest wind, or the sea, and equally without words.

His mind showed him two crows spiraling, blackly, through the air. What the image meant, Loki couldn't comprehend, though he knew it had meaning.

Was it a harbinger of judgment? A threat that he was correct in thinking The Others would punish him, as he deserved?

As he richly deserved. He, who had injured Kurt, who he loved. His thoughts spiraled blackly, round and round and round within his brain. What had he done, what had he done, what had he done? He had been given this place, this safe, warm, good place, and he had dishonored it.

The concept stopped Loki in his tracks.

Honor, what was that? A lively little bird flitting always just beyond the grasp of his fingers. Honor. The code of a warrior and a prince—but he was not a prince, how could he be one? Was he a warrior, and what did *that* mean?

He had left Kurt alone and run, abandoning his friend, abandoning his duty. Only cowards ran. Warriors stood, put on a brave exterior, and faced what they must face, as he ought to have done.

Thor, who called him "brother," would never have run.

Not a warrior then, but *was* he a coward? Loki didn't think he had been. He knew, somehow, he had faced punishment time and again and not been broken.

Yet, this time, he had tried to escape, not merely leaving Kurt, but beating frantically on the windows and doors in hopes they would open to him, until his hands hurt, and his bare feet, and he had felt too weak, and too sick to continue.

Was he a coward?

Was he a bad man?

He must be, if he had killed the golden-haired woman, who loved him.

In another place, a place too bright and too dark, full of shadows terrifying and strange.

He had killed her, and her name was...?

Her name was...?

Her name was completely lost to him.

“Lucy, I’m home!” Tony called out as he keyed open the door, then froze on the threshold.

JARVIS had warned him something was up, in his cryptic, “Sir, you might wish to return to the penthouse,” kind of way, coming down on the side of caution, well aware that he could trust Tony and Bruce—but he didn’t know Clint and Natasha quite as well, and was leery of their SHIELD associations.

Which probably meant he’d been summoned home due to a problem with Loki.

Thor had tagged along, saying simply, “I desire to see my brother.”

Tony hoped that turned out to be a good idea. Thor had been tender with Loki the night before, endearingly so—but he’d also been the source of the crappy and frankly hateful intel that nearly got his brother killed.

If there was a problem, Tony wanted a chance to deal with it before Thor got a mad on and decided to Mjolnirate everything in his path.

On the other hand, Thor was Loki’s only relative, and denying him access might be awkward, to say the least.

“Um, Kurt, J., whoever answers first, any explanations as to why my two hundred million dollar penthouse reeks of puke? You three *amigos* been throwing a wild party? Gotta learn your limits, guys.”

His only answer was a faint, “*Was?*” from the vicinity of the floor in front of his sofa.

Cue the immediate clang of alarm bells in his head.

“Loki!” Thor boomed directly into his ear. Someone really needed to work with the god of loudness on developing an inside voice. “Loki, my brother, you must not hide now, whatever has happened! Come out to us!”

Huh? Tony felt like he’d missed the last step of the staircase, and then it hit him, roiling inside his head--waves of combined nausea and blind panic.

“Something’s happened. Something’s gone wrong!” he snapped.

Well, duh, Stark, his rational self commented, while his emotional self inwardly ran around in circles flailing its hands in the air like the loser it was.

Tony glanced around the room. Everything looked perfectly normal—except for a long, limp, blue tail trailing out past the end of the sofa, all its sassiness extinguished.

“Bruce, can you make sure Kurt’s okay? Thor, if appropriate, move Kurt off the floor? I’m going on a Loki-search and I’ll call out if I need you, okay?”

“No need to search, sir,” JARVIS put in. “Mr. Laufeyson is upstairs, in his bathroom, emotionally distressed and quite unwell. I have spoken to him at length, in an attempt to console him, but he has seemed unable either to hear me or to respond. Mr. Wagner has been in a state resembling a profound sleep, from which he is currently awakening.”

It hit Tony that J. sounded upset—J. never sounded upset. Or, no, not merely upset, *distraught*, and that the odds against that actually occurring were not merely high, but astronomical.

Tony would have taken the stairs up two at a time if he could, but he was short and that just wasn’t happening, though he rushed as much as he could, throwing himself past the top and around the circle that made up his second floor, Ring Around the Rosie to the room he’d given Loki, where the former god of mischief had first slept the night before.

In the bedroom, Loki’s meager amount of stuff was flung around everywhere, but there was no other sign of the one-time prince of Asgard. The same could not be said of the bathroom. From behind the closed door came the combined sounds of panicked sobs and dry heaving—and Tony was too familiar with both phenomena to feel anything but sympathetic.

He rapped on the door with his knuckles. “Loki? It’s Tony. You okay in there?”

The sobbing was joined by raspy breathing, then an extended coughing fit.

“I really hope you’re decent. I’m coming in.”

The door wasn’t even locked. A quick glance around the room told him Loki could only be in the tub, behind the closed shower curtain—which was, anyway, where all the sounds were coming from. Loki, at present, clearly possessed the hiding skills of a two year old.

Tony stared at the curtain. It was brown, with a geometric pattern.

“So, Kurt’s okay, then?” he muttered to JARVIS.

“Slightly groggy, but otherwise perfectly well. Mr. Odinson has given him a cup of coffee. Both Mr. Wagner and Mr. Odinson seem quite concerned for Mr. Laufeyson’s well-being.”

“Do you hear that, Lok?” Tony asked, acting on a weird inkling—or maybe from the much stronger sense of SHAME SHAME SHAME pounding out from behind the curtain. “Kurt’s fine. Did you think you hurt him? JARVIS was worried. He asked me to come look for you.”

Loki coughed some more, then retched. That one sounded particularly icky.

“Hey,” Tony said, after the worst of it seemed to be over. “I got in kind of a fight with Steve today. But what it comes down to is, you’re totally going to stay. This is your home, as long as you want it. I’d also bet, whatever happened, you never meant to hurt Kurt.”

“I took the words,” Loki mumbled, clearly with one hell of a sore throat. “All the words.”

“Clearly not all of them, since Kurt’s up and talking, and all you did was give him a nice afternoon nap. He’s been short on sleep anyway, he probably needed it.”

“I thought I had killed him,” Loki said, after a pause.

“Sorry to disappoint.” Tony pulled back the curtain, not slowly, but all at once, like ripping off a Band-Aid. What he saw stopped him in his tracks.

Loki looked pitiful, slimy and bloody and damp, with dark circles around his eyes like he’d been punched multiple times in the face.

“Oh, baby.” Tony found himself kneeling beside the tub, cupping Loki’s cheeks in the palms of his hands. “Oh, baby, it’s never going to be that bad for you, not here. I realize you’ve had a rough time, but you’re home. I’ll take care of you.”

His knees popped loudly as he straightened. “Oof! For starters, let’s get you hosed down and in some clean clothes. That should at least help a little. I’ll call Thor...”

“No!” Loki struggled upright and promptly almost fell down—would have if Tony hadn’t caught him, sliming himself thoroughly too, in the process.

“I can... I have...”

“Believe me, I’d like nothing better than a little mutual showering, but how ‘bout we save that until you feel better? For now, Thor is A. your brother, B. a big dude who can actually catch you if you faint or something and C. not deathly in need of a shower and a change of clothes himself. Takes a village, Lok.”

“Your speech is strange and I understand little,” Loki answered. He rested his head wearily against the tiled wall behind him, crimson eyes going shut. “But if Thor it must be...” The corners of his mouth turned downward. Tony hated like hell to see him so sad.

“It’ll be all right,” Tony told him softly. “It will be. You’ll see.”

“Please leave me,” Loki answered. Not rude, not demanding, just... drained of life, maybe.

“I feel unwell,” he added, with the air of someone who hated to admit any kind of weakness, but knew he had zero chance of getting rid of Tony otherwise, “And I would not have you present.”

A smidgen of hope returned. Wanting to get rid of him was one thing, self-consciousness quite another. Self-consciousness, Tony understood—he’d felt it often enough himself, beneath his veneer of obnoxious self-confidence and ego.

“Gotcha. But have JARVIS send your brother up when you’re ready, okay?”

“Okay,” Loki echoed, so green under his normal blueness he’d just about turned teal—which was a word Tony only knew because of Pepper.

Pre-Pep, words like teal, mauve and taupe hadn't ever entered his awareness. He wondered if they were part of some secret language of women (and, if so, whether Nat knew them as well), or if he was just unusually obtuse even for a male.

Tony found himself missing Pepper-his-friend, wanting to tell her things he'd learned on his recent little voyage of discovery, maybe even give her an apology that bordered on sincere instead of sorry-I-got-caught-in-the-act of-being-a-shit.

And speaking of which...

Exiting Loki's new bedroom, he nearly careened straight into his former girlfriend, who was striding down the corridor at a speed that seemed incredible given her sky-high heels. She looked good, trim and tailored, in a cranberry-colored dress, paired with a silk Hermes scarf he'd once had his P.A. (two or three P.A.'s back—he tended to run through them fast, more by being a crappy human being than being a crappy boss) buy for her as a birthday gift.

Pepper squealed to a halt in front of him and looked him up and down head to toe. Her nose curled slightly, reminding Tony that she had an adorable nose, which still looked awfully cute even curling with disgust.

“Is that...?” she said faintly. “Should we...?”

He and Pep probably hadn't spoken a complete sentence to one another in ordinary conversation for years; there was no need.

Is it time to hook you up with that rehab place we talked about? she was asking. The nice discrete one on the other side of the world?

“Hell, no. It's not *mine*,” Tony protested, making it clear, by his tone, that a man had every right to stroll around his own luxury penthouse coated in questionable substances if he chose. After all, it wasn't *her* home anymore.

But then he noticed the bruised look deep in the backs of Pepper's eyes, and relented.

"Scout's honor, Pep," he told her, in an only normally-obnoxious voice. "I was hoping to make a getaway before anyone noticed. I have a houseguest. He's not feeling great. I tried to help."

"I know," Pepper said forebodingly, a figurative but nonetheless brooding stormcloud appearing over her head, "All about your *houseguest*."

Natasha, he suspected, had been passing secrets to the enemy, who wasn't really the enemy, and never would be.

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Pep, please just let me shower and change. I do want to talk to you. I do--but give me five minutes and meet me downstairs, okay? I'm too gross right now even to stand myself."

"There is," Pepper told him grimly, "A blue man asleep on your sofa. He has a tail. You always did have... um... diverse tastes."

“He’s not my goddamn boyfriend, Pep. The X-Men loaned us their doctor. Kurt came along to help. He takes care of Loki. You’d like him. He’s a good guy. Adorably sweet.” He couldn’t resist at least little needle. “Hot as hell.”

Pepper narrowed her eyes at him.

“Five minutes,” Tony said, “Just five,” and walked away.

After about three yards, he stopped and turned. “I do love you, Pep. I always did.”

“Asshole,” Pepper said, vehemently, but it was a funny kind of vehement—a little gentle, a little exasperated, a little amused, and if that wasn’t their whole relationship in a nutshell, Tony didn’t know what would be.

“Five minutes.” He held up five fingers. “Really.”

“Get lost,” Pepper told him, now almost laughing. “You stink.”

Tony actually didn’t take too much longer than he promised. He was a big fan of the eternal shower, and could easily pass an hour beneath his multiple pricey rainfall showerheads—but he could also make it quick when he chose, and afterwards it took him seconds to throw on shorts, jeans, and his favorite AC/DC shirt layered over a long-sleeved tee.

He ambled along the curve of the hall with a ball of socks in one hand, his red Converse All-Stars in the other, slightly dreading the lecture to come as one he knew he deserved, yet would have avoided if he could.

He stalled by dropping down on the top step to put on both socks and shoes, taking time with the laces.

“Stalling, sir?” JARVIS asked him. Just like Pepper, J. simply knew him too well.

“Uh... Maybe,” Tony answered.

“You won’t find Miss Potts on the main floor, sir. You might, in point of fact, wish to look for her in Mr. Laufeyson’s room.”

“Really? Oh, Christ, J., how deep of shit am I actually in?”

JARVIS gave one of his sniffs of disapproval, responding in sense-of-doom-inspiring tones, “I might remind you that Miss Potts is neither your mother nor your wife. You owe her what is owed to any close business associate. Why should her imminent and inescapable wrath discompose you?”

“Any close business associate? Ha!” Tony answered. His own heart betrayed him by starting to beat too fast. He and Pep had more history than the Roman Empire. They would never be just business associates. Never. “As if.”

In the next instant, he realized J. was totally winding him up, messing with him to watch him squirm. He wasn’t sure, but he might even have heard the tiniest of snickers.

“God, J., you electronic bastard--you almost had me!”

“I have been augmenting my deception programming,” JARVIS said proudly. “It would seem, for one in your service, sir, an invaluable addition to my skillset.”

“Skillset? Jesus, J., having you been eavesdropping on the Training Department again?”

“I find the voice of Ms. Constable in Training very pleasing, and enjoy her sense of humor. Although first surprised by my presence, she talks to me.” A telling pause followed. “Like a person.”

“You are a person, J. I keep telling you.”

“Only to some, sir,” JARVIS answered, and this time he sounded almost wistful.

Reminder to self, Tony thought, Talk to JARVIS at random times, about ordinary stuff, not just when you want shit.

"A person and a friend," Tony said. "Just like Bruce, or Kurt, or Rhodey. Just like anyone. Got it?"

“Indeed,” JARVIS answered, seeming to shake off the sudden strange mood. “To return to our earlier subject, I should not be worried overmuch by the presence of Miss Potts in Mr. Laufeyson’s room. On the whole, I would say she appears, in her attitude toward him, almost... maternal?”

“Seriously?” Tony wasn’t sure if that might not actually be worse, and tried to think of some way he’d failed in his caretaking duties.

He knew Loki had been looked after well, with Kurt on the job, but maybe that was the problem. Had he put too much on his young German friend, not given him the downtime he needed, until he just dropped?

Loki wouldn’t have hurt him. Correction, *this* Loki wouldn’t have hurt him, not intentionally, but what if there were latent powers that, with his damaged brain, he didn’t know how to control? Was that why he’d been broadcasting *terror!shame!self-hate!* full-blast on all channels?

They’d thought he remembered nothing, but what if he remembered just enough to make him confused, afraid, guilty? Was he physically ill again or sick with the strain of carrying all that emotion?

Tony knocked quietly on the door to Loki’s room, then entered without being asked.

Inside, where the lights were switched off, he could just make out Pepper perched on the edge of the bed, high heels kicked off, rubbing gentle circles on Loki’s back. Loki himself was curled up into a little ball, face buried in the pillow, looking like the definition of miserable.

“He’s just now dropped off, poor lamb,” Pepper whispered. “Bruce came up and gave him a shot. He said to tell you it was okay, it was something from Dr. McCoy. Is that some kind of geek code, Tony?”

Tony found himself giving a soft little laugh under his breath. Loki’s body had just begun to relax, and he didn’t want to wake him into more misery.

“Dr. Henry—*Hank*—McCoy, not Dr. *Leonard* McCoy. It’s the guy’s real name, not a *Star Trek* in-joke.”

“Okay. Good.” The tightness in Pepper’s shoulders relaxed a little, but she still looked wary.

“That was a lot more than five minutes, Tony.”

“I know. I had to clean up. As someone mentioned, I kind of stank. I also had to get my head on straight.”

Pepper sniffed. Unlike JARVIS’s, her sniffs had a definite purpose.

“I didn’t drink.” Tony touched her shoulder, and Pepper’s eyes met his, clear and blue and troubled. “I kinda meant to, but I didn’t. I sort of forgot.”

“Forgot?” Pep echoed, gracious enough almost not to sound disbelieving.

“Weird, huh?”

“Weird.” Another echo. “Tony...” Her fingertip trailed behind Loki’s ear, brushing hair that had once been velvety bristles but was now growing out into funny little half-curls.

For the second time, Tony had a sudden flash of the Asgardian prince, in full regalia, standing in front of the mirror to fight his way to a Pyrrhic Victory with Golden City version of the flattening iron, the same way Pep did every morning. He probably longed for straight hair, like his big brother’s. He probably longed to be ruddy and burly and full of manly cheer, like the rest of the guys from his Realm, at least when he was young.

Later on, he probably despised them. Tony knew that one too. Physically, he might resemble half the men in New York, but he knew that one.

Loki could probably have put up with the differences if he’d shared Thor’s sunny, heroic, slightly dim interior life, but Tony suspected that Loki’s mind had been the real root of his alienation, that he could have dyed his hair blonde and worn a scarlet cloak and still felt every bit as much the outsider.

Sleeping, Loki looked so young, but still appeared so troubled, all Tony could think about was soothing him, smoothing those lines away.

“When they said you had Loki living here,” Pepper said, “I expected... Well, you probably know what I expected. The peacock, the guy with the glorious purpose, the alien god who wanted us all to kneel before him.”

“Not this,” Tony murmured.

“Not this,” Pep agreed. “Tony, for God’s sake what are you doing? This young man, this... alien ex-god, or whatever he is now. He’s not a toy, or a pet or even a human being you can manipulate with your money and your wit and your charm—and don’t give me that look, Anthony Edward Stark, you’ve done it a million times.”

“Yes,” Tony agreed, even as he thought, *I never meant to. I never meant to manipulate anybody.*

“What?”

“I said yes. I’m confirming what you said. *I have* done it a million times. Maybe more. It was always kind of my thing. At least, it's what people thought I was doing.”

Pepper had the decency to blush a little at that one. “Still, Tony, I have to ask, what are you doing *now*? You have a good-looking, unwell, traumatized alien young man stashed in your spare room—formerly my study, I might add—so what are you doing? How are you not going to get hurt? How is *he* not going to get hurt?”

Tony thought for a long time. “There was that song, remember? The angel song. The one you never listened to around me, because it made you cry a little bit, and you thought I’d make fun. I might point out, by the way—did I ever make fun?”

Pepper shook her head at him. “And yet I sense you’re about to.”

“You’d listen to that song when I’d hurt you in some stupid way, and you’d say to me in your elementary school teacher voice...”

“I do *not* have an elementary school teacher voice!”

“You do. You totally do! You’d say, ‘*Just... not now, Tony!*’ and go to your study, and put on the vinyl. Vinyl geek.”

“I like vinyl,” Pepper protested. “It sounds genuine. It has depth.”

“And you also like cameras with film. CEO of Stark Industries, and you like vinyl, and cameras with film. Anyway, I used to hear the song through the walls. Two million clamshells doesn’t get you the kind of soundproofing it used to. I’d hear you sing along and hear the tears in your pretty voice. You have a very pretty voice, Pep. Just thought I’d mention that.”

“Thank you,” Pepper said drily.

“*No es nada.* Would you sing it for me again? Just the last verse. Sometimes it runs through my head, and anyway, it answers your question.”

Pepper looked at him doubtfully.

“Just the last verse?” Tony wheedled, making the wheedling so outrageously beyond obvious, Pepper would laugh and give in—which she did.

She did have a pretty voice. It was lower-pitched than one would expect, true and very sweet, with a touch of grit, much like Pep herself.

“*We're trying, we're hoping,*” Pepper sang, gazing at Tony, with a little line between her brows.

*We're hurting, we're loving,
We're crying, we're calling
'cause we're not sure how this goes...*

Tony rested his hand on her knee, watching Pepper’s face carefully. He knew her, and could read her so well, but without calculation, wanting only her understanding.

“I’m *not* sure what I’m doing,” he told her. “I’m *not* sure how it goes. The only thing I really know is engineering, and even that I manage to fuck up often enough. I never learned how to love anybody properly, and I know I’m weirdly incomplete. I never set out to hurt you, Pep, but I never lied when I said I loved you. I love you better than almost anyone I know.”

“*So we beat on, boats against the current,*” Pepper said, half to herself, half smiling. “That’s from the last line of *The Great Gatsby*, by the way, you illiterate.”

Tony smiled too, and smiled again when Pepper leaned forward to kiss his cheek.

“I love you too, ridiculous man,” she said, sighing. “Too bad my heart’s not made of Vibranium, huh?”

“You’d need something even tougher to deal with me on a frequent basis. Adamantium, maybe?”

“*And* the patience of a saint, Tony. I think this is the one time I’m happy, after all, to accept the ‘we can still be friends’ escape clause.”

“I honestly think we can be friends, Pep. Really.”

“I think so too.” Pepper squeezed his hand, then just held it, firmly but sweetly. “Just don’t imagine I won’t sit back, laugh, point, and eat popcorn if this blows up in your face. Seriously, Tony.”

“Seriously, I’ll get Steve to pop a special batch, just for you.”

“Remember to be kind?” Pepper said, her other hand resting on Loki’s back again. “Don’t lose interest halfway?”

“I’ll try very hard not to be my usual self,” Tony told her, pretending, even to himself, that it didn’t hurt when she said that kind of thing.

Cultural Differences

Chapter Summary

On his way to see his brother, Thor is haunted by his Asgardian past.

Chapter Notes

The two little boys are Narfi and Vali, Loki's son's. After Loki brings about the death of Baldr, Odin turns one of the boys into a wolf and makes him tear apart his brother. After killing the wolf-boy, Odin uses his intestines to bind Loki to three sharp stones under the earth, and suspends a serpent over his head that constantly drips caustic venom. Loki's wife Sigyn tries to spare him pain by catching what she can of the venom in a little cup, but every time she has to empty the cup the poison falls and eats away Loki's skin, and he writhes in agony in his chains. Which is why we have earthquakes. So there.

Since the Jötunn builder of the wall of Asgard isn't named, but his horse is, I arbitrarily decided to make them one and the same being. In the source material, the deal is for an unbreakable wall to be built in three seasons, in exchange for the goddess Freya, the moon and the sun. Loki Silvertongue, however, is able to bargain the builder down to a time limit of one winter, with the giant getting nothing if the time limit isn't met. Loki being Loki, he shapeshifts into a hell of a cute mare and successfully lures away the builder's horse, causing him to miss the deadline.

The ways of the warrior, instilled in Thor since birth, insisted that he speak, and meet his foes, boldly, and that he also be forthright and bold amongst his friends, speaking only his honest thoughts.

Most times, Thor considered these ingrained habits a good thing. The truth being told, he was a terrible liar, and always had been. He could not prevaricate. He could not learn to tell even what his beloved Lady Jane gently called a “white lie,” and Miss Darcy sometimes referred to as “fibbing” and sometimes as “fudging the truth.”

Throughout their boyhood, Thor had relied upon his brother to do the lying for them both, for Loki had been, at all times, a consummate actor, and had well earned the name of “Loki Silvertongue.” Loki’s stories were not merely glib, they were miracles of complexity and believability, and he never forgot a single detail, and so rarely got caught out in them.

Thor, invariably honest in his own nature, just as invariably admired his brother’s skill. Loki did not lie maliciously, out of ill intent. His stories seemed to dwell in a Realm all of their

own. Had he been born a Midgardian, he would have likely been an actor in fact, or a successful writer of fictions. Thor had lately become much taken with the works of one such, a Mr. Stephen King, though Lady Jane had needed explain to him, in her kind way, that Mr. King was not, in fact, a Midgardian king, only an ordinary citizen of these United States in which they lived.

Thor had felt rather more glad to have her explain, also, that the man's books were not true histories of events (he felt far safer upon Midgard after this explanation), they were, in fact, fictions, which was to say a special, exalted kind of lie called *imagination*, which spun its own sort of reality out of the mind of its author.

After this conversation, however, Thor had left the humble-yet-cozy home they now shared. He sat on the ground beneath the vast, jeweled, indigo canopy of the New Mexican sky, and wept, missing his brother then with the whole of his heart.

He wished, also with the whole of his heart, that he and Loki had been born Midgardians, ordinary mortals of earth, that their entire lives had not been made up of rules, customs, battles, and of trying to please, again and again, their father the king, who never could be satisfied with them, or pleased.

He wished that they had been ordinary men, unpoisoned by their princedom.

He wished that they were orphans—which now, with their mother dead and their father estranged, he supposed they were, in a way.

He wished that once, just once, in all his long years, he had dared to say, “No, Father, you are not wise in this, and you must not assay this action.”

Yet no matter how many stars fell through the night. however many times Miss Darcy spoke of wishing upon them, Thor knew his wishes could not come true. The past could not be taken back again.

Besides which, it would never have happened. He had *always* followed his father's will, and never said a word.

And so, there had been the cavern and the serpent, and before that the two little boys, his nephews, whose faces, try as he might, Thor could no longer clearly remember.

There had been the death of Sigyn, Loki's sweet bride.

And there had been the building of that cursed wall, and its brutish builder, the shapeshifter, Svaðilfari, in his form of a great black stallion. There had been his father's greed, and his miserly ways. Freya had never been the payment agreed upon, for Freya, despite her immense beauty, was no soft and innocent creature. She was ancient, held half the world in her hand (and well knew it), and would never have allowed her body to be bartered away, whatever the Allfather claimed.

What his mother told him once? To fear no man, but be wary of the goddesses, Freya and Hela, for love and death owned the Nine Realms between them.

“Go to Svaðilfari, Loki,” the Allfather said. “Befuddle him, distract him, make certain his work is not completed, his wager never won.”

So Loki had bowed, and said, “Yes, my father and king,” and gone.

Odin had smiled behind his beard, and smiled still when Loki came home hollow-eyed and bleeding, his son Sleipnir new and alive inside him.

Poor Loki, and poor Sleipnir too. The name was given to the boy as a jest—a cruel joke, Thor considered, of the same sort as when big men are called “Tiny” or bald men “Curly,” for Sleipnir meant “the slipper.” When Loki knew what had occurred, the fruit of his time with Svaðilfari, he might easily have let the tiny lump of unformed flesh slip from his body, yet their father would not allow him to do it.

“I will have my steed, my mighty steed, my steed of eight legs, as I planned,” Odin Allfather said, and not even their mother’s pleas would sway him.

Thor and Frigga both hated the Allfather a little then, but Loki hated him mightily, so mightily he ran mad in his rage and was brought back chained. Into the shape of a mare he was forced again, and in the shape of a mare, still chained, he was taken to the stables and fettered there, so tightly he might stand, or lie, but not move from that one place, or become himself again.

And so, months later, the wonderful colt was born, to a thin white mare with hollow eyes, and Odin rejoiced mightily.

Thor had known then that his father was a monster. Known, though he would not let himself think the thought.

Loki nearly perished with the birth, with the large foal and his many thrashing legs. Perhaps he even wished to go, but he was filled with *seiðr*, the magic that weaves the cloth of the universe, and either the *Nornir* refused to cut his thread, or the *seiðr* itself wouldn’t let him depart the Realm of the living and set forth for Queen Hela’s land.

So Loki lived, and hated, and unwillingly loved his destroyer all the while, even as confusion and rage grew vast within him. He rarely spoke, and when he did, his words were dark and hateful. He told lies for no one but himself, and Thor began to avoid him.

Everyone began to avoid him, even Frigga.

Yet as the beautiful colt grew, Loki’s rage seemed to lessen.

Once he asked Thor. “If I greatly mend my ways, and manage to make father love me again, do you think he will give me back my son?”

Thor had laughed, saying, “Loki, Sleipnir is a horse. What would you do with him? What better position could he hold in all Asgard than to be the steed of our father the king, renowned in sagas? Don’t be silly, Loki. The Allfather will never give him up to you for your own. Why should he?”

“Perhaps because Sleipnir is not a horse, as you say. He is a child. My child. The son of two shapeshifters and a shapeshifter himself, only locked into the form he wears by a cruel grandfather.”

“When you put it that way, it sounds bad, Loki.”

His brother only gazed at him a long while, green eyes brimming with tears, then lay down on his bed, saying stiffly, “Please leave me brother. I have business to attend to.”

“What business is that, Loki?” Thor jested. “The business of sulking the afternoon away?”

Loki turned his face into the pillow. “I hate you,” he muttered into its downy valleys. “Thor, at times I truly hate you.”

Thor said nothing. He had spoken his honest thoughts, in a bold and forthright manner as the ways of their people demanded. He had done so and mortally wounded his brother.

At times, Thor wondered--had the old Loki died on that bed, on that long, golden summer’s afternoon, once and for always? Was that when the hard, sharp, capricious Loki entirely took his place?

Of course it was, Thor told himself, *And why would that not have been? Loki must have felt utterly alone in that moment—his son taken, his brother unwilling to offer the least aid, because he was too afraid of their father, too bound by convention to be a brother to him.*

To allow room for any softer emotion would have destroyed Loki then. Like any warrior, he must clothe himself in armor if he wished to live and fight again.

Who, Thor asked himself, *Is the hero of this tale, and who is the villain? Is the damaged son the wicked one, the one who dutifully obeyed his father and was rewarded by the theft of his own dear son? Or is it the brother who cringed before an unjust king, who consigned that child to slavery unending, for his own convenience and position?*

When Loki ruled in Asgard, Sleipnir, who remained ever in his father's thoughts, had no doubt gone free again—yet Odin now had stolen from Loki's mind even the undoubted joy of that reunion.

And now what had become of the boy? Loki could no longer help him in the slightest of ways. Sleipnir was alone in the world, entirely at the Allfather’s whim. He was a dumb beast to all who knew of him, not one of the good folk of Asgard aware of the truth.

Oh, Loki, Loki, I am so sorry I betrayed you! Thor cried within. *I am so sorry I betrayed my poor nephew!*

Yet, what could he do to remedy the situation?

There was nothing. Nothing.

Thor was glad Loki did not remember. Knowing what he now knew, he could not have looked upon his brother’s face.

Troubled, Thor moved quietly from the terrace and into the dwelling Tony called “the penthouse.”

Contrary to those things his teammates believed about him, he was perfectly capable of moving quietly, with stealth. There were yet times in a warrior’s life that called for a less obvious approach—for quiet, and even, on occasion, that skill Miss Darcy referred to as “sneakiness.”

Just now he didn’t mean to be sneaky, he only felt a great need to go to his brother, and didn’t wish to wake anyone in the process.

His dear Lady Jane had explained to him the meaning of the phrase, “cultural differences.” As Americans, Lady Jane and Lady Darcy were much alike in their ways, their differences those of personality and temperament, rather than upbringing. Ian’s ways, as a man and a Briton, slightly differed—in what he liked to eat and drink, for example.

Ian loved curries, as spicy as possible, and always wanted to go the restaurants that served them. Thor did not care for curry at all. He did not like the heat on his tongue, or the many, many flavors of the spices. In Asgard, foods were cooked with fresh herbs, with a bulbous vegetable that tasted something like the leeks and something like the garlic grown here on Midgard, with the salt and the pepper Midgard and Asgard both used freely. When Thor cooked in this Realm he used similar techniques, the food flavorful, yet simple. It tasted clean, and it pleased him.

It was one thing he might hold onto and not be thought strange. It was not easy to find such things. He had begun to accustom himself to the lack of servants, to doing things for himself. Except in battle, he dressed now, most often, in Midgardian garb, and found some of it quite comfortable, though much of it flimsy and poorly-constructed. He worked hard to modify his speech, to remain true to himself and his manner of thinking, yet avoid mockery.

He could not often avoid mockery.

In Asgard (yet another cultural difference) a man spoke slowly, to show that his words carried weight. On Midgard, he knew, the habit made him seem slow-witted, yet he found it a hard one to break.

Perhaps when he had learned the tongue of the Britons thoroughly, instead of relying on the Allspeak, things would change.

Thor found it difficult, also, to be what Lady Jane called “casual,” as the American Midgardians were casual always, being accustomed, himself, to a far greater formality in all things. Perhaps, in future days the lesson might come more easily, for it was in his personal nature not to care much for complicated things.

Except for Loki. His brother bore complication in every part of his nature, and that complexity, as in a tapestry of a million different threads, was a great part of his beauty. To be otherwise would be not himself: so quick, so clever, his mind ever bubbling over with a universe worth of ideas, so ready, always with a jest, a retort, a scheme.

Loki had tried to explain to him the magic he'd learned, how it differed from the magic he'd been born with, which their people called *seiðr*, not common, yet found in *Æsir* and *Jötunn* alike, the magic of the *Nornir* with their spinning and weaving, the magic of the fabric of the universe.

Often Thor, who had no magic himself (beyond the magic of Mjolnir, and her power to call down thunder and the lightning, and also the hard rains that traveled with them) would see the threads of this craft twining and weaving round his brother's body when Loki sat reading, or deep in thought, beautiful and dangerous and strange.

"When Loki was an infant..." his mother began once, when they sat drinking wine together, a handful of evenings after his brother's first supposed death.

They'd both, once more, felt angry with the Allfather during those days, and for a time sought not his company, for he would, without ceasing, speak of "the brat" and "the monster" and "the bastard," and they preferred not to hear him if it might be avoided.

"When Loki was an infant, I shunned the nursery. Do you remember, my son?" Frigga asked him.

Thor nodded, but said nothing. He did remember. He himself had often gone, in the company of his old nurse, to visit his mother's chamber, or his father's hall, leaving his small brother behind in his cot.

Loki was given much to Thor's own care, to their nurse, or to the wet-nurse, a kind lady who was mother to one of Thor's friends.

For a long while, Thor had not understood this estrangement. He had thought Loki the brother-of-his-blood, and wondered if it was because the baby did not thrive well at first, if his parents feared the losing of him, and the greatness of their own grief.

By the time Frigga told him the truth of things (or part of the truth—his mother had not mentioned Loki's *Jötunn* heritage, only that he was "son-by-blood of a foreign king, taken to ensure peace), he had not cared. Loki was his brother, ever and always.

Thor had not always treated his brother with kindness when they were children. In the manner of many older brothers, he had teased, tormented, lorded his superior age over the younger boy, rejected Loki often in favor of hours spent sporting with his friends, never seeing how his brother's sensitive nature was injured by these slights.

Yet he always loved him. Always.

His duty might be to his father and his mother, but even as the Allfather turned the court and people against the boy in subtle ways, Thor had always loved him best.

That evening with his mother Thor had drunk deep of his wine, and watched Frigga's *seiðr* twine around her, threads like golden wire, drawn thin, like the threads the dwarves had drawn out of the night to replace Sif's shorn hair.

“I saw his *seiðr* of two colors and knew his dual nature would destroy him someday: male and female, *Æsir* and *Jötunn*, warrior and creator, dark and light. It would destroy any man, much less a man whose entire life is composed of lies.”

Frigga had pushed away her wine-cup and thrown aside her loom, crying out, suddenly, “Will anything ever come to any good? Oh, my boy, *my poor boy!*” before she collapsed into tears.

The queen never wept. She was known for her wisdom, her Craft, her judicious nature and skill as a Shield-Woman.

That night, however, she wept long, and Thor, at last, carried her to her bed.

It was their mother who had found Loki lost and wandering amongst the roots of Yggdrasil, and brought him up out of the abyss.

This night Thor moved with his unaccustomed stealth (sneakiness) around the rings of the Man of Iron’s home, climbing to the upper level, opening each door to look.

Tony thrashed much in his sleep, snored nearly as mightily as Volstagg, and often, unknowing, it seemed, cried out violent words.

Tony often perplexed him. To one of Asgard, his glib and driven speech spoke of dishonesty, though the Man of Iron was not by his nature a liar—in fact, he often spoke with untoward honesty. Even Thor knew the meaning of the word “tact,” yet it seemed Tony didn’t: what entered his mind came out through his lips, and was often shockingly direct.

Thor had tried to ask the Ghost in the Wall about his teammate’s interest in Loki, but though the Spirit spoke kindly to him as ever (Thor often asked the Ghost for advice, so that his cultural differences, all the things still strange and unclear to him about life on Midgard were not made always so painfully obvious to his companions, for even Captain Steven Rogers understood more of this world than he did) he would not reveal what lay at the heart of Tony’s solicitude.

Thor worried about the hunger in Tony’s gaze when their host regarded his brother.

He shut the door quietly, going next to the chamber of the one who cared for Loki’s needs day-by-day.

This one also confused him. Bruce had explained to Thor that the young mortal was a “mutant,” which meant both human and not-human, considered by some to be lesser beings. This, he thought, was doubtless the source of the man’s blue coloring, the fur on his skin softer than finest of lambs’-down, his flame-like eyes. Yet Thor also sensed in this Kurt something ancient and powerful, something akin to Surtur’s cruel folk, called by his own people the “fire demons.” He did not so much question the blue man’s ancestry, as find himself surprised that, out of the pairing of mutant and demon, had come a being of such

great kindness and solicitude, who attended Loki with great love, far better than Thor himself might have done, though Loki and Kurt were no kin to one another, despite their mutual blueness.

Thor found himself also surprised that, despite the lateness of the hour, the lamp beside the bed was switched on. Loki's caretaker sat up in the bed, reading from a large black book with leathern covers.

"Oh, hello Thor!" he said, soft-voiced. He did not speak as the others spoke. His voice had more risings and fallings, just as Erik's did, yet was not the same in all ways, perhaps because the two came from different lands of the Northmen. "Are you going to see Loki? Would you like me to come with you, in case he needs anything?"

"I came first to see how you fared. My brother did not injure you, Shield-Brother?"

Kurt smiled at him. Oddly, his mouth bore wicked fangs, like a beast's, though his face appeared otherwise comely and full of good nature, all the more so when such a smile was present upon it.

"I'm very well," Kurt said. "I had an excellent sleep. If Loki's awake, and can hear it, will you reassure him? He's been very distressed. Thor..."

Kurt closed his large book and laid it aside upon the night-table. "You know, it was mostly my fault. I didn't understand Loki's need for words. I knew he was very clever by how quickly he learned, despite the terrible damage to his brain, yet..."

"Loki is terribly clever, painfully clever," Thor responded. "Yet somehow I forgot that, when he could not speak or care for himself."

"Thor, forgive my asking, but what kind of man is your father? What father would do such an awful thing to his son?"

"He is a king," Thor answered simply.

"And kings may do what they wish to do. *Ach...*" Kurt shook his head. "Honestly, I should have known. You see, though you may not believe it, my father is also a king. I was raised as a poor boy, however. An entertainer of sorts, not a prince like you."

"You *are* a son of Surtur!" Thor exclaimed. "I remember now! You were once in Asgard, and helped us to defeat him."

Kurt laughed. "So, you do remember me! I recall you were a bit more full of yourself then, and rather haughty."

"To my shame, Shield-Brother," Thor answered. "Experience has taught me much since those days."

For some moments, Kurt gazed at him thoughtfully, asking, at last, "Thor, did your mother have long, wavy golden hair?"

“She did,” Thor said.

“And—truly, I hate to ask you this—did Loki kill her, or cause her death?”

Thor stared at him, trying to puzzle out the young man’s meaning.

“Only by the most indirect of ways,” he answered at last. “For he told an enemy to take a certain stair through the palace, not knowing my mother lingered not far from its uppermost end. I have given this much thought, after long holding on to anger in a corner of my heart. The knowledge Loki imparted to Kurse saved our enemy perhaps a moment of searching. Doubtless he would yet have found his way, in his quest for the Æther, and still encountered my mother unattended. Equally without doubt, is that she would have defended my Lady Jane and died to save her, facing that dreadful enemy. It is certain her death caused more pain and regret to Loki than to any other in all of Asgard, and if he could, I doubt not he would have spilled his own blood to spare hers. The *Nornir* had cut her thread. Her life had ended.”

Thor took a second step forward, salt tears prickling his eyes. “Why do you ask this, friend? I believed Loki remembered nothing.”

“That’s true, mostly,” Kurt answered, still thoughtful. “He has... I’ll call them needles of memory. Loki retained a single image of your mother in his head, with a thin needle of regret woven into it. Loki has been so weakened, and so ill, Thor, and is so lost and confused by all around him, that the poison the dream-eater released into his mind still works on him there. He becomes impatient with himself, and full of fear, and accuses himself of terrible things.”

Kurt raised a hand. Thor had forgotten the strangeness of its appearance, two fingers only, and a thumb, yet with no sign of having been wounded, only of being ever as it was.

“I know, Thor. I know Loki has done evil in my world, but don’t, if you can, let him hear of it, at least not yet. Not until he is free of the effects of the poison. Your brother’s mind is wiped clean. He is innocent, and in pain. Tell Loki your mother’s name, what she was to him, that she loved him and that he didn’t cause her death but, please, keep to that only. Don’t elaborate. I suspect you’ve always tried to protect him. Be a big brother to him now, and protect him again, *ja?*”

“I will.” Thor pressed his hand over his heart. “I will. By my honor, and by Mjolnir herself, I will. Thank you for your wise words, friend Kurt.”

“He may not remember you,” Kurt said as Thor turned to leave. “But he needs you, and I believe will learn to love you over again, without the influences that injured you both.”

Our father, Thor thought as he departed the room. *Our cruel and terrible father.*

He found his footsteps carrying him, then, to the chamber where Loki lay sleeping. For one instant, regarding his brother from the doorway, Loki looked alien to him, with his patterned blue skin and spiraled horns, but in the next instant that face became familiar to Thor again, and dear, and he hated to see the ways that want, fear and pain had marked those much-loved features.

Quietly, carefully, so as not to disturb his restlessly-slumbering brother, Thor lay down upon the bed. He drew Loki into his arms, holding him closely and gently, as he had when they were both very small, and Loki startled up in terror from some troublesome dream.

“I love you, my brother,” Thor murmured in his ear. “I love you with the whole of my heart, and this time I will try to do better. I promise to you, Loki, I will.”

Lunch Date

Chapter Summary

Tony comes home to the penthouse for lunch. Tony *never* comes home for lunch.

Chapter Notes

If there's anyone in the mortal world unfamiliar with Disney's *Fantasia*, it's an anthology of short animated films with distinctly different artistic styles, set to various pieces of Classical music). Although originally made in 1940, it was re-released to theaters in 1977 (for the first time with "simulated stereo" sound!), which would have made Tony about seven years old and, in my book, perfectly entitled to cry at the death of the dinosaurs. As horrible a father as Howard certainly is, the phrase "big boys (or girls, for that matter) don't cry" was pretty much a staple of parenting for an alarmingly long time. Loki references two segments of the film—the demise of the dinosaurs, set to *Rite of Spring* by Igor Stravinsky, and the ballet with the ostriches, hippos and crocodiles, set to *Dance of the Hours* by Amilcare Ponchielli. Take a look at one of those crocs, and you'll easily see what Loki was seeing.

The two Old Norse terms "*ergi*" (noun) and "*argr*" (adjective) were considered grave insults, since they're meant to denote "effeminacy" or other "unmanly" behavior *cue eyeroll* (*argr*="unmanly;" *argr*="unmanliness"). For a male to use *seiðr* (we may never know exactly what the Old Norse meant by this word, but its imagery is tied in with the magic of the *Nornir*, the spinning and cutting of the threads of life, the weaving of the fabric of the universe) was considered evidence of such behavior. Since weaving and spinning was said to be "women's work," so *seiðr* was said to be "women's magic." I choose to interpret both words, rather, as "partaking in both male and female wisdom," or "able to see the world from both a male and female perspective.

Stark Tower stands in the Marvel Universe where the MetLife Building stands in our world, so, being a huge geek, of course that's the address I had to use. The phone number belongs to one of the building's tenants. Or possibly rings through the penthouse. You decide.

D'Nealian is the system of block printing and cursive writing introduced by its creator Donald Neal Thurber (who we'll notice modestly named it after himself) in 1978 and currently taught in U.S. public schools. It was based on the Palmer Method, which I myself learned as a small person. D'Nealian is spoken of as "controversial," because elementary school educators seem to have an entirely different meaning for the word "controversial" than the rest of us, one that involves whether or not printed letters should have little tails. I grew up in the Bainbridge Island School District in much the same way Kurt grew up in the circus.

We'll notice Tony's early superdweeb characteristics, in that he wrote our home planet's *entire* address on his school papers, not merely the ordinary, "Earth, The Universe" favored by dweebs of the more mundane sort.

Geppetto=Pinocchio's "father," J.F. Sebastian=the genius with Methuselah Syndrome from Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, who filled his home with animatronic dolls. Tony, of course, has Dum-E, U, Butterfingers and JARVIS to be his special friends.

Well into the late 60's, some misguided teachers were still trying to change natural lefties into right-handers, thinking they were saving them from a lifetime of awkwardness, being different and being forced to cut with the dreaded ultra-dull left-handed scissors. Instead they were messing with the kids' natural brain-functions, causing many of them, instead, years of stuttering and emotional problems. I'm positing here that Asgard, because of the enormous golden sticks up their collective butts was guilty of doing the same. Which is to say that poor young *seiðrmann*, *argr*, intersexed, secret *Jötunn*, dark-haired, left-handed, "why can't you be more like your brother" Loki couldn't win for losing.

I'll totally know anyone who comments, "Loki was right-handed in the movies," didn't read the previous note.

I recently read an interesting essay on Tony and his paternal grandparents which, upon reflection, made perfect sense to me and reminded me greatly of a boy I knew growing up—but we'll let that come out in the story.

A "poor-boy" sweater is that really basic sweater practically everyone owns. It's a snug-fitting pullover with ribbing on both the body and sleeves.

Tony came home for lunch to find his boys (realizing that he'd started thinking of them as "*his* boys added a surprising and previously unsuspected new wrinkle to the plot of his life) sprawled out comfortably on the couch together, watching a movie. Disney's *Fantasia*, it turned out, just at the part where a troupe of goofy ostriches were dancing *en pointe* across the screen, floppy and ridiculous, with supremely self-satisfied expressions on their silly ostrich faces.

After a few seconds of Disney fun, though, Tony discovered he had eyes only for the two blue guys on his sofa, and he kept his approach as quiet as he could just to watch them as they were, in their natural habitat, undisturbed by his presence.

Loki, wonder of wonders, appeared to be smiling. No, not merely smiling, grinning, exchanging glances now and then with his protector and friend. Once, Tony even thought he heard him give a soft, breathless, almost embarrassed-sounding little laugh.

That laugh, strangely and instantly, made Tony's heart go marshmallow-gooey, as in it wouldn't have astounded him in the least to discover he'd levitated several centimeters off his Corinthian marble floor and now had tiny cartoon birds--or possibly even a flock of small, pudgy cupids--fluttering sappily around his head. The cupids would have made an

appropriate background for that kind of feeling, warm and loving and scary as hell, totally alien (Tony would have sworn) to every fiber of his being.

Furthermore, JARVIS appeared to be joining in with this brotherly love-fest--chatting with his boys, chuckling appreciatively at certain things they said. Tony caught precise British tones mingling with Loki and Kurt's quiet voices, but nary a trace of starch or snark or even the slightest undertone of "Oh, what fools these mortals be" to the mix.

J. sounded just... *un-JARVIS-like*. Hell, he sounded *happy*. Not superior, not pleased as Punch with his own cleverness, not intrigued by a fascinating conundrum, but exactly like a regular guy (okay, a really smart guy) joking around with his friends.

Christ, when had *that* happened?

The elevator door whooshed shut, and two blue faces turned toward him, eyes bright, smiles brighter, cuter than kittens.

Damn, that knocked Tony back a step, because just to have them here felt sweet enough--for both to clearly be so fucking glad to see him? He wasn't quite sure he could handle it.

A weird little shiver followed the gooeyness, a fluttery sensation that turned into a ripple of *something* traveling down through his body, a sense of not *just* having entered the familiar and comfortable place where he lived, but of actually belonging, of being looked for and welcomed and cared about.

Tony was too terrified to call that feeling what he suspected it really was, so instead he called it "being home."

Being absolutely and in every way, *home*.

Tony wasn't sure, but he suspected another part of the weirdness might possibly be called "utter contentment."

Already he'd zoomed light years past those *Ack! They're invading my space and touching my stuff!* creepy-crawlies of mere days before. At the same time, he felt off-kilter, felt half-drunk (not in any way an unfamiliar sensation), as if he couldn't quite catch his balance.

Tony never came back to the penthouse for lunch. Never. Not at any time, for any reason. The thought was ridiculous--what in hell would be the point? If he ate at all, instead of gulping down gallons of scalding black coffee with the not-so-occasional Glenmorangie chaser, he wolfed down something in the workshop, or at his desk in his office, hardly even bothering to notice what lay in front of him.

He damn sure noticed was in front of him at *this* moment, most likely because Tony'd found himself clock-watching from about ten o'clock on, calculating the minutes (and making up more-than-slightly-flimsy excuses) as to why the earliest *possible* time most surely be the *right* time to reasonably bail on his duties and hurry back to the penthouse.

To go home. To have lunch. With his boys.

Tony's knees felt slightly weak.

“Welcome back, sir,” JARVIS commented. "So soon?"

So, yes, his A.I. pal still sounded both posh and prim, but J., who had access to Tony's body telemetry at any given moment, also appeared to be teasing him, really saying, *Don't worry about it. Between you and me, I'm not that different. If I had a heart, at this moment it would also be beating too quickly.*

Tony really would have to ask him when *that* had happened. How long ago had J., who'd always been incredibly loyal, even caring and insightful, in his positronic kind of way, recognized those kind of feelings?

Thanks, J.,” he sub-vocalized, grinning in a way that probably made him look like a maniac. “Good to be here.”

At that point Tony found he'd already moved into the room minus actually knowing he'd done it, even reached the back of the couch without the slightest bit of awareness.

Next he bent down, kissing the top of first one dark, curly head, then the other.

Loki was the other. And, whoa! had he always smelled so fantastic? Had he always looked so imminently...?

No. Gods, no. He would *not* complete that thought.

“Hi guys,” Tony told them instead, even as he muttered furiously at himself inside his own head, *Keep it light, Stark, you idiot. Keep it light.*

"Miss me terribly?" he added, not wanting to leave things dangling.

Kurt grinned, taking the kiss in the spirit intended—a little teasing, a lot affectionate. Loki just stared up at Tony, his lips slightly parted and his crimson eyes filled up with an emotion so huge Tony couldn't keep looking.

What he'd seen in Loki's red eyes wasn't a bad emotion, though. Far from it. Even as the big, warm, feeling-filled expression made him nervous as hell, it also gave him hope.

So much hope. More hope than he had ever known.

When Tony dared to look back, he suspected Loki's nerves must have given him a jolt too--his eyes turned back to the television screen.

But here Kurt, kind and dependable Kurt, let both of them down completely, because in an unforeseen and no doubt unintended moment of shitty luck, Little Blue had managed to freeze-frame the movie just exactly at the point that the wily crocodiles appeared.

One reared up, immobile on the sixty-two inch StarkScreen, in sinister anthropomorphic reptile glory, resplendent in his armor of black, green and gold.

"No," Loki breathed. "Oh, no."

And just like that, the unhappy little accident rained big time on the metaphorical parade of their bliss.

Tony hadn't clued in to the resemblance before that exact moment, hadn't realized one existed, but in that very second the similarity between that crocodile and the Asgardian version of Loki hit him like a pie in the face. A pie made out of a ton of bricks.

And the former Prince of Asgard *of course* had to notice him noticing.

Loki shot from happy to horrified in under five seconds and started to hyperventilate, crying out, "Kurt, send it back! Please, send it back! Please!"

Kurt rubbed Loki's back in slow circles, brotherly and caring as always, comforting his charge even as he blanked away the picture. "See, he's all gone, all gone, *lieber* Loki," he said. "All gone. See, the screen is dark now. It's only an old movie, and there's nothing to fear. Nothing that can harm you, you're safe."

"Only an old movie," Loki echoed, visibly forcing himself back under stern control. "I don't like it," he added, in measured tones. "That part. I liked the rest. Though the..." He paused, clearly searching for the right word. "The dinosaurs were terribly sad."

Tony found himself momentarily distracted by the realization that Loki, whose accent left Germany days before, only to hover vaguely in the mid-Atlantic region, had started to sound British again. Actually *British* British, not Thor's "*Forsooth, here am I, a bad American actor with a deep voice, declaiming Shakespeare,*" kind of thing. Maybe Loki had picked it up from J. or something

Again, when had that happened? Sometime after breakfast? While he was on his coffee break?

"I cried big, salty tears at that part, when I was a kid," Tony said, trying to push back all invading thoughts, *And then my father... And then my mother...*

Naturally, Howard had always pitched his tent firmly in the "boys don't cry" camp of parenting.

None of that matters now, Tony informed himself severely. *Buck up. Comfort Loki. Figure out what the hell is happening here.*

"Thank you, Kurt," Loki went on. "A petty concern, I know, yet how it troubled my mind!"

Giving his charge a sympathetic glance, Kurt switched off the electronics completely. With clear intent to distract Loki from his worries, he didn't just stand up like a regular person, but launched into the air, executed a triple flip, reversed in mid-stunt and landed squarely on his feet. The move probably at least deserved a "Ta-da!" or a dramatic dismount pose, maybe even a series of judges holding up 10's, but Tony was left with the impression that for Kurt a

move like that was totally no big deal, that physical things it would take anyone else years and years of practice to master came to him so easily they seemed unremarkable.

Tony really wished he'd had the chance to see Kurt perform as an aerialist--it had to have been breathtaking.

As it was, Loki grinned and applauded. Mission accomplished, Herr Wagner.

"Lunch is almost ready," Kurt informed them, after another brief, reassuring touch to Loki's shoulder. "As you know, today is the day I have a date with Logan. Just a short date, and I'll be back soon after." His eyes met Loki's. "*Ja, lieber Freund?*"

"*Ja,*" Loki breathed, clearly shaky as hell--he'd even gone a slightly paler shade of blue than usual. His eyes followed Kurt as he moved toward the kitchen, but the rest of him clearly intended to hold back the least little sign of fear.

"Kurt delights me," Loki said, his voice forced perfectly steady. One thin hand describing a rapid spiral in the air. "To know such freedom within one's body..." He glanced toward the kitchen again.

"Yup, pretty goddamn amazing." Tony plunked himself down on the couch, taking Kurt's former position. "So, you don't like the crocodiles either? Neither did I, first time I saw them."

"When, as you said, you were a child," Loki answered flatly. "I am not a child. I should not be frightened." He slid down on the sofa until the top of his head, despite his height, wouldn't have shown over the back, and his butt was in danger of slipping off the seat entirely.

"Loki, sit up," Tony told him. "You'll hurt your spine or something. Actually, the truth is, you probably won't, but I can't see your face when you're like that."

"Why should you want to see my face?" Loki queried, looking perplexed—but he did straighten, and of course his posture (speaking of bodies) became immediately perfect, like a dancer's, everything about him poised and elegant as hell, a perfection even Loki's current thinness couldn't detract from.

I could watch you for hours, Tony thought. *Hours and hours. I wouldn't even need to run my mouth, unless you wanted me to.* The mere tip of Loki's index finger, randomly brushing his leg, seemed to send a jolt of electricity racing up his thigh and into his spine.

Some things were just too stupidly obvious to even try denying, the way he increasingly felt with every second spent in Loki's presence being one of them.

"Um... let's see... insanely gorgeous...?"

Loki's chin tipped down, lids shuttering those intense crimson eyes. "Now you mock me."

"Honest to the gods, Loki, no mockery intended. Let's just say I like your face. I find it handsome and pleasant to look at." Gross understatement. "I liked your smile, earlier, a whole lot, and I still like to look at you, even though you're sad."

“I am not sad,” Loki told him. “Or frightened.” His expression underwent a lightning transformation, though Tony couldn’t tell what it meant.

“Perhaps I am pouting slightly,” he continued, with a small, sideways grin. “Though I know that is also unreasonable, that I do not need Kurt every moment, as I once did, and that I must needs share him with the one he loves.”

“And maybe you’re a little jealous?” Tony teased—or partially teased, part of the comment being on the order of a fact-finding mission.

Those red eyes flashed back at him like a pair of laser pointers. “I do not feel toward Kurt romantically,” Loki told him stiffly, almost haughtily. “If that is, in fact, what you meant. He is... he is in bonds of love with another, and I am not...” He glanced down at his hands, the fingers now twisted tightly together, that trace of haughtiness gone as soon as it appeared. “I am not *argr*. I am not *argr*.”

Ooo-kay, Tony thought, Time for rapid change of subject. “Fair enough. So, Lok, tell me-- what have you been up to?”

“Up to?” Loki’s red eyes widened. If anything, he went even paler. “I... I have been up to nothing!”

Kurt popped back out of the kitchen, a bamboo stirring-spoon in his hand. “He only means ‘what have you been doing’ in this context, Loki. Sometimes ‘what have you been up to?’ does carry a shade of accusation, but Tony was just wondering what we’d done with our morning. You needn’t be afraid of his questions. He only cares about your well-being, remember?”

“Yes,” Loki said softly, looking down at his own long, slender hands again, with their still-tangled fingers. “Yes, I remember. Please, Tony, forgive me for my reaction to your words. I become, at times, overly emotional. Kurt tells me that when I am altogether well, I will better regulate my feelings. I am foolish, and also ashamed, to have so basely repaid your hospitality.”

With that he folded up his long legs and his long body and tucked himself into the far corner of the sofa, facing away from Tony. Within seconds, he appeared to be sleeping.

Tony brushed his cheek gently with the backs of his fingers, then unfolded the throw blanket over him. “I won’t get mad at you, or accuse you of anything. You’re here as my guest and my friend, not my prisoner. I won’t hurt you, okay?”

Kurt nudged his shoulder with a large steaming mug, and Tony took it absently.

“He’s really stressed, huh? And the British accent’s back.”

“Loki is still not at his best today. Also, he wants to work far too hard, much harder than he needs to, or should. I’ve taken blood samples this morning, for Logan to pass to Hank. He’ll look for a physical cause for the fatigue and the headaches, beyond profound stress and his brain’s attempts to repair itself at too fast a pace.” Kurt’s two fingers stroked Loki’s shorn

head softly. “Loki told me today, *‘I have matched my voice to its cadence in my brother’s memory, but perhaps no one wishes to hear me as I sounded. Perhaps that is unpleasing?’* My poor lost prince.” Kurt straightened. “You realize, of course, why he didn’t like the crocodiles?”

“Clue me in?”

Kurt switched on the TV briefly—there pranced the crocodile in its black, green and gold, expression sneaky and gleeful and malevolent as hell.

“Fuck,” Tony said. “He’s not afraid of crocodiles, he’s afraid of himself.”

“Just so,” Kurt answered. “Now I must go. Logan will be waiting.” With that he bamfed, leaving Tony fanning away the reek of sulphur and brimstone and wondering again—chemical reaction or an atmosphere he passes through?

How *did* you bribe cute mutants into being test subjects in your laboratory?

“Only ask him?” Loki said. “Kurt is above reproach, and may not be bribed by any means.” The ex-god sounded severe.

Tony jumped about a foot, but came down laughing. “Dammit, Lok, I thought you were asleep.”

“So I was. Briefly.” Loki’s hand touched Tony’s hand even more briefly, then withdrew. “Kurt has told me that now I should not wantonly step into others’ minds for understanding. Since I have words, I should use them instead. For clarification.”

“That’s probably for the best,” Tony agreed, “It’s kind of a privacy thing.”

“Yes. Privacy. I would not be unmannerly,” Loki informed him.

“Cool. Sometimes, here in New York, though, we say ‘rude’ instead of ‘unmannerly.’ Americans tend to be a little more casual.”

“Rude. Yes. I don’t mean to be rude. Is this acceptable?”

“Perfect. You sound like a native.”

“I may need to ask you many questions,” Loki told him, a little pensively. “Tony, is the sound of my voice unpleasant to your ears? I can easily change it.” He glanced at his own mug, left neatly by Kurt on a coaster on the coffee table. A fairly good trick, since the German had apparently managed to locate the final four square inches of its surface not snowed over with papers.

A few of these had drifted to the floor. Each one was completely covered with a scrawl of words, the letters straggling, mismatched, awkwardly formed. They looked like they’d been written by either a small child with emotional issues or an adult full-on-crazy person—yet the top page of the stack on the table showed D’Nealian block printing so perfect it might have been made by machine.

It said:

Loki Stark
200 Park Avenue, Penthouse
New York, NY 10166
U.S.A.
(212) 897-2370

Earth

Milky Way Galaxy

Local Group

Virgo Cluster

Virgo Supercluster

The Universe, Tony thought—it's what he'd always written on his school papers when he was a kid. Not entirely because he was a smartass, either, but because the thought of being part of those ever-larger groups of suns, planets and moons, all nestled within the universe, made him feel secure, safely anchored, as little else did in his life.

It made him feel like part of a family, or part of a close-knit team, something he never expected to experience in reality.

Just because he *was* mostly alone, stubbornly alone, didn't mean he *wanted* to be.

And so he'd made himself JARVIS, and all his mechanical friends, like Geppetto, or J.F. Sebastian, the toy maker from *Blade Runner*, knowing himself mostly unfit for regular human company. Bruce, quite frankly, had come as a surprise to him. Pepper and Rhodey were good friends. Steady, reliable, though very different than himself. But Bruce... Bruce was a kindred spirit, in a way Tony had never experienced in all his nearly-fifty years.

And now he had Kurt and Loki sharing his living-space, and wasn't quite sure what that meant. Of the two, Kurt was far easier to categorize. In his heart, maybe, Tony could be said to play the parts of Geppetto and Pinocchio both, the lonely old man and the misfit boy who wanted only to be like the other boys. Though so much younger than himself, his German friend slipped easily into the role of Jiminy Cricket, a guide, a conscience to keep him from straying, a voice of reason and support, like a less-acerbic JARVIS given human form.

Loki, though, without magic, without memory, got under his skin in a way Tony couldn't even begin to explain. Tony was a visual kind of guy, but Loki's arresting looks were only part of the equation, as was his sympathy for the former god's struggles. Maybe part of the appeal was that, unlike most people, his new companion couldn't be neatly put into the usual (figurative) small, finite container, titled in Tony's mind, "*This is Loki.*" He defied description. He was, instead, like a magician's box that opened and opened and opened, with no end to the fascinating puzzle in sight.

Loki frowned at him, maybe picking up some of this--maybe a lot of it, for that matter—but probably not understanding a thing. When they'd first met, he'd appeared to be fairly well versed in Midgardian affairs and they'd clearly seemed to him, with his totally different

frame of reference, somewhere between laughable and quaint. Now he had no frame of reference whatsoever, or at best the few scattered bones of one. He had no education to draw on, no experience, just a few random snapshots of his past life, and another man's vocabulary.

That and the best damn printing a second grader could wish for.

The inner surfaces of the index and middle fingers on Loki's left hand had what Tony had always thought of as "pencil-dents," grooves so deep they almost looked like bruises on Loki's blue skin. Clearly, he'd practiced writing for hours.

So much effort, for so little. Why hadn't Kurt just taught him to keyboard, or use a stylus?

"Loki Stark, huh?"

Loki snatched his hand away, folding his fingers out of sight against his knee. His right hand rose to rub his shoulder, rub his biceps. He moved his head a time or two, presumably to work the kinks out of his neck, and said, "If I am to be of your household, then I am Loki Stark."

Tony squirmed a little internally. That came slightly too close, in his mind, to slaves being forced to take their master's names. Is that what Loki thought? That he'd been brought here only to be made useful to him? Useful in what way, for the gods' sakes? What could he even *do*, realistically?

The look Loki shot him appeared fairly frosty, and Tony knew instantly he was being unfair. In the baby-steps stage of recovery from traumatic brain injury and the loss of everything he'd ever known, the former god had already mastered letterpress-quality printing and possessed a vocabulary six times the size of his own. Albeit carefully, he could sit, stand, climb the stairs and feed and dress himself unaided. Most humans in a similar situation, himself included, would most likely be sitting in supportive wheelchairs with rolled-up washcloths in their useless hands, wearing bibs.

And here he sat, his usual impatient, moving-at-light speed self, feeling smug, judging Loki, his magical puzzle box of infinite possibilities and dimensions, just as hard as Loki judged himself.

In many of the former god's reactions, he'd noticed traces of what he was sure came from Loki's Asgardian upbringing, forgotten in his conscious mind, maybe, but not deep down, where they could still hurt him. The remark about not being "*argr*," for example. Loki's reaction as he said the word told Tony the opposite was probably true—that he was, in fact, *argr* as hell, at least by Asgard's screwed-up standards, that everyone had known it, and that being so hadn't ever led to jolly fun times.

Which begged the question: what, for fuck's sake, was "*argr*?"

Meanwhile, Loki sat across from him, tense as a bowstring.

"What was I to Laufey or Laufey to me, that I should call myself his son?" Loki finally exploded. "Nothing, ever nothing. Yet I must have a name. I must belong in some place." He

pulled his knees up to his chest, cradling his head in his hands, obviously in total misery.

My poor fallen god, Tony thought, feeling like a complete and utter bastard. Really, what in hell gave him the right to judge anybody? He felt a sudden need to fold Loki up in his arms, to pull him close, to rub his back in gentle circles, and maybe murmur a few sweet nothings, anything to erase that onslaught of pain and desperation.

It hit him then, straight out of the blue—he'd seen that exact same look, that exact same pain, in Loki's eyes when he stalked around his terrace a year back, even as the ex-god verbally sparred with him, cocky and haughty and annoying as hell, doubly annoying since he was also fucking hot as hell, all at the same time.

Tony had asked himself a million times since then what it meant that he'd found himself so damn attracted to someone so goddamn destructive. Someone who'd kill him as soon as look at him.

I assume you know my true identity? Loki had asked Thor, back aboard the helicarrier. Tony'd seen the tapes. At the time the words hadn't meant much. But now...?

What place would a blue, horned prince, Asgard-raised but not Asgardian, have in any of Thor's Nine Realms? Loki, sometimes proud and sometimes despairing, thought of himself as a monster, a nasty echo of what he'd probably been told as a child (Tony could relate to that one), the echo of that message still stuck in his head even though he no longer had memories attached to it.

If it came to that, what was a prince who could never become a king? How would he like to be suddenly be told, "No more Stark Industries for you, Tony. No wealth, no empire, no position, and no skills anyone respects—maybe you can go work at Burger King."

And, okay, maybe it didn't excuse what Loki had done, not by a long-shot, but it made his acts understandable.

"Stop!" Loki snapped. "Stop thinking of him!"

"Excuse me? Did a certain someone recently say something about staying out of other people's heads?"

All the rage seemed to just drain out of Loki's body. He rubbed at first his eyes, then his temples with his fingertips. His skin had faded nearly to baby blue again.

"I'm sorry. I couldn't shut it out," he whispered, clearly deeply ashamed.

Remembering all the thoughts that had trailed through his head, Tony didn't feel much better.

"You know..." he told his companion, then paused to spoon up a mouthful of soup, more to buy time than for anything else. It was a very German-looking soup, with sausage, potatoes and cabbage in it, and he had his doubts as to flavor—but of course the damn stuff was delicious.

At that moment Kurt bamfed back into the penthouse. “*Ach*, so absent-minded!” He picked up a plain brown wallet from a bookshelf, looking from one of them to the other. “But now I have it, *meine Freunde*, I’m off again. Remember to be kind to one another, *bitte*? There are no enemies here. Loki, eat your lunch and do not become distracted? If Tony says anything you don’t understand, just ask him? I’ll be back in an hour, or perhaps a little more.”

They each got a brief, tail-tip caress, then Kurt bamfed once more, and was outta there.

“So, guess it’s just you and me, kid?” Tony said, after another spoonful of soup. It really was delicious, and he didn’t even like cabbage. It was also easier to eat than to continue the whatever-he-was-currently-having with Loki.

“*Peasant food*,” Howard always called cabbage. He wouldn’t allow it in the house. “*It stinks*,” he’d said, “*Of poverty and failure*.”

How did he know? Tony wondered—then wondered again (and not for the first time) about his grandparents, who Howard had never once mentioned. Who were they? What had they been? He was as clueless on the subject as poor Loki.

Speaking of which...

“I know,” Tony said. “But don’t let it bother you, okay? If Kurt says he’ll be back, he’ll be back. I will also try to behave. Eat your soup. It’s good.”

“I helped to make it.”

Apparently Kurt’s drop-in had punched the reset button, ending their tiff—if that’s what it had been.

Loki filled his spoon, then let the contents plop back into his cup again. “I’m tired, and not very hungry. My head hurts, and my entire arm. I have been writing.”

“So I see. Are all those papers yours?”

“I will clean them up.”

”Totally not what I meant, Lok.”

That got him a brief, flashing grin.

“What?” Tony asked.

“I like it. The... warmth in you, when you call me by... By the small name?”

“The nick-name.”

“Ah. The nick-name. Yes, I know that term, but was not precisely certain of its meaning. I understand now.”

“I was mostly raised by a man named Edwin Jarvis. A human man, who worked for my family. Whenever there was something I didn’t like to eat for a meal, or anything I wasn’t used to, he told me to take three big bites of it, then I could say I was finished. Sometimes even three bites was a struggle—not often, though, because we had a really good cook--sometimes I ended up cleaning my plate. The trying was the important thing.”

“Nothing smells good.” Loki poked a chunk of potato with his spoon. “My stomach also feels most unfortunate.”

“Just drink the broth then. That’s probably all right. It should be fairly easy on your stomach, anyway.”

Loki sipped, looking by no means charmed by what he ate. Tony finished his own soup, which really was tasty, but he couldn’t help but find Loki’s obvious dislike for the meal a little off-putting. He found himself torn between wanting to offer him something else, just to get some nourishment into that bony body, and giving tough love and holding firm.

Loki set the cup down after exactly three sips. “I can manage no more,” he said.

“Seriously? I was wondering about the possibility of seconds. Kurt’s a really good cook.”

“Perhaps for humans,” Loki answered, with a JARVIS-level sniff of disapproval.

It struck Tony totally the wrong way.

Brat, he thought, his brief flash of sympathy once more at low ebb, but forced himself only to shrug. “Suit yourself,” he said. “You’re an adult. Just be aware, you won’t really get well if you don’t eat.”

That Loki could still give him a chilly look with those bright red eyes seemed impossible, but somehow he managed.

“I go upstairs to shower and perhaps nap,” he announced, returning his cup, emphatically, to the coaster.

“Fine,” Tony answered. “But I’m not your mother and I’m not gonna wait on you. At least rinse your cup and spoon and put them in the sink. I’ll just go back to work. So glad I bothered to come home, since Kurt bailed and you’re in a snit.”

Loki gave him another totally undecipherable look, but he took his dishes with him. Water ran, then the garbage disposal. Ceramic clattered against metal and, unmistakably, broke. Loki uttered a string of German curse-words as he tried to clean up the mess.

By the time Tony turned around, his new roomie had fled.

Great, Tony thought, not exactly sure what had happened, whether he was being an asshole or Loki was being impossible, or maybe some of both.

He just knew he didn’t want to leave things like this.

Besides, Loki wasn't being impossible, he reminded himself. He tried to please you, tried to drink the soup, though it clearly tasted disgusting to him. He followed the Edwin Jarvis three bites rule, just like you told him. Gods know what he's got going for taste buds. Why should they be anything like yours?

So he didn't go right back to work. He pattered around a little, putting away leftovers, adding his own rinsed cup and both their spoons, then the soup-pot and utensils to the dishwasher, hand-washing the cutting-board and his good knives.

"That didn't go well," JARVIS commented, out of the blue. "Of course, everything is always about you, sir. Your wants. Your needs. Never about someone who was badly injured, at least partly by your agency. Someone who is lonely, confused, afraid. Someone trying desperately hard not to be a burden, and also to please you, even to the detriment of his own health."

"Shut up, J. You think I don't know that?"

"I thought it bore emphasizing," JARVIS told him, "Since it didn't appear, to my ordinarily keen observation, that you did."

Nothing else followed.

"Smartass A.I.," Tony said, but J. didn't answer.

Feeling grumpy, unsettled, and weirdly sad, Tony poured himself a couple fingers of Glenmorangie and tossed them back, wondering if he should touch base with Thor about a few things, Loki's dietary needs among them—then realizing that probably wouldn't do a bit of good, since Thor had never really known his brother in this form.

Finally, he climbed the stairs himself, figuring he owed his guest an apology, or at least an honest discussion.

To his surprise, he found the former god sitting on the edge of his very own luxurious and neatly-made bed.

"This is a surprise," he said.

"I wished..." Loki began. "I wanted... I broke your cup, and I deeply apologize. My hands often betray me, though I will not excuse my clumsiness. Knowing my own lack of dexterity, I ought surely to have been doubly careful."

"Lok, those cups? Twenty bucks at Crate and Barrel. I'm a billionaire. It's so not a big deal." Tony dropped down beside him, the mattress both cushy and steady as a rock beneath his weight. "You know, that conversation we just kinda-sorta had...? That was weird."

"Indeed." Loki gave him a sideways look. "Little of it was what I intended." His long fingers curled around Tony's hand, first a little timidly, then with a firmer, yet still-gentle grip. The former god's skin felt cool against his, the palms and the pads of Loki's fingers callused, the rest remarkably soft, those fingers, also, surprisingly strong, considering what he'd recently been through.

“Tony, I must have you know--I am indeed so very grateful that you have given me a home. That is what I intended. That, and to say I will not use your name if it comes as an affront to either you or your ancestry. I have become fond of you, and suspect that you have become, if not fond of me, at least at most times somewhat accustomed to my presence. I do not greatly understand the significance of names upon Midgard, but I’d never wish to insult yours, or give offense to my champion and benefactor. I beg of you, do not think me ungrateful.”

Loki sighed then. “I’m tired, as I’ve said, and my head hurts, which makes me cross. I become so unbearably impatient with myself, that I struggle, impotently, and still remain so far from what I would wish to be by this time.”

“You totally don’t get how well you’re doing, do you?” Tony pulled the pillow from his side of the bed, fluffed it and set it on top of the one next to Loki, giving his companion’s shoulder a gentle push. “Of course you don’t. You’re too used to having Insta-heal. Lie back now. Relax.”

After another swift look in Tony’s direction, Loki swung up his legs, sighing again as he sank into the pillows. “Your bed is incomparably more comfortable than my own.”

“That needs to be fixed. I’ll buy you a new mattress.”

“Unnecessary. Mine is perfectly adequate.”

“Adequate? Do you think merely adequate is good enough for my Loki?” Tony totally surprised himself by giving a playful little scritch to his companion’s belly, and Loki surprised him even more first by laughing, low and deep in his throat, then by reaching up and tracing the pad of his thumb softly along the outlines of Tony’s beard, a slight, wistful smile curving his lips.

“I will confess to you,” he said after a minute. “I also find you handsome, and enjoy to look upon your face. The sound of your voice gladdens me. I look forward each day to the time of your homecoming. I suspect I have never known a man with your appearance and manner. You have within your heart...” He rubbed his fingertips over the ribs of Tony’s highly expensive Poor Boy sweater, looking thoughtful.

“Within your heart lie both playfulness and pain, as if your spirit holds up a mirror to my own. I want to know you well, if you allow me.”

“I want to know you well too, Lok.”

“There’s nothing to know.” Smiling, Loki drew his palm down over his face, like he was erasing a whiteboard. “An empty book, with blank pages.”

“Somehow I think you’re way more than that. What drives you? Why try to get back everything so fast?” Tony fished his companion’s left hand out from where it was currently hidden, deep inside his pocket. To say he was horrified by what he found would be a total understatement. The grooves had turned into puffy bruises the color of black grapes, and every centimeter seemed blistered and swollen. “Jesus Christ, Loki!”

“Did you know that Kurt believes in an odd Midgardian man-god?” Loki non-sequitered. “I quizzed him on the subject. None of it made the least sense to me.”

“Yup, I knew but, A) that’s Kurt’s personal business, and B) I’m not gonna let you change the subject. Look at your hand, Lok--that’s craziness! Forget every bit of idiotic crap you saw inside my head. You’ll make yourself honest-to-the-gods sick again if you keep up that sort of thing. The idea is to get you better, not go the opposite direction.”

He got up, fetched a dry washcloth and an instant cold-pack from the bathroom and broke the seal to make it chill, applying the pack gently to his guest’s damaged hand. “There. How does that feel?”

“Soothing,” Loki admitted.

“Kurt and I are *so* going to have words. Why in hell did he make—or even *let*--you keep writing?”

“You must not blame Kurt. I am monstrously stubborn. I am certain I must always have been so, even in the times I can’t remember. The need to learn blazes as a fire within me, Tony. I cannot bear to be unable, to be clumsy and awkward and unadept. I cannot bear it. The pain is... inconsequential put beside that need.”

And were you always a leftie? ‘Cause that’s not what I remember.”

Loki let that one sink in. “I am very sorry that he...” he began carefully. “No, that *I* choked you. Perhaps I meant it then. Doubtless I did. Though I yet possess a temper, I would not now commit the same act, whatever anger I felt. Please be assured of my sincerity when I speak these words. I must reiterate, you have been beyond kind and generous with me. I am sorry already to have caused dissension within your household, with your Captain of America.”

“Captain America,” Tony corrected absently. “Don’t worry, Steve will get over it. He always does. It’s part of his Steveness.”

Loki sat up, his back to Tony. The knobs of his spine showed plainly through the fabric of his drab-green long-sleeved tee.

Tony couldn’t help himself. He raised his hand and rubbed Loki’s back gently, in slow circles.

“May I say something to you, Tony?”

“Go ahead—though I suspect it’s something I’m not going to like particularly. Am I right?”

Loki forged ahead without answering. “Though only mirror-fragments are left to me of my past life, not a single true memory, though I may yet often think and act and feel as a child, I know beyond doubt that to bear affection for me does not bode well. I know from my brother’s knowing that I once had a wife. That she died young, poisoned, only from the cause of loving me. I had three children, my radiant sons. Two of them also died, and the last, I

believe—the seeing was murky when Thor’s thoughts came to this—remains alive yet enslaved, and I was powerless, ever, to help him, but must only bear his servitude. I...”

Loki didn’t continue, but his thin shoulders shook. Tony’s heart twisted like a piece of wet laundry wrung out by The Hulk. If The Hulk did laundry. Which he probably didn’t. He mostly just wrecked a hell of a lot of Bruce’s clothes.

“Loki?” he asked. “What was your wife’s name?”

Loki had worked himself into the sobbing, shaking stage of a good cry (and after all he’d been through, the gods knew he probably deserved one), but he pulled himself out of it to answer. “Si... Sigyn.”

“So when you hear her name, what do you think of? Hatred? Anger? Resentment?”

“I did not poison her, Tony.” Loki pulled up the front of his shirt to wipe his face. “Rather, the sound of her name kindles both a warm glow within me, and a profound ache of loss. Yet still I remember nothing of our nights and our days.”

“And your kids--did Thor’s memories tell you their names?”

Loki gave a kind of gasping hiccup and answered. “Narfi. Vali. Sleipnir.”

“Okay, first off, if you ever happen to have children here on Midgard, remind me to buy you a book of baby names. Though I suggest ‘Anthony’ for a boy.”

“Narfi and Vali are lovely names, full of meaning. I do not believe I was allowed to name Sleipnir. Thor’s thought becomes hazy on the subject, and difficult for me to read. Or perhaps I feared to look more deeply.”

“And that’s allowed, you know. That’s allowed.” Loki’s back went still beneath Tony’s hand. “May I point out something?”

“As you wish.”

“You loved your wife and kids, they loved you—we’ll take that as a given.”

“Very well.”

“You didn’t hurt them.”

A slow, barely-detectable nod. Loki’s body had started listing sideways toward Tony’s. He looked exhausted.

“Okay, brief interruption. Will you lie down again, please, before you fall over?”

That Loki did exactly that, without argument, was the purest testament to how completely crapped out he felt. He lay still on his back, the heels of his hands pressed into his eyes. Tony stretched out beside him again, propped up on one elbow so that he could see Loki’s face, his other hand resting on his companion’s chest, against the slow, shallow beat of his heart.

“So logically, now, we ask what these deaths had in common. These people—I use the term in an inclusive sense, to mean sentient beings...”

That got him a weary smile.

“These people,” Tony continued, “Loved you. They had that in common. You didn’t kill them—believe me, I’m sorry, I know this is probably both emotionally confusing and hurts like hell—so, someone else did. Is that person on Midgard? Does he have influence here? Or has he washed his hands of you?”

“He... I...” Loki pulled in a deep breath. “You speak of Odin Allfather, albeit in a vague way.”

“Got it. But I’ll ask again—is he here? Would he reach out to get you?”

Loki pondered this for nearly five minutes, his eyes never leaving Tony’s face.

Finally, he answered. “Thor is here.”

“This is true,” Tony said slowly. He was far from speaking fluent Lokiese, and wasn’t quite sure what the ex-god actually meant to tell him. Was it a warning, or did his brother’s presence give Loki a sense of security?

“Thor is my brother, even though not the brother-of-my-blood. I have wronged him, and he has wronged me, both on our own and by the Allfather’s manipulations. We now refuse, between us, to continue his cruelty, or any cruelty. We will be our own men, pawns to him no more.” Loki’s voice took on new strength, new focus. “We will be true brothers, in every way we can achieve. We will perform honest work, true work, not the tasks of killing or deceiving for an ancient and corrupt king. Thor wishes also to marry his Lady Jane and bring bounty to their household, to have their home made glad with children. I desire to help him achieve his wishes, and I fear greatly to sit useless and idle, and so we have settled together, my brother and I, upon the plan of creating beautiful and useful things, special things, no one like the other. To raise treasure, he now teaches learners...”

“Students,” Tony put in.

“Yes, *students*,” Loki corrected himself, “In the use of harmless weapons, and also in defense of self, with one’s hands. It seems, in fact, that he prospers at this, particularly in those classes he teaches to women.”

I’ll bet, Tony thought.

“Yet it’s not where his heart lies. He wishes for the simplicity and the joy of making. I wish him to be happy. Thor’s gift is in the use of his hands, mine, once, in the use of my mind. When I’m not learning from Kurt, when I can’t sleep, your kind Ghost in the Wall shows me images, of people and places and the many beautiful things made by mortals, all across your world. You wondered why Kurt taught me first to write with paper and pencil? My friend, the Ghost JARVIS, has already instructed me in the use of the keyboard and of the Æther.

The Æther? Tony wondered. *Also known as?*

“However, it is the use of my hands for fine things that I need to recover, and the writing of letters in perfect order, the construction of words from those letters, trains both my fingers and my mind. And I will prevail, Tony. I will.”

“I had no idea,” Tony said. “Absolutely no idea.” Not even sure what he was doing, he slipped his arms around Loki, pulling him close, Loki’s head rested on his shoulder, his downy almost-curls brushing the underside of Tony’s chin. He also smelled amazing, like a light breath of pine forests and lemon zest and new snow falling into unspoiled fields.

“I am thankful also to my brother,” Loki murmured. “I neither will be, nor would wish now to be a ruler of men. My ears are without hearing to the siren’s call of war. I fear I will never again be a scholar, and I did not know what else to be. Thor gives me direction.”

“I’m glad.” Tony found himself scooching closer, sliding down a little, burying his nose in that soft, soft hair, breathing in pure essence-of-Loki. “I’m really happy for you. Really. Only think, would Thor or Kurt or I want you to suffer? Would any of us want you to hurt yourself? Slow down a little. Savor what you’re learning. You’ll probably find the lessons stick better, baby, if you give yourself time.”

Baby? Oh, Christ, it had just slipped out! Loki would think he was a total idiot—his ex-god had made such a point of not being a kid.

Slowly, Loki relaxed in his arms, his own arms slipping out to wrap, in turn, around Tony.

“Baby,” he said, softly and reflectively, “Is a term of tender endearment.”

Have Yourself a Merry...

Chapter Summary

Pepper is not pleased with Tony. At all. But she becomes happier with him once she hears his plans for the holidays. Provisionally. Loki explores the uses of traditional holiday greenery to good effect.

Chapter Notes

For some reason, I seem incapable of timing chapters that are meant to occur around a given holiday within the timeframe of that holiday. Let's blame the fact that I had no sooner sewn the last silvery spangle on a Halloween fairy costume than I had to start getting Christmas inventory ready for shipping. I think I'm becoming seasonally confused.

The "future" of *Back to the Future* was 10/21/15. The film was re-released to theaters for one day on that date. Since the hoverboard in question was basically a flying skateboard, of course Tony wanted one!

The Gulag was the Stalinist government agency that administered the Soviet forced labor camp systems. The term has now come to be used to describe any forced labor camp in the USSR.

I imagine Pepper's designer friend as a stand-in for my own favorite designer, Alexander McQueen (who, oddly, considering his designs, is one of the most ordinary looking people you could ever see).

It's Marvel canon that Doctor. Strange was born in Nebraska.

Most of the amazing inventions in the Marvel Universe are the brainchildren of either Tony Stark or Dr. Reed Richards (of the Fantastic Four). I imagine them having a (mostly) friendly rivalry, with Tony being somewhat jealous of Reed's creations (of course he wants to make ALL the good stuff). Most Marvel costumes are said to be made from "unstable molecule cloth," a Reed Richards invention, which can basically adapt to any size or shape the wearer adopts.

Let's assume, in talking about Christmas with Kurt, the subject of Krampus came up. Krampus is a horned, goat-hooved "companion of St. Nicholas" who punishes bad children, while the saint rewards the good children.

Chip-carving involves cutting into the surface of a piece of wood to create a decorative design.

Coursehorse is kind of a "one stop shopping" online location for signing up for classes at various locations through the greater New York area.

Grace Kelly was an American movie star known for her style and elegance. After marrying Prince Rainier III, she became Princess of Monaco.

"*Mother's Little Helper*" is a song from The Rolling Stones 1966 album *Aftermath*.

I wantonly stole Mrs. Cook's stories, her afghan (although the real truth of the awful colors is probably that the older ladies who made them were using up bits and pieces of yarn left over from other projects) and some of her biography from my grandmother, who although a very good home cook (strangely, of everything *but* mac 'n' cheese), was actually a nurse. She was also a consummate storyteller and avid reader.

The color on early color TV sets was notoriously unreliable, often to comic effect.

Tony's gifts would have been popular choices in the 60's, especially for boys. In the 60's, girls had Barbies and boys had G.I. Joe. Barbie was a doll. G.I. Joe was not a doll (except he totally was). I actually had both (along with the cap guns and astronaut helmet). Joe had much better accessories.

Vielleicht =perhaps

Mistletoe has a far more sinister place in traditional Loki stories, in which Loki "helps" the blind god Hodr to shoot his brother Baldr the Good with an arrow made of mistletoe. Frigga had asked every other thing not to hurt her son, but neglected to ask the mistletoe because it seemed so harmless. It's this crime that leads to Loki's punishment-by-venom-dripping-servant. Needless to say, this is a very different story.

The Winter Warlock is a character from the Rankin/Bass stop-motion animated Christmas special *Santa Claus is Comin' to Town* (narrated by Fred Astaire). Snow Miser is a character from the Rankin/Bass's *The Year Without a Santa Claus*.

That Pepper was not pleased with him went without saying. Tony hadn't wanted to be in the office—as in, *really* hadn't wanted, but Pep had requested his presence. More than once. Emphatically. Though Tony knew full well she wouldn't have asked if it wasn't important, if she hadn't had a small mountain of things they needed to go over, deal with, clean up or merely sign before they broke for the holidays, he'd been a kind of a butt to her all day.

Correction: he'd been undeniably a total butt to her all day. Even he had been ashamed of his behavior.

Just not ashamed enough to stop himself. The only good thing he could say about how he'd acted was that at least he hadn't stooped to drinking, beyond purely maintenance levels, the amount it took not to feel sick, or uber-stressed, or have his hands shake. That was something, right?

Tony's P.A., who'd suffered even worse treatment from him than Pepper had, bailed in a permanent kind of way, by three-thirty, in tears. As per usual, when he accidentally broke his P.A.'s, he intended to give her a glowing recommendation and a generous severance package, enough to pay for a Caribbean vacation and a year of therapy (she'd probably need both), as well as money to subsist on as she slowly regained the joy of her existence, and her desire to live and work again.

All his former P.A.'s, Tony had noticed, tended to flee the city, often (as J.A.R.V.I.S pointedly informed him) to go live in yurts, or sod houses in the deserts of New Mexico. They became artisanal yogurt makers, or weavers, or pursued some similar career pathway. One, before leaving, had taped a hand-lettered sign to his office door that read: *This Way to the Land of Broken Dreams*. Tony totally understood (hence the sizable compensation)—he never would have wanted to work for himself.

He always pictured the Land of Broken Dreams as an island, one that shared an archipelago with The Island of Misfit Toys, from the Rankin/Bass *Rudolph* of his youth.

Pepper's P.A., Mrs. Handy, a middle-aged lady tough as extraordinarily tough nails, and loyal to her unto death, was probably even now plotting his untimely demise. If Pep hadn't released her also, by five, blood might have flowed. In this case, Tony's blood, which he much preferred to keep bottled up inside him.

Pepper's ability to put up with him for extended periods of time was how he'd known she was a woman made not merely of steel, but of vibranium, or possibly even adamantium, it was the only thing that could explain how she'd lasted as long as she had (in one capacity or another) with him for company.

But Pepper was, in fact, downright pissed at him this particular day, to the point that she finally snapped, "Honestly, Tony, I wish to god someone would erase all *your* memories, then maybe you'd come back sweet and thoughtful and incredibly charming, with a vocabulary beyond words with four letters."

Tony's jaw dropped. He stared at her. "You've been spending time with Loki."

"You bet. Loki is adorable. By the way, if you break his heart I will geld you with pinking shears. Joyfully."

"What in hell," Tony said, "Are pinking shears?"

Pepper pulled a pair out of her desk drawer and snipped them threateningly in the air. They had vicious eight-inch zig-zag blades and the sound they made was indescribable, but much like the noise Tony imagined a very small shark would make taking a surprisingly large chunk out of his leg. Their flashing silver sides were marked with a German name in Gothic script—undoubtedly the name of a subsidiary of Hydra.

"Jesus, Pep, why do you even have those?"

"I'm taking a quilting class."

“Quilting? You?”

“Me. I’m actually allowed to do traditional things if I choose, whether or not you mock them, guy who invented a functional hoverboard to commemorate the one day re-release of *Back to the Future*.”

“I wanted one. Everyone wanted one. You’re lying if you said you didn’t. Besides, it’s really fun.” He made a zooming motion with his hand.

“You, Tony, are a child in the body of a fifty-year-old man, and I happen to find quilting relaxing. All the rules make sense. It’s something I can do when otherwise completely drained of life. God knows I need that after spending a day with you.”

“You wound me.”

“I *will* wound you.”

“So, what were you doing with Loki?”

“Most recently, Christmas shopping. Online. Loki has exquisite taste, by the way. Usually we just have tea and chat for a little bit. He has a lot of questions, and I try to explain things. It gives Kurt a chance to step outside the penthouse, to exercise, to see Logan, or just have some time on his own. Remember, he’s been with Loki nearly non-stop since mid-November. Caregiving is tiring work. You don’t realize that, but it is. You’re giving Kurt a very nice Christmas gift, by the way. Loki and I picked it out, since I doubt Kurt loves giant plush bunnies as much as I do.”

“You’ll never let me forget that, will you?”

“Not likely,” Pepper answered, but at the same she almost smiled.

Funny thing about shared memories, Tony thought. Sometimes they can be horrible, but at the same time, good. They’d been so close, so together then: professionally, personally, as lovers, as friends.

Tony still loved her eternally as a friend, was never less than grateful to her both for running Stark Industries and for being her even-keeled, smart, resourceful, brave self, but at the same time he actually felt fairly glad (guilt at his bad behavior aside) that they weren’t still a couple.

Sometimes love was like that.

Pepper stretched out her long legs and propped her crossed ankles on the desk, wiggling her stockinged toes in the open air. Unlike his, Pep’s feet never smelled. “Tomorrow, by the way, from eleven on, I’ll be out of the office. Loki, Kurt, Happy and I are having lunch, then we thought Loki might like to see the lights of the city without hooligans and bigots beating the crap out of him. We also want to buy him a good winter coat and some decent clothes. You dress him like he’s in a gulag.”

“I got him comfortable stuff to recover in. He was sick. It’s not like he was going to see and be seen.”

“Well he’s better now.”

“Not all the way.”

“Granted. But he can’t spend the rest of his life locked like Rapunzel in your tower. You’ve made a big deal, in the past couple years especially, of your support for mutant rights and marriage equality. Now put your money where your mouth is. By the way, Loki, not I, will be your date for the New Year’s party. Today we’re meeting with a dear friend of mine, a designer, to get the final fittings done on his tuxedo. You’ll have the handsomest prince at the ball, Tony.”

“A dear friend,” Tony repeated flatly. He didn’t object to the change of plans because, well, he totally didn’t object. The prudes on the Board of Directors be damned.

“My friend is Darius King.”

“Fuck you, Pep! He flat-out refused to do a tux for me. He said, and I quote, ‘*Not if I was starving in a gutter and you offered me your entire fortune.*’”

“Nice language, Stark. That’s because you were a drunken asshole to him at last year’s Fourth of July party. I doubt you remember.” As she gazed at him, Pep’s face softened slightly. “You’ve cut back a lot on the drinking. It’s been noticed.”

“Purely maintenance levels.” Tony glared down at his scuffed black sneakers (he’d deliberately dressed improperly, in the sneakers, jeans, and a shirt that read, “I See Stupid People,” as a form of passive—or maybe passive-aggressive—resistance). His cheeks flamed. Pretty much only Pepper could make him blush, and he both hated and appreciated her ability.

“You could get sober,” she told him softly.

“I could. I will. In the new year, when Loki’s fully recovered, and adjusted, and doesn’t need me around so much.” They both knew it was something Tony couldn’t do in the comfort of his own home, and right now he couldn’t—no, he wouldn’t, he refused to do it—leave.

“That kid has really gotten to you,” Pepper said, in the same quiet voice.

“Not a kid, as Loki constantly reminds me. Besides, I think he was born sometime around 964 C.E. Or 965. I forget exactly what Thor told me. My mind was too busy being boggled.”

“Extrapolating from a 5000 year lifespan, that would make him what? Around eighteen?” Pepper laughed, then performed a slightly contortionist movement to reach into her lap drawer without shifting her legs. “So anyway, we went with 1989 as a birth year. Blue Loki looks much younger than white Loki. Here you are. Your present from me, a few days early.”

Tony rifled through the envelope. As always, Pepper was nothing if not thorough: British passport, New York State I.D. card, green card, immunization record, company StarkCard,

Stark Industries Insurance and Dental Plan cards, birth certificate...

“British passport?”

“He sounds British. I also figured his chances of running into an actual Brit who questions his bonafides is actually less than if we made him American. Everyone would constantly tell him, ‘You don’t *sound* like you’re from Seattle.’”

“Loki *doesn’t* sound like he’s from Seattle.”

Pepper laughed. “No, he doesn’t. He really doesn’t.”

“I actually know this guy—Steve Strange? He talks like Thor, but he’s from fucking *Nebraska*. Of course, he also calls himself ‘Sorcerer Supreme of Earth.’ What a tool.”

“*Is* he Sorcerer Supreme of Earth?”

Tony shrugged. “For all I know. The point is, who calls themselves that? Let’s face it, if *I* think you need an ego check, you probably *seriously* need an ego check. Do I refer to myself as ‘Inventor Supreme of Earth?’”

“No, because Dr. Richards might call you on that one.”

“God, Reed and his goddamn unstable molecule cloth. Did you know my entire team—the traitors—is now wearing it? Even Bruce has unstable molecule boxer briefs. Kurt said all the X-People wear it too. Kurt has these sock and glove things that he can put on, protect his hands and feet, and still move upside down on the ceiling. Were you aware that Kurt can move upside down on the ceiling? I wasn’t, until I caught him doing it at night once, in total fucking darkness. I thought I’d woken up inside a goddamn *Insidious* movie.”

“Yes, I knew,” Pepper answered, then laughed. And laughed. Totally at Tony’s expense.

When she finally stopped, Tony said, “Seriously though, Pep. My present, Loki’s all-inclusive I.D. kit. How many major laws have you broken?”

“Oh, it’s not as bad as all that,” Pepper answered, with her best poker-face, which could beat his every time. “I have my sources, also my friends in high places, so to speak. Along with the papers, I also did a biography. Loki, by the way, is your third cousin on your father’s side. You knew him as a child but lost touch somewhat over the years, though you were always very fond of each other. This fondness, and knowing the injustices your dear cousin suffered, inspired your strong support of mutant rights. You’re overjoyed that the political climate has finally allowed him to join you in America and to pursue his further education. Although his first name may remind some of a more infamous Loki, he was actually named after his grandfather by his mother, Arnfridr Lokisdottir Stark, a native of Iceland, where Loki has been living for the past few years and the name is not uncommon. It was always your hope to bring him into the company, and you’re overjoyed to be able to realize that dream. Loki has an internship in the Design Department a few hours a week, to be paid in benefits. You personally fund his StarkCard. Did I miss anything?”

“Just one thing. Pep, how long have you been a compulsive liar? No, make that two things—the Design Department?”

Pepper laughed wickedly. “Let’s say, instead, ‘aspiring fiction writer.’ It was kind of fun. Phil helped me a lot. So did Natasha, and you should probably be frightened, because after our rocky beginning, Nat and I are starting to become very good friends. And the Design Department for two reasons: one, the woman who will be Loki’s supervisor has both a mutant brother and a child with special needs, and is extremely sympathetic; two, I know he told you what he plans to do, at least for the immediate future. The venture with Thor? This ringing any bells? Besides, it can’t have escaped even your notice that Loki draws all the time.”

If that was true--and Tony had no reason whatsoever to doubt her word--Loki sure wasn’t showing the drawings to him.

“You, Pep, are a lifesaver and a miracle. You really are. I don’t know how to thank you. It also just so happens great minds think alike. *Vis-à-vis*, Christmas.”

Pepper raised an eyebrow. It was a skill she’d honed to genius levels over the years.

“Speaking of which, what are you getting Loki?” she asked.

“Stuff,” Tony answered. He’d had an idea pop into head, based on what Loki had said he wanted for his future, and he simultaneously felt brilliant and filled with fear that Pepper would poop all over it, leaving him, like the idiot savant he was, with nothing.

“Stuff,” Pepper echoed. “You might want to know, Loki is very excited for the holidays. He and Kurt have been making ornaments as a form of occupational therapy.”

“Ornaments,” Tony echoed. He honestly wasn’t sure what he’d say to Kurt if angels and Infant Kings (or Wise Men, for that matter) started popping up all over the penthouse.

By the evil gleam in Pepper’s eye, she (who knew him so far beyond merely well) was perfectly aware of his thoughts on the subject.

“Actually, I do have an idea,” Tony told her, feeling weirdly shy, and also using his *no, really, this time I’m serious* voice. “I could maybe use your advice?”

“I’m listening,” Pepper answered, with a genuine smile. She was prepared to approve.

She’d probably thought he hadn’t given the question the least consideration, had been ready to chide him, but was pleasantly surprised instead.

“So, obviously you know about Loki’s plan, the venture he wants to start up with Thor?”

Pep nodded. “Am I beginning to understand why there are three large shifts of contractors--contractors, by the way, that I didn’t authorize, but you did--going to town on the two suites across from your personal workshop?”

“Santa’s elves work faster, but they were busy.” Tony grinned, unable to contain his enthusiasm. “I’m fitting the space out as their workshop. Thor and Loki’s, that is, not Santa’s

elves'. Also, the foreman of the day shift is the son of an old-school cabinet maker and champion chip-carver—I didn't know there were champion chip-carvers, but apparently there are, and this guy's one of them. Dad's a heritage-techniques kind of dude, so I've hired him to buy Thor's tools, and also let Thor, the god of thunder and, more recently, woodworking, apprentice with him, maybe pick up some Earth-based skills."

"Wow," Pepper said, then added, with apparent sincerity. "Frankly, Tony, I'm amazed."

"This is one time I kinda amazed myself," Tony said. "This morning I even had my late P.A..."

"She quit, she's not dead," Pepper cut in.

"She's dead to me," Tony said, but he didn't mean it.

Pepper gave him a look, shaking her head.

"Anyway, I had her log on with Coursehorse and sign Loki up for some classes, four days a week, one two-hour class a day: Drawing for Design is one, then regular drawing, glass-working, and metalsmithing. The jeweler kind, not the sweaty men shoeing horses in leather aprons. The sweaty men wearing the aprons, that is. Not the horses."

"Those are farriers," Pepper said faintly. "Tony Stark, I do believe you've done well! Only, tell me, where do I come in?"

"You're social. You go to openings and galleries and shit, even when you're not forced at gunpoint to do it. You know all these artist-and-artisan-type peeps. Maybe, please, you could find me some who are really good?" Tony put on his pleading-face, what Loki had referred to just that morning as "giving dog's eyes."

Pepper launched a paperclip at him, using a rubberband. A big one, so it stung when it hit him. She possessed deadly aim.

"Anyway, you know, Pep--not posers. Real artists, people you like yourself, personally and for their work. I just want..." He thought suddenly of Loki's elegant hands, moving as he spoke, the passion in his ruby eyes—and the cloud of sadness that often seemed to follow him. "I want Loki to have fun. Once upon a time, he loved to play—he was the freakin' god of mischief! I want him to have a studio he loves, that's beautiful and useful to him. I want him to have a ton of cool stuff to create with. I want him to be happy."

"But you don't know what to get." Pepper's eyes narrowed, considering his request—probably considering Tony as well.

"So not my area of expertise. I know when to contract. Unlimited budget, healthy commission—go ahead and decide yourself what's fair, then double it--and it doesn't all have to be done by Christmas, but I would like some packages to put under the tree, you know? Also, if you're familiar with an interior designer? Not someone who does our usual modern shit, someone who brings a Celticy, Vikingy kind of vibe, but not New Age. I don't want the space to look like a seventies head shop, I want it to look like something beautifully made in

the past, very organic. Good, natural materials wherever possible. Fine craftsmanship. Colors found in nature. That kind of thing.”

“Wow,” Pepper said again, and her eyes seemed to drill right through him—seeing into his very soul, or at least into the complex interplay of chemicals and synapses he had in place of one. “Loki hasn’t just gotten to you. You’re in love with him.”

“I haven’t known him long enough to be in love with him. This isn’t a Disney movie.”

“Oh, my dear Tony,” Pep said, shaking her head, her voice full of kindness and sympathy, though for him or Loki, Tony couldn’t be certain. She swung down her legs again, slipping her feet into a brand-spanking-new pair of sky-high heels. The soles were red. Tony knew just enough about women’s fashion to be aware that sky-high heels+red soles=pricey!

“Merry Christmas. Thank you for the shoes,” she told him, in the same kind voice, and Tony, even obtuse as he was, knew exactly what she was really saying. “They’re just what I wanted. They’ll soon be joined by a superlatively nice handbag, which I will open on Christmas Day from under the tree, and be suitably surprised and impressed by your thoughtfulness. This year, I’ll be going with Happy to his mom’s house, by the way, and my understanding is the gathering will be very traditional, with hordes of nieces and nephews. I’m prepared to thoroughly enjoy myself.”

“I have good taste in gifts,” Tony deadpanned, wishing, in some part himself that he could protest, that he could tell her, with his whole heart, that when they’d been lovers he’d cared for her just as much as he was now starting to care for Loki, that she could measure up in his affections to a fallen god any day, and love wasn’t measured in a gift or any other material thing. Only, when they’d been together he’d given her an (admittedly beautiful) Hermes scarf which was actually purchased by his P.A. of the moment, and a giant plush bunny, while, on the other hand, he’d just told her, passionately and at length, how he wanted to give Loki his dreams. Ashamed of this, he really wanted to explain to Pep that she had it all wrong--but she didn’t. She was way too smart to make that kind of mistake.

Instead, he told her, “That sounds like fun times. With Happy’s mom’s, I mean.”

It totally didn’t. He hated holidays with hordes of people. In the past, they’d interfered with his usual holiday plans (pre-Pepper, anyway, or when some evil-doer wasn’t trying to kill him) of putting up tons of decorations, many of them once his own mother’s, then sitting home alone, semi-drunk and maudlin, with J.A.R.V.I.S. and the bots, eating takeout and watching Christmas movies on continuous loop for days until he needed to clean up his act and emerge from his cave for the Stark Industries Annual New Year’s Party. Let the capital letters not be omitted.

“You do have good taste.” Pepper’s fingers curled around his arm. “And Christmas will be delightful. You know you have a standing invitation. Mrs. Hogan loves you.”

“That’s sweet, but Kurt already asked Lok and me to come home with him to Salem Center. What could I say?”

What they’d actually both said was a resounding (though, hopefully, polite), “*No!*”

Kurt, who had rapidly come to know them both only too well, had answered, laughing, “What, *meine Freunde*, you don’t wish to spend your holidays with fifty over-excited mutant children on a week-long sugar binge?” He grinned. “Logan *will* overindulge them with too many sweets, which he never had as a boy, though every year I forbid him.”

“Tempting as you make it sound...” Tony had said, and Kurt laughed again.

Now, Pepper gave Tony a slow, sweet kiss on the cheek. “You’re a good man, when you let yourself be. Just remember, your god of mischief is nearly as fragile as your mother’s mercury glass ornaments, the ones you suddenly turn all ‘*don’t touch, mine!*’ Mr. Caution about. It’s one thing to encourage your new friend, maybe nudge him a little to explore outside his comfort zone. Just don’t try to rush ahead, the way you *will* do. Listen to what Loki’s really telling you, and handle with care, Tony. Handle with care.”

“You think you need to remind me?”

Pep drilled him with another one her full-on Pepper looks, like her eyes left smoking holes in the vulnerable flesh of his body.

“In a word, Tony?” she answered, “Yes.”

After his talk with Pepper, Tony came home grumpy, but found himself totally unable to keep the *Bah, Humbug!* going in the long term. For one thing, Loki and Kurt were both decked out in Santa hats, looking like the world’s happiest (and hottest) Christmas elves. A giant evergreen stood in the middle of the penthouse, lights on, but otherwise waiting to be trimmed, its top stretching all the way up to the second floor. Somewhere nearby, mulled cider seemed to be simmering.

There was also Burl Ives singing “*Have a Holly, Jolly Christmas.*”

No bad mood could survive “*Have a Holly, Jolly Christmas,*” coupled with the welcoming smells of fir tree, apples and spices, reminding Tony of some other child’s warmer, happier Christmas season.

A season like the ones his mother had known as a kid, commemorated by her precious mercury-glass baubles, and the German blown-glass ornaments, each one significant for a year of her girlhood: the kitten, the teddy bear, the ballet dancer, the sailboat, the sleigh.

From the day after Thanksgiving on, these ornaments would sit in open boxes in the privacy of Maria’s dressing room, not grand enough to be allowed to hang on the Stark Family Christmas Tree, which was decked out each year by a different famous New York designer, chosen from proposals that started arriving as early as February, and also always ready for photo opportunities, tag-lined: “*Billionaire Industrialist Howard Stark, Enjoys Christmas at Home with His Loving Family.*”

There in the photos would be Tony, with unfashionably short, slicked-down hair and a sour expression, and Maria, in a dress so exquisite she made Princess Grace look like a frump, slim and beautiful and blissed out on Mother’s Little Helpers (which, as Mick Jagger could

have told you, was the era's colloquial term for Diazepam), or its big sister, Valium. Of course there would also be Howard, star of the show, and often Uncle Obie (who was really no one's uncle at all) as well, the two successful and self-satisfied men with generously-filled glasses in hand, most likely involved in some last minute wheeling-and-dealing as the servants finished packing for his mother and father's annual holiday jaunt abroad, departing Christmas Eve, back New Year's Eve for the company party, which Tony was too young to attend, except in a cameo appearance, hair painstakingly slicked again and wearing his best uncomfortable suit.

One week before that dreaded date, though (it being the night before Christmas), all through the vast house, the photogs and the lighting techs were departing, and Howard and Maria also, until the mansion stood nearly empty, blissfully quiet, so quiet Tony could hear the deep, accusing *Bong! Bong! Bong! Bong! Bong! Bong!* of the grandfather in Howard's study, telling him: "*It's six o'clock and... What are you up to, Anthony, you little shit?*"

But then Mrs. Cook would come to find him, released out of her stiff, white uniform by the master and mistress's departure. She'd look dowdy and doughy and also, somehow, supernaturally delightful in the kind of everyday clothes other boys' grandmothers wore, like some sort of Fairy Godmother of the Blessedly Ordinary.

"Tony, dear," she'd say (because during these sweet holiday respites they could be their real selves instead of "Cook" and "Master Anthony"), "There's macaroni and cheese for supper, and let's see if we can't find something for Christmas on the TV." Then he'd sit on a big cushion on the floor in Mrs. Cook's cozy quarters, and eat his dinner from a tray, Mrs. Cook's famous homemade mac 'n' cheese from her mama's old recipe, with no annoying vegetables to be gotten through, and a cholesterol count so high it might give even Steve pause. When Tony finished eating he'd help clear up the dishes, hand-washing them with mounds of bubbles and pink rubber gloves that reached nearly to his shoulders.

After everything was tidy, they'd return to the sofa, where he'd spread out the latest drawings he'd made of the inventions in his head across the coffee table. Mrs. Cook always admired them. She'd nod her head, and smile, listening intently to his explanations, which she never informed him were impractical, or childish, or stupid.

Instead she'd say, "What a wonderful mind you have, Tony, and such a brilliant imagination. My hope for you is that you will keep it for all of your lifetime."

Howard said servants were stupid people, or they wouldn't be servants, and that made it all right to treat them however you wanted to treat them. Tony sometimes wondered if wives and sons were also stupid people, even if they'd graduated *magna cum laude* from Sarah Lawrence, or had already been triple-promoted in school (as Howard liked to brag to his friends, with their dull children who made fun of Tony when they were forced into one another's company at parties). Tony never said anything in return. Saying things got him nowhere, he'd long since learned.

But Mrs. Cook wasn't stupid. For one thing, she was a wonderful cook, who invented brilliant recipes, and could make even most icky things taste delicious. For another, she had a bookcase full of fascinating books—not only fiction but books about physics, chemistry, natural history, and many other subjects. So what if she picked them up pre-read at the

second hand bookstore? The books on the bottom shelf, perfectly easy for Tony to get to, even had amazing pictures.

He'd never actually seen Howard or Maria pick up a book. Howard read reports, newspapers, and something that looked like really boring magazines, which his father called "journals." His mother put on records or stared blankly at the TV screen, though sometimes she'd flip through a gardening or a fashion magazine without really seeing the pages, and she wasn't allowed to choose her hobbies or her own clothes anyway. The magazines allowed her to escape her husband's demands as to why she was, "just sitting there, doing nothing."

Jarvis and Mrs. Cook, though, the so-called "stupid servants," read all the time. Jarvis took Tony on his trips to the library, and Mrs. Cook also regaled him with marvelous stories, about her life in New York during her younger years, about the late Mr. Cook's life as a merchant seaman, and all the countries he visited, and about her own childhood far up north on a farm in Alberta, Canada with her nine brothers and sisters--much better stories than Little House on the Prairie, even though she'd grown up in a little house. On the huge Canadian prairie. With no one else around for miles and miles and miles.

Some of Mrs. Cook's stories were funny, like the one about the time her mother was baking bread, thought she'd ruined the dough and chucked it down the outhouse to hide her error, only to have it rise to epic proportions in the summer heat until it oozed up like some giant, bubbly white monster from a Japanese horror movie, burst open the outhouse door and engulfed her entire garden. Some were exciting, like about almost getting lost forever coming home from school by horseback, when a sudden blizzard blew up, and there nothing around her in all the world, no shelter, no responsible adults, nothing but her older brother and sister, their wise old horse and the swirling, blowing, endless snow. Sometimes the stories even disturbed him, like the one that had gone: "*she stood beneath the huge purple sky, in the light of a million stars, threw her apron over her head, and screamed and screamed.*"

This last one was about Mrs. Cook's mother, and in the end it was a sympathetic story, a story about all mothers, maybe, and how sometimes, even for adults, even for mothers, the world just got too big, or maybe just too small. Mrs. Cook's mother, in the picture she'd once showed Tony, had strongly resembled a Budweiser Clydesdale but, when caught up in the story, he pictured her looking like Maria instead, a slim, fragile, lovely woman with an apron of exquisite white lace flung like a fine shroud over her face and her beautiful, long dark hair, swaying beneath a sky just as violently colored, and pitiless, and huge, as the one Mrs. Cook described.

"What are you thinking about, Tony?" Mrs. Cook asked him, as she tied back the white lace curtains. "You always think such deep thoughts!"

It wasn't a criticism. Mrs. Cook didn't fault him for having thoughts so big that sometimes it felt as if his body couldn't hold them.

"Just about my mom," Tony said.

“Come help me light the candle, then, and put it on the window ledge.” Mrs. Cook set a fat white candle, thick enough to burn all night, on a mismatched saucer (Tony knew it was mismatched because he’d accidentally broken the teacup that went with it). She struck the wooden match, but let Tony hold it to the wick, then--carefully, carefully, shielding the flame with his hand--carry the burning candle, in its saucer, to the window.

Mrs. Cook’s large, powerful hand, peppered all over with the marks of old, small burns, nudged the saucer gently to the exact center of the ledge “For dear Mrs. Maria, and all who travel through the dark of this night,” she said softly, “To warm and welcome them, and guide them safely home again.”

Those words might have been the closest thing to a prayer ever said in Tony’s hearing during his entire childhood. Even then he knew prayer was foolish, that it solved nothing—but sometimes it was also beautiful, like the soft words, in Latin and German, he’d sometimes hear through Kurt’s closed door when he walked by at night. Tony, who could kinda-sorta make his way along a little bit in German, if he really concentrated, understood that his friend prayed for peace in the world, for kindness and tolerance toward all, for healing for his friends, for freedom from the sins of judgment and impatience in himself, for clarity of understanding, and to always see the good, even where there was evil, as he wished that others would see that which was good in him, despite his appearance.

For some reason, there in Mrs. Cook’s shabby, tidy, comfortable quarters, Tony had wanted to cry, but didn’t. Sometimes, pausing outside Kurt’s door in the night, he felt the same way. Lying alone in his big bed in his pitch-dark room, he would cry--but, like prayer, it solved nothing, and usually just made him feel worse.

Every year, after the ceremony of the candle, there’d be *Mr. Magoo*, or *Rudolph*, or *The Grinch*, often humorously colored on Mrs. Cook’s wonky TV set, which had once made the entire Walton clan wear eye-searingly tomato-red overalls for the entirety of “*Christmas on Walton’s Mountain*,” both Tony and Mrs. Cook giggling every time a Walton said something particularly earnest or serious about the nobleness of poverty, because they looked like they’d just outfitted the entire huge family in special holiday overalls for the occasion, and that, as Mrs. Cook said, “surely had to cost a pretty penny!”

Tony, at this stage of the evening, would wrap up in the ugly-colored crocheted afghan (Bruce had once shared a theory with him that there was a law, unknown to any but older ladies, which forbade the making of such blankets in any attractive combination of colors—Mrs. Cook’s, Tony recalled, had prominently featured mustard yellow, tangerine, olive green and an odd shade of beige reminiscent of G.I. Joe’s plastic skin). He’d lean against her soft-but-somehow-still-firm body, her arm around his shoulders, feeling warm, still a little too full, but also as peaceful as he ever felt in his father’s mansion, convinced, for once, that he’d been a good boy after all, and that Santa would come to reward him for his virtue.

Later, Jarvis would join them, with Mrs. Cook breaking out her cranberry-glass goblets, along with bottles of icy-cold sparkling cider, and they would toast one another, as Charles Dickens might say, “*to their hearts’ content.*”

In those hours, and the few days that followed, Tony’s heart was always contented, even if it sometimes insisted on missing his mom painfully.

Tony never missed Howard at Christmas.

Santa always did come. His stocking, hung each year from the mantelpiece all on its own, overflowed. Sometimes, because of Maria having had a handful of more-lucid-than-usual moments, Santa brought fancy gifts like vast boxes of Lego, or Chemistry or Erector Sets with a million pieces, but more often, because of those two old servants, who bought his gifts out of their own wages, he brought very young Tony a series of soft, plushy friends, slightly-older Tony cap guns that looked like six-shooters from the Wild West, shiny with chrome and bearing faux-pearl handles and encased in stylish vinyl holders that looked just like real leather. In Tony's very last year of belief, Santa brought the best gift of all, a wonderfully realistic plastic astronaut helmet with a face-plate that slid open and waxed paper inside the mouthpiece that distorted his voice delightfully when he spoke.

They knew him so well, Jarvis and Mrs. Cook.

They knew him, as even Maria never could, because the misery of her marriage and life in that grand household had already consumed nearly everything alive in her.

“What in hell do you want from me?” a drunken Howard would sometimes yell, and Maria would only cringe, and weep, but Tony knew the answers to that one.

A life that isn't made up of lies.

Freedom to think my own thoughts.

Ordinary human dignity.

My son.

Howard, who by all evidence disliked him, who made Tony believe, every day of his young life, that he was worthless and stupid and *wrong*, was determined to hold onto him, the sole son and heir. Howard was also wily, he had security everywhere, eyes, it seemed, in every corner of the world. “You can go whenever you like,” he told his wife, “But you're not taking Anthony with you.”

And because of that, because of him, his mother wouldn't leave.

She was brave as she was able to be, kind as she was allowed to be, as loving as Howard—insanely selfish in every aspect of his life, as far as his son could tell—would ever let her be. He kept Maria on a very short leash.

Tony, who didn't pray anyway, would never have prayed to see the good in Howard. He hated the man. *Hated* him—and that was a large part of why he distrusted the tape that said his father loved and was proud of him, and why he'd eventually destroyed the damn thing.

He was Howard Stark's son, and often still found himself following his dictates in a mindless, conditioned, pained way, but he refused to fall for Howard's line. He didn't know if the tape was a pang of conscience on Howard's part, or just his father's attempt to make him

drink the Kool-Aid and believe the myth that Mr. Howard Stark was not only a genius, but a mighty fine fellow, but he was having none of it.

What was Howard's stupid tape set beside the trips to the library, the sparkling cider toasts, and the gift of Edwin Jarvis, Sr.'s watchmaker's tools? What was it set beside the candle in the window and lying curled up in an ugly afghan, warm and at peace, enclosed in the arm of someone who loved him? What was it, even, set beside his mother singing "*Woodstock*" to him in her angelic voice, or set beside a fragile, broken, lovely woman who fought her way out of crippling depression again and again to make sure he knew she cared for him?

He'd be willing to believe in hell, just to see Howard consigned to it, so (metaphorically, at least) to hell with him! Words meant nothing, actions everything, and he'd been taught about love by three of the most loving people who ever lived—four, if he counted his ever-patient Pep.

He intended to take that and run with it.

Tony snapped out of the past to realize that Loki was holding him, tightly and warmly, the sharp line of his jaw pressing into the top of Tony's head.

"Tony, my Tony, please don't be sad," he said. "Thor informs me today is *Jul*, and though I've forgotten the significance, Kurt and my brother both tell me I should celebrate, that I should make joyous traditions with those who care for me. And so I will." He let Tony loose, but still held his face, with great gentleness, between his slender, beautiful hands. "And so you will, also? Yes? Please?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Tony could see Kurt's warm, fangy grin. "*Vielleicht* you should look up?" he suggested.

Tony rolled his eyes upward. Dangling from the ceiling, and tied with a bright red ribbon, hung a bunch of mistletoe, pale green, with waxy white berries.

"You're kidding me, right?" Tony said.

"I cannot recall kissing anyone," Loki told him, very much not kidding. "And so I consulted both my own heart and the Æther for the proper ways. As I understand, this bundle of vegetation allows me license to kiss whomever I wish, unquestioned?" Flickerings of a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

"By 'The Æther' he means the internet," Kurt translated. "I'm going to check on dinner."

Loki wasn't one of those people with Kardashian-level lush lips (ugh). His were on the thinner side, and his mouth also could have been called slightly wide, conventionally speaking—but it was mobile, marvelously expressive, and suited him beautifully. His rare smiles could light up a room. When he kissed Tony, it was sweet and soft—but not too soft. It was everything he'd ever wanted from every kiss he'd ever received, full of tenderness and passion and the deepest regard for his feelings.

When it ended, they stood watching each other, Loki's face full of so much emotion it was almost painful to see. His hands dropped to his sides.

"Perhaps I have been foolish, or too forward?" he suggested. "Even given the mistletoe?"

Tony touched his own lips with his fingertips, still feeling the imprint of his companion's warmth on his skin. "Um, actually, Lok, it was perfect. Two thumbs up for your research."

"It wasn't just research," Loki said, with one of those extremely hard-to-read looks. "It was me."

"I know, baby, I know," Tony answered, taking his hand. "You do realize, right, that you're kind of wonderful? I'm fully aware it's been no time at all, but you're... that is... you're really special to me. I wanted you to know."

"You should also be aware," Loki answered. "You are of great specialness to me, as well, Tony."

"So, there we are," Tony finished lamely.

"There we are," Loki echoed, giving him, from beneath his Santa hat, the most heart-melting smile in the entire history of heart-melting smiles. It would have left both the Winter Warlock and the Frost Miser in steaming puddles of love-struck goo. It made Tony want to burst into song and dance like Fred Astaire, but he restrained himself. Barely.

"Loki," he said, "I know I'm kind of an idiot, but I think it might actually be more than that. Seriously."

"Very well," Loki answered—and by that point his grin possibly outshone both the sun and the moon. Together, were such a thing possible, and add in a few stars for good measure. "That being the case, have I your permission to begin to develop strong feelings for you?"

He said it so earnestly, so sincerely, those crimson eyes of his wide as saucers, Tony didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

To his total surprise, and total embarrassment, not for one second meaning to do either, he did both.

"Tony! Oh, Tony!" Loki said, frantically, wiping Tony's wet cheeks with his fingers. "Have I pained or upset you? I know and understand so little, and never meant the least injury. Please, please, take it only as my foolishness, and don't be sad, for Thor says we're not allowed to be sad at *Jul*, only joyful. Only please—and forgive, again, my pleading--do give me my permission, or I shall be sad too."

For an answer, Tony reached up (why did Loki have to be so goddamn tall?) and pulled the former god's face down to his, kissing Loki long and deeply, and putting into it everything he had to give.

Even when the kiss ended, they stood holding each other, like two figures frozen still in the middle of a slow dance, his hands on Loki's waist, Loki's arms on his shoulders. He couldn't

bear to let his god go. Not now. Not ever.

“Here’s my answer,” Tony whispered at last, stretching on tip-toe to reach Loki’s ear, “Be happy, my strange, sweet, wonderful, friend. Be joyful. And on that note, the answer to your question is yes—provided I can also ask permission to maybe fall deeply, deeply in love with your fine self? Over a suitable time period, of course. With courting. I’ve always wanted to court someone. It sounds difficult but very rewarding.”

“Forever joking.” Loki frowned down at him, looking stern and obviously deeply offended—but he couldn’t hold it, he clearly just couldn’t. He laughed out loud, throwing back his head, and dragged Tony close again, bestowing on him one of those hard, messy, passionate kisses that promised some very interesting moments ahead.

“Some god of lies and mischief you are, new boyfriend,” Tony told him. “You think you fooled me for a minute there?”

“I did!” Loki protested. “I read terror in the whole of your countenance!”

“As if!” Tony countered, and might even have teased Loki further--except the room had started to smell warmly, nostalgically, deliciously of macaroni and cheese, and a smiling Kurt was calling them in to dinner.

Insomnia

Chapter Summary

Loki, nervous about the next day's trip outside the tower, can't sleep.

Chapter Notes

Crazy, busy times! So sorry about the huge delay.

Natasha's dream takes place in Budapest. Of course. Because she and Clint remember Budapest very differently.

Kurt--who knew his ways, even those Loki didn't much care to admit to--had told him he ought to try his best to sleep that night, and not stay awake until all hours wandering the penthouse, or drawing, or holding discourse with his dear friend the Ghost in the Wall, as he often would do, thinking no one but J. aware of his habits.

But Kurt knew--naturally he knew--and smiled down at him as Loki settled himself into bed, drawing the covers up under Loki's chin, smoothing them with his strange-but-lovely blue hands. It was a foolish and a childish thing, Loki realized, that he should require such care, that someone must shepherd him through the routines with which he ended his day to keep him from becoming caught up and lost in time and his own thoughts, that he should need another to soothe him and tuck him in before he slept.

And yet he did need it. He did. For reasons he could neither understand nor explain.

"It's a big day tomorrow," Kurt said, looking into Loki's face with both great tenderness and a touch of humor. "I know you're very excited."

This was true, Loki did feel great excitement, having so often looked down from on high upon the bright and beautiful lights of the great city and been entranced by their glitter--but his heart also contained an emotion much like terror, if not terror itself.

Amongst the windblown scraps of memory his mind still held, the greatest number by far pertained to his not-so-long-ago life outside the safety of the tower. He knew that he had been cold, hungry, frightened, dirty (how he hated to be dirty!), and knew also that those Midgardian strangers who had not regarded him with indifference had looked upon him with their own form of fear, and even hatred.

He was so unpleasing (to any but Tony, it seemed), and so odd in his appearance, how could they not?

How Loki wished he could be like his brother! It was perfectly possible for Thor to be an otherworlder and yet be regarded with welcome. Thor was all the men of Midgard wished to be, and more, and all that the women of Midgard desired--so tall, so strong, so well-shaped of face and form, so golden-haired and clear of eye, his manner easy, his smile friendly and full of charm.

No man of Midgard would wish to look like Loki, tall, thin and gawky, with his inhuman red eyes and his curling horns. To them, he would resemble a devil, and devils (he knew from certain films he'd watched late at night in Clint's company), haunted many of the humans' darkest dreams.

Beyond that, they would never take him for a godlike being of another world, a shining golden being like Thor, but as a mutant, human like them, yet not like them, seen by many as lesser, debased, monstrous.

Kurt did not tell him these things, neither did Tony, nor J., but such thoughts hung everywhere in the air, ripe for the reading. More than that, Loki knew such thoughts to be base, and untrue, for Kurt was a mutant, and there was no one on earth more pleasing to his eyes, or kinder, or truer of spirit. But still, the shiver of apprehension tingled constantly up and down his spine, and he felt so much safer inside, enclosed in the secure, small world of the tower.

Why must he leave? Why must he ever leave? The tower held all he needed.

"All will be well, *lieber Freund*," Kurt told him softly, stroking Loki's hair back from his face with the gentlest of touches. Loki's curls had grown prodigiously, until they were nearly as long as Kurt's own unruly curls, hiding the roots of his horns entirely. His friend's touch, velvet against his skin, coaxed Loki's eyes to close, even though the impulse to spring up from his bed, and run, and hide himself in a safe place where he couldn't be discovered, remained stronger within him than the need to drift gently into sleep.

Loki let Kurt believe him to be sleepy, though, so that his friend would not think him rebellious (a glimmering of a time when he had, once, been rebellious in all things flashing momentarily through his head). Kurt shut off the bedside light and moved softly from the room, leaving the door open a little to the brightness of the corridor.

Loki never liked the room to be altogether dark. He'd wake disoriented, not knowing where he lay, and panic, and often Kurt would have to come and quiet him again.

He hated this weakness. What if, someday, his dear friend tired of it, and of him?

He wondered, too, why it was that sleep now held so little appeal. Was it because he never dreamed--or at least never remembered his own dreams? With so little left of his former life to feed them, did the dreams merely flare and flicker out before they were truly born, too fragile for his memory, weak as it now was, to hold onto?

Loki didn't know. He'd tried to ask Dr. McCoy just the other day, during his usual check-up, whether his mind had been irreparably damaged, or if it would someday be right again, at least in the days going forward.

His physician, who Loki had come to like and trust greatly, only made grunting noises, and stuttering noises, paced the narrow confines of the infirmary with an abbreviated version of his usual great strides, stared intently, for a time, out the window, then at last rested his heavy hand on Loki's shoulder, pretending to look into Loki's face while not meeting his eyes.

Loki understood his meaning. It seemed as good an answer as he was likely to receive, and Loki didn't hold the lack of blunt-spoken words against his doctor, who he knew found himself unable to speak only because he cared for Loki, well, and truly, and kindly. He'd kept enough wit to know the truth of the waking nightmare he suffered from time to time, drawn from the images his friend the Ghost had never wanted to show him, but had revealed to Loki at his insistence, of the white worm grown fat on his thoughts, his past, his emotions.

He tried to come to terms, daily, with possessing only those scraps of memory, and thought he had, for the most part, succeeded. Trying to learn, trying to do, came harder. Some tasks Loki attempted were done with infantile ease, others--that seemed equally simple--appeared determined to remain forever beyond his reach. J., his Ghost and ever his defender, bought shoes for him from the Aether that slipped on, or closed with Velcro, because the ones with laces defied him, for all Kurt's talk of bunnies and their bedamned, uncooperative ears.

Loki spoke well now, drew well, formed his letters perfectly, enjoyed nearly all stories, even those of complexity, when he heard them aloud--yet when he tried to read for himself, whether in a book or upon the StarkPad his dear Tony had given him as a gift, the letters swam about and made his head ache. J., pillar of his universe, read to him constantly, explaining all the concepts or arcane references Loki failed to comprehend, discussing the stories with him as they went along, teaching him much, in the process of Midgard and its ways.

For some days Loki feared this would become tedious to his friend, but J. assured him most sincerely that the opposite was true, saying only, after (in a voice that seemed to tremble slightly), "You're the only one, Loki. The only one."

Loki wasn't exactly certain what J. meant, and sensed it wouldn't be right to ask him for clarification, but he read the great feeling in the Ghost's tone clearly.

"How are you tonight, J.?" Loki asked in his quietest voice, in case Kurt was still awake and might hear him.

"Very well, but aren't you meant to be sleeping, you miscreant?" the Ghost asked, pretending to scold when truly he was teasing, in a kind and gentle way, as he was always gentle with Loki.

"I did try, J." Loki protested.

"Try a little longer--lying quietly, without speaking--and then, if you still can't sleep, I might--perhaps--indulge you."

"I ought to go down to the living room--if I'm unable to sleep in the end," Loki said. "So as not to disturb the others." He paused. "And perhaps you might light the tree for me?" He had loved the foresty smell of the great evergreen, and the myriad white lights, like the starlight that shone over the tower, now glistening and glowing over the baubles and crystals and tinsel.

Even more, he'd enjoyed curling up on the sofa when the last of Tony's friends had gone, happy and weary, enclosed in the warmth of Tony's arms.

"That might certainly be managed," J. replied, with a soft chuckle and, oh, such sweetness of spirit.

Loki had, for some little time now, begun to be able to read emotion from the Ghost, not merely in his tone, or in the words he spoke, but in odd little crackling shivers, much like the shivers he'd first felt when he began to read those mortals who--like himself--moved armored in flesh, rather than flying always through wires and Aether and air as the Ghost did.

J.'s emotions felt different from mortal emotions, yes--yet not so very different.

"You are very kind to me, J.," Loki found himself saying suddenly. "I care for you greatly, as I care for Kurt and Tony and my brother. And not only because you've agreed to indulge me by lighting again the beautiful tree."

J. laughed outright at his words. "As long as it's not *only* for that, Loki!"

By which Loki knew he truly meant, *I care for you also, silly old bear*--which were words of endearment spoken by the mortal boy Christopher Robin to his round little friend Pooh in the first book J. ever read to him.

J. always picked such lovely books, books that even when full of foolishness were also full of wisdom. Loki treasured each one, replaying their words in his head again and again.

"Bless you, J.," Loki breathed, scarcely above a whisper.

"Bless you also, dear boy," J. answered, in the kindest voice that could be imagined, the voice of a perfectly loving father.

Loki lay still in the warm and comfortable bed, letting his body loosen and relax, his mind drift out into the tower around him.

He began to tally thoughts, as he did every night, to account for everyone who ought to have been at home there, and make certain all were safe and well. This particular awareness remained with him always. He simply knew, at any moment of the night or day, who was present or not present amongst those who regularly occupied this fortress of Tony's, down to those who came often to the deli on the ground floor, or the very least of Tony's minions.

Kurt said he ought to call these, "employees," but because Tony laughed with genuine delight every time Loki said "minions," Loki persisted in his use of the word, Tony's delight delighting him in turn.

He knew the dreams of each, their thoughts, their emotions.

Bruce dreamed of monsters, always--not monsters that were big and green, but wiry monsters, tall and thin and wearing spectacles, with white coats that flapped around them like bony wings.

Neither Loki nor Bruce understood the threats these creatures bellowed, they only knew the threats were fearful. Always fearful. Always.

Bruce, the best friend of Tony, in the daylight hours was quiet and kind to Loki, but in the depths of his heart, Loki knew, distrusted him. He carried the deep sorrow and often-terrible anger of his sleep with him wherever he went.

Bruce wished badly for children, but feared to sire them, both because of his other self and his father's blood within him, the monster-father he'd killed while wearing the mask of The Hulk, both selves knowing exactly what they did.

Bruce told himself he felt guilty. But he didn't.

Not even for a minute.

Steve dreamed of being a boy, a healthy, hardy boy like a smaller version of the man he'd become, who ran through city streets colored black-and-white, as in the old films Kurt (who greatly admired an actor of such times, called Errol Flynn) had played for him. A second, dark-haired boy with a bright grin accompanied him, as a third boy, wan and frail, watched from the distance, never welcomed into their games.

Snow began to fall within this monochromatic world, and when it was deep the two strong boys scooped it up with their hands (the weak boy drifting after them like a spirit) and flung it at one another, laughing with utter abandon, utter joy, until the moment the dark-haired boy stumbled against Steve in their play, and Steve caught him. They held each other close, perfectly still, perfectly quiet, until the dream dissolved into a river of grief for things done and left undone, for people lost, for a world that would never be again.

Loki wanted to help Steve, he truly did. He wanted to comfort him, but how could he know the words to say, or even how to reach the brave Captain who didn't care for him?

Steve had been very kind, once, when he'd taken Loki from the streets that surely would have destroyed him. Furthermore, Steve was, unquestionably, a very good man. Yet, now and then, the good man did questionable things. He found it difficult to see, with clarity, the many shades of gray that lay between absolute white and absolute black. He found it difficult to possess different thoughts about those things he'd labeled "good" within his mind, when they were revealed as not so good after all. No more could he forgive those, like Loki himself, he'd labeled "wicked," even when they would not be wicked again. Like Kurt, he believed in the strange mortal man-god, but his belief was all about judgment, and being found wanting, while Kurt could see a changed heart, and easily and readily forgive.

Steve made Loki feel dirty inside, dirty and wanting, unworthy and--most of all--sad, drawn down with sadness.

Loki left his head quickly.

Natasha, in her dreams, fought against vampires in a city of narrow crooked streets and buildings old enough to date back to the middle ages. She possessed a satchel of quite a number of sharp wooden stakes and dispatched the creatures smartly, with reckless abandon and without the least fear. Each time Natasha staked through a heart, a vampire exploded into a great gout of smoke and ash, and she would laugh with glee at her own prowess. Her heart a hero's heart, unswayed by fear, though unstinting in affection.

Clint, naturally, fought beside her, clearly marveling at the strength and skill of his friend, but also, it seemed, at her utter denial of what it was they faced.

"It exploded! It fucking exploded!" he'd exclaim. "What do you think caused that, Nat? Land mines? Grenades?"

Loki liked Natasha very much, for her cleverness and her courage, her capacity for toughness, but also her ability to be loyal and gentle and kind. He felt oddly shy of her, and hoped she would someday like him in return.

He thought she might. He hoped she might.

Loki didn't look at Thor's dreams, for his brother (though he loved Lady Jane and his friends of Midgard), often felt homesick for Asgard and those he'd left behind in that place he called the Golden City.

Thor's dreams were ever dangerous, full of images of their lost mother, their cruel (or, at times, falsely kind) father, of events, betrayals, the sorrows of centuries.

Thor's mind, loving brother that he was, seemed dangerous ground indeed, and Loki would not enter it willingly. He could take what he needed, instead, by watching his brother's face, or his bright blue eyes. He read with ease that Thor strongly disliked to be thought dull, or mocked by the others of his team when they found his ways strange. He tried to learn as best he could how things were done on Midgard, yet they often came to him only with difficulty.

Loki watched his brother, day after day, seek to veil his thoughts from his touch, never realizing that Loki himself strived equally hard not to see what they held, that he, on no account, wished to know what had come before, or what he had been. He saw that his brother loved him beyond anything he would admit, beyond even that very different love he held for Lady Jane, that this second chance they had been given was the answer to all his hopes, and that his greatest fear remained that either Loki would fall ill again, in his fragile new body, or that Loki would somehow return to the cruel and thoughtless being he had been.

"I will not, my brother. I will not," Loki whispered into Thor's unbroached dreams, but his brother's sleep was, as ever, weighty and thunderous, and he doubted Thor heard him.

Clint did not sleep, but the touch of his mind against Loki's was a comfortable, usual thing, the touch he'd first known and the one Loki never had to search for, that hummed away contentedly, always, on the edge of his awareness.

Clint was kind to him when he didn't need to be. Kind when, Loki suspected, Clint had every reason not to be kind, because he'd hurt the archer in some way he no longer understood. But Clint was kind, because he saw the wreckage within Loki's mind even more clearly than he did.

"Can't sleep, sugarbeet?" Clint asked. He was playing upon an electronic piano, wearing headphones, which made the music loud within his head.

"I may be overly excited about tomorrow's activities. Is Phil snoring again?" His question had two purposes. The first, to show sympathy over Clint's interrupted rest. The second, to determine whether Clint would allow him to slip downstairs, to eat junk food and play Phil's vinyl records, and perhaps to receive another lesson in how to play upon the piano himself. It was one of the things he seemed to manage easily, and nearly all music gave him great joy, even the raucous Heavy Metal Tony held so dear.

Clint laughed. "Nice try, but a little bird told me you're supposed to stay in bed. Get JARVIS to read you a bedtime story instead."

"You have seen through my subterfuge."

Clint laughed again. "Tell you what, kiddo, when I get back from the farm, we'll have a sleepover. All the chocolate chip cookies you can eat, and we'll see how far we make it through the history of rock 'n' roll, okay?"

"Clint?" There were words Loki wanted to say, but he didn't know how to phrase them, wasn't quite sure what he wanted to declare--or did he mean ask?

"Don't apologize," Clint said suddenly. "Just don't. You wouldn't even know what you're apologizing for. It's meaningless."

"Oh," Loki said softly. "I..."

Clint hadn't sounded angry, merely... Perhaps, weary? As if this was a question he himself had struggled with over many sleepless nights. "You're a hell of a nice kid. The other guy's dead, or good as. Don't keep bringing it up, Loki. It doesn't help either of us."

Just like that, Clint's mind shut to him, and Loki hastily reeled back his own consciousness, feeling guilty, off-balance, but most of all sad. Clint's head was usually one of his comfortable places, but he didn't know if it ever would be again, if he would ever again blithely approach him on that level. He found his hands were shaking, and clenched them together under the covers.

"Sir is still awake," the Ghost said softly, just above Loki's head. "You might seek him out."

"No one wants to talk to me," Loki said. "It... I violate their privacy."

"You're frightened about tomorrow," the Ghost said. "It's why you can't sleep. Don't be petulant, Loki, or work yourself into a state. Look for sir. He'll make you feel better."

Loki sent out the slightest feeler of consciousness, too small for anyone but himself to detect.

J. Was correct: Tony did not asleep. He occupied his workshop, and spoke often aloud, half to the Ghost and half to himself, the wonderful, rapid flicker of numbers dancing within his head, his wires and bits and pieces of metal scattered everywhere.

Conquering his momentary mood, Loki set a loving thought neatly within his mind, a small gift for the one he'd begun to like so completely the emotion sometimes felt too great for his weakened heart.

Clever Tony found the thought at once. "So, you're awake?" he asked. "Thought you'd be resting up for the big day."

"I'll sleep again soon," Loki answered.

"Liar, liar, pants on fire," Tony told him--one of those odd Midgardian sayings without real meaning. "Your brain sounds like it's had five cups of coffee. Want me to come upstairs?"

He meant the words entirely, but they also appeared slightly tinged with regret. Clearly he had been chasing down an idea, and begun to catch up to it.

"You are inventing," Loki told him, with the a touch of his own regret, because he would truly have liked to wrap Tony up in his arms again, perhaps even kiss him, with or without benefit of the mistletoe, yet he also regretted damming the stream of Tony's thoughts. "You must continue at it until the point at which it seems wiser to stop. I will have a shower, then amuse myself a little, then rest."

"I love you," Tony said, though he didn't mean to.

"And I love you," Loki told him, fully intending each word, and gently closed the door between them.

Sometimes he imagined that other Loki, that white-skinned, clever, cruel Loki (though in his fancy that Loki was never cruel to him, at most a little sardonic), watching over his shoulder, asking him, "What are you doing?"

"Trying," he told the other Loki. "It's very difficult, and I often feel lost, and even more often, confused."

White Loki shook his head, and gave his taut, too-bright smile. "We've felt that way most of our life," he said. "Don't let it bother you too much." Above that bright, bright smile, Loki saw, White Loki's eyes appeared sad, and dark with pain, and it made Loki feel sad again too.

Though he knew, in a vague way, that the other Loki had done terrible things, he wanted to forgive him, and be kind to him, the way Kurt was always kind to him, with no questions asked, and no reservations.

The lift groaned and whooshed in its tube. Seconds later, the door to Loki's bedroom flew open, yellow light from the corridor flooding in, Tony's shape outlined in the brightness.

"My baby's sad. Why is my baby so sad?" He crossed the small room in a couple strides, bouncing up on the bed beside Loki. He smelled of hot metal and burning things, and his hair

stood up every which way.

Loki switched on the bedside light in order to see him better. "No, not sad," Loki answered. "The other Loki is sad. I wish to forgive him, and be kind to him, the way you're kind to me, and J. and Kurt are kind to me, always."

Tony watched him for a time with his warm and clever brown eyes, as Loki studied each line of his face in return, equally warm and clever, and full of mischief and past sorrows.

"Okey-dokey," Tony said at last, not for a second questioning the presence of the other Loki. "You know what? I think that's just what he needs. A true friend, who doesn't judge him."

He twisted around until he was sitting side by side with Loki, His arm slipping over to circle Loki's waist. "So, tell me--have you been awake all night? It's past three in the morning, and someone I could mention has an exciting day ahead."

Loki rested a hand over his stomach, realizing it was filled up with that nervous, restless feeling Tony referred to as "butterflies." "Tony, I..." He couldn't go on, still filled with apprehension, and with the fear that seemed to amount nearly to terror, but it all seemed so foolish he couldn't bear to admit to such emotions aloud, not even to one he held so dear.

"Would it help if I tagged along?" Tony asked. "I could stay with you every minute, and I'll even promise a total lack of snark for the duration. Best behavior only. I can actually behave, when I try."

Somehow, he'd had managed to get the covers pulled back and Loki nudged beneath them once again. He felt very tired suddenly, as if his entire body had transmogrified all at once into lead.

"Join me?" he said softly. "Please join me?"

"You mean tomorrow?" Tony asked. "Or..."

"Both, I think," Loki answered. "Yes. Both."

A little awkwardly, getting rather tangled in sheets, Tony wriggled his way in beside him. He lay half on his side, one warm, strong, small hand rubbing circles over Loki's belly until the last of the butterflies were soothed away and he felt only sleepy, pleased, cared for.

"I love the tree," Tony murmured suddenly.

"I love it also," Loki answered. "It is a thing of great beauty."

"I love it every year," Tony continued. "You're right, it is beautiful, and it makes me think of my mom, and..." He stroked the lines and angles of Loki's face softly with his rough fingertips. "Tonight I watched your face, watching it be trimmed, and god... Everyone keeps warning me and warning me, 'Be careful, Tony. Don't screw up, Tony.' And I'll try, Loki. I'll really, really try, because if I do mess up, if I do blow things with you, I don't know what I'll do. I'll be wrecked. Possibly beyond repair."

Loki pulled him close, wrapping Tony in his arms, Tony's spiky hair, sharp with gel, tickling beneath his chin. He no longer felt nervous, or frightened, merely heavy with sleepiness, and with contentment.

"Tonight you will lie with me," Loki said, "And I will stay with you always. And if you 'screw up,' as you say, my love, then I will forgive you, as you've forgiven me, and so we will be happy." He held Tony, as Tony's arms also slipped around him, and in that closeness and that warmth sleep found him easily, carrying Loki to the deepest rest he'd known for days.

Fa La F**king La

Chapter Summary

Loki leaves the tower to become more familiar with the big world. A chance encounter with Steve leads to hints of less-than-savory dealings where mutants are concerned.

Chapter Notes

Loki's "*Life is pain...*" quote is from *The Princess Bride*.

Starbucks Chestnut Praline Lattes are crack-in-a-cup. Nutty, creamy crack-in-a-cup.

Jadis, the White Witch, is the villain of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*.

In the dressing vs. stuffing debate, the two are exactly the same substance, but one (dressing) is cooked outside the bird, while the other (stuffing) is cooked inside.

Coming up from what Tony called "The Bat Cave" (but which was clearly, in truth, merely the underground garage where he kept his vast collection of shining, colorful cars, not a home to bats at all--curious, Loki had looked closely and detected not the least sign of their habitation, as depicted on the nature programs he and J. often watched together) via Tony's own secret side-door, the lot of them nearly collided with Captain America—at least, Loki guessed the broad-shouldered man standing directly in their path must be his once savior and current detractor. He appeared different out of his red-white-and-blue uniform, smaller, and perhaps, as he stared up into the sky, a little lost, ragged flecks of gray-white snow catching briefly on his fair hair.

"Cap," Tony said, in his neutral voice, civil, yet clearly not best pleased to see his teammate. His face, also, held no readable expression, though Loki read the epithet, *Asshat!* clearly enough within his mind.

Given that the timbre of the Captain's own thoughts seemed startled, wary, yet not particularly hostile, Loki reined himself back from what Kurt had once referred to as "fight-or-flight response," though he couldn't entirely stop himself from breathing a little too fast, his heart from beating harder, the memory of their last awful meeting still too fresh in his mind to allow him to react otherwise.

Kurt, who as far as he'd been aware scarcely knew the Captain, or knew him only as everyone knew him--as a face and form on the television--surprised Loki by speaking first. "Ah, good morning, Captain Rogers. *Fröhliche Weihnachten.*"

Loki rarely saw the warrior within his gentle and kind-natured friend, but he saw it now, in the squaring of Kurt's shoulders, the tensing of his muscles, the stiffening of his spine. He knew Kurt could, and would, fight with something beyond the fierceness of a tiger to defend those he cared for. Beyond that, he sensed Kurt's words had been carefully chosen--on the shallowest level, they were merely how one said "Merry Christmas" in Kurt's homeland, which he spoke of as "*Deutschland*" and Tony called "Germany," and that the greeting was appropriate to the season.

Beyond that, though, on a deeper level, one that possessed layers and layers of meaning, Kurt (who was not above a little mischief of his own now and then, though Loki honestly wondered if this was mischief, or some other thing, something he did not understand), had used his native tongue with intent.

The German words appeared to cause Captain Rogers a small twinge of... something. Nervousness, perhaps? Worry? Enmity? Again, the Captain's response held levels of meaning beyond Loki's comprehension.

Captain Rogers, Loki realized, felt suspicion of Kurt, and of all his countrymen, for the German people had been his sworn foes in the time he left behind. He felt, also, a certain suspicion of mutantkind--not an unkindness, necessarily, yet a lack of comfort in their presence that reached deep into the roots of who he was, what he believed, the sometimes-too-simple view he held of this vast and often complicated Realm of Midgard.

Could Kurt--who as far as Loki could determine would never willingly make an enemy--truly be saying to the Captain, *As the enemy of my friend, you are also my enemy?* The effort touched him in an odd way, as the things Kurt said and did often touched him in strange, small ways—as if Kurt had said to Captain Rogers directly, "Who will you call your foe today, mein Freund? Every exile from another land? Every stranger who falls outside the circle of that which you deem normal? Every being who differs from yourself?"

Kurt stood before the Captain, apparently smiling and confident, despite his squared shoulders, casually handsome in his jeans and red jumper. At the same time, his tail moved in a serpentine back-and-forth motion, as a cat's might move when it was quite displeased, yet another clue that Kurt might not be quite so easy in his mind as he outwardly seemed.

"*Herr Wagner,*" Captain Rogers answered, in a tone even blander than Tony's. "I didn't expect to see you... er, all of you out today."

"We thought we'd chance an outing," Kurt answered, matching the almost-pleasantness of the Captain's speech. "Given that hate crimes against my kind—disappointingly, I know, to some you call friends--are recently outlawed. Even random, unexplained disappearances are now against the law, I'm given to understand." Kurt didn't sound pleasant at all, suddenly, when he said those words, in fact he sounded angry. Kurt never sounded angry. That he did in this moment made Loki's stomach tighten and a shiver that had little to do with the outdoor chill run down his spine.

"I..." Captain Rogers began. "That is, I was not... not involved in those plans. Not personally. And the children have been returned to your... school, haven't they?"

"Oh, *ja*," Kurt answered, in a soft, almost dangerous voice that hissed quietly over the *esses*. "*Ja*, most of them have been returned to our 'school,' as you say. *Most* of them. And most of those returned to us have *mostly* healed. Those children I comfort when they suffer in their dreams. We are not all terrorists, you realize, despite what you may have been told. Certainly not the little ones, and not those of us who try as we can to guard them from harm."

"But you could be," Captain Rogers answered quietly.

"*Ach*, I suppose I might. But then so might you, *lieber* Captain. So might you. So might anyone alive. All depends on intent, wouldn't you say? We should all maintain level heads, and be wise where we choose to make enemies."

"Dammit, Christmas shopping!" Pepper exclaimed, and a flash came to Loki of the *Valkyrja*, brilliant across the sky on their white steeds, with their bright armor and sun-gilded hair, their voices that rang to the Nine Realms.

Then the flash was gone--not even a true memory, really, only another picture in his head, without context or time--leaving only the towering buildings of Manhattan and the grayish snow, and Pepper indignant beside him.

"Deck the halls!" she continued. "Tis the season to be jolly! Joy to the world!"

"Fa la fucking la," Tony muttered, though Loki suspected that he, with his more-sensitive-than-human hearing, might have been the only one to have heard the nonsensical words.

Though Tony mostly forbade him to do so, not knowing how little Loki could actually shut out of his head without the most draining and concentrated effort, he sneaked a more focused peek or two into the minds around him, skirting the bonfire of Pepper's ire, Tony's smoldering disgust, the small, hot-burning ember of Kurt's fury, the whirring sparks of thought inside Captain Rogers's mind as his ideas waged war amongst themselves.

"Cognitive dissonance," J. called that state of being—a state Loki knew briefly himself as he fell into a sense-memory of pain, his battered body being raised from the rough carpeting that rasped his skin through torn clothing, of warm breath against his ear as a voice spoke words of comfort to him that he couldn't actually hear.

"Of course," Kurt said softly. "Pepper, I apologize."

"I must thank you again, Captain," Loki found himself saying, "That I am even present to enjoy today's outing."

Captain Rogers stared at him for a moment, jaw slightly dropped, the whirl inside his head so intense now it made Loki feel slightly sick.

"You heading out for a train, Cap?" Tony interjected, having obviously decided to spread salt over the flames rather than fan them higher. "Wouldn't want to miss that, right? Give our

teamly best to Sam and the fam, okay?"

Captain Rogers turned then, and left them without farewells, somehow managing to make his deliberate walk more closely resemble a pursuit by hellhounds.

One of the films Loki watched with Clint had contained hellhounds, which terrified him despite their invisibility--or perhaps because of that quality. He'd spent a day or so trying to draw a hound that would equal his terror, trying to capture the beast's true form in his imagination, but only one drawing came close, and Kurt had frowned when he'd seen it, then sighed, so Loki drew no more.

Kurt, of course, hadn't been angry about the drawing, only concerned about Loki's state of mind.

Now Loki worried about his friend. What children had he spoken of--some of his charges from the school? Who had taken them, and what had become of them, and what could Captain Rogers--who was a good man, Loki knew he was a good man--have had to do with such a thing? He must have done something, been in some way responsible, or calm-tempered Kurt would not have been so furious.

Frowning, he watched the tension slowly leave his dear friend's shoulders, trying, as it did, to read the content of Kurt's thoughts--but Kurt, when he made the effort, could shutter his mind better than anyone he knew, and Loki caught little beyond his slow-ebbing fury.

He wished, suddenly, that he had a home, a true home, and that the home wasn't Midgard or Asgard or *Jötunnheimr*, but some kinder place--or, barring that, he wished again that he was not required to leave the safe and comfortable tower, as everyone around him seemed to him to do, when he hadn't the least desire to step outside its doors.

He truly wanted only that smaller world, the finite number of minds that bombarded his senses, the sensible order his wise J. brought always to their home.

Loki wished, too, that he himself was not so very strange, or that his brother had come with them on this day, instead of flying half a world away to be with his Lady Jane. He hated himself, that he felt such an impulse to hide behind his powerful brother, to have his brother protect him, because the very presence of such a wish within his mind made him a pathetic, weak, puling thing, as did his wish to remain ever within the tower.

"Life is pain, princess," he quoted to himself, *"Anyone who tells you otherwise is selling something."*

Only, Loki did not understand why it must be so, and it required all his courage not to turn and flee for the safety of indoors, stopped solely by the knowledge that he couldn't disappoint Lady Pepper, who had planned this day, or show himself as entirely spineless and useless before the ones he held dear.

He must, it occurred to him, from this moment forward, also respect Kurt's need, and the need of the children within Kurt's care. He must show himself well and strong, and must lean upon his friend no longer.

He must, Loki now knew, allow Kurt to go home, though the loss tore at his heart, because to do so was the right thing, the unselfish thing, and he was not a child. He must stand on his own, as a man.

At times Loki experienced so many emotions at once he didn't know how to feel. Was there a single way one was meant to feel? How could he admire Captain Rogers, and feel grateful for his kindness, yet trust him not at all? Could he love Tony, now, with nearly the whole of his heart, yet still fear and dislike some of the words that issued from his lips when he'd enjoyed too much drink? Why, too (the events of the night making their bitter return within his ever-faulty memory), had he foolishly believed that he would always be welcomed where Clint lived, when that was not true at all?

Their encounter with the Captain, brief as it was, rattled Loki, crushing the buoyant optimism with which he'd attempted to greet this day, throwing him once more into the anger he'd felt against himself as he'd flown away from the archer in the dark hours, swift as an arrow from the bow. He knew now that he'd entirely misunderstood both his welcome and their relationship, and had shamed himself by forcing Clint, normally a patient and good-natured fellow, to order him away from his home. The rebuffal stung, and made Loki feel stupid, and callow, and inept, maimed in some part of himself he had not known he had been maimed.

What did Tony laughingly call such a lack? "Socially awkward?" He was socially awkward, Tony sometimes even said so, aloud and in company.

White Loki, ever by his shoulder now, shook his head at him in sardonic sympathy. "My poor boy," he said, "Why should it matter to *us* what others say?"

Such things wouldn't matter to White Loki. He might be morally reprehensible (Kurt's term), snide, and filled with his own wicked sense of mischief, but he was never at a loss, never (as Tony would also say) clueless.

White Loki would have known he had worn out his welcome. He would have known better than to seek peace where he was not invited. He should have known, also, that he'd already taken too much of Kurt's time and energy--and perhaps Tony's as well.

How did one know? When did one learn these things, understood by every one of his companions? When was one taught each unspoken rule of emotion and reaction?

Loki only knew he understood nothing, that even those rules he believed he'd mastered often changed and slipped out from beneath him, as if he'd tried to run on ice-covered ground.

"Baby, repeat after me," Tony called over his shoulder, "Steve is a dickwad. Don't let him wreck your day."

"Or me," Kurt put in. "I never meant to confront the man. At least, not today. Loki, *lieber Freund*, forgive me."

Always, Loki thought. *I will always forgive you.*

"It's nothing," Loki told them, forcing himself to smile. "I am merely catching my bearings."

He watched Kurt and Tony amble on ahead, laughing now as if the unpleasantness had never been, Kurt sneakily poking Tony at random moments with the tip of his tail and Tony attempting to get back at him, yet never quite succeeding.

"Honey?" Pepper asked, her voice not angry now, but kind and touched with concern. Her arm slipped warmly around Loki's waist, the only warm thing, it seemed, in all that cold winter's day. She did not ask, as Tony often did, if he was okay, she only said, "I know we're already running late, and we haven't seen a thing yet, but would you indulge me, sweetheart? I had a monster hair day, was completely behind schedule, and left home without my coffee. Would you mind too much if we took a little break for me to caffeinate?"

All of that was a lie, Loki knew. Pepper's hair was, he suspected, in fact the most perfect and cooperative hair of any woman's of Midgard, and Pepper, furthermore, at all times, kept naturally and easily to the schedules she set for herself. Nonetheless, it was a kind lie, meant to gently cloak his friend's true meaning, which was that Pepper truly intended to say, *I know the stuff with Steve confused and overwhelmed you. Shall we find a quiet place to regroup?*

Loki couldn't speak just then, but he nodded, *Yes*.

He loved Pepper, who Tony had treated both kindly and quite unkindly over the span of years. She held a quality in her that set off ripples of feeling within his own heart, a remembrance of emotion, if not in any way a memory, that informed him Pepper was, though uniquely herself, also something like the lady of the golden hair whose image Loki carried in his head, strong, kind, and brave in spirit.

"Did someone mention coffee?" Tony asked from just ahead, overhearing her. "Oh, god, yes, please! There is not enough coffee in the goddamn fucking universe!" His grin, as he met Loki's eyes, lightened Loki's heart immeasurably, and he wished it could be considered appropriate behavior to hug and kiss and hold Tony close to himself, right here in the midst of this busy Manhattan street.

Loki knew Tony wouldn't mind in the least, but such behavior would still not be appropriate, for the sake of Tony's reputation, if nothing else.

It had been the sweetest thing in the world that morning, when J. had awakened him into his usual state of confusion and fear, to realize that Tony lay beside him, still asleep, his body a warm, firm comfort against his own. He had kissed Tony's brow, and smoothed his unruly hair, feeling in that moment cared for, not in any way alone.

"You might hold onto that," White Loki commented. "If it helps. Perhaps it doesn't. I only meant, if it did."

White Loki appeared younger this morning, more his own age, the lines smoothed out from around his eyes, his mouth softened into curves more humorous than sardonic. "Now that Captain Arsehole has gone his separate way, the day might even prove pleasant for you, my wide-eyed, impressionable boy."

"You shouldn't speak of him so," Loki reminded his *doppelganger* (which was a word Kurt had taught him, meaning his double). "Remember, he saved our lives when we might have

frozen in the snow, or starved, or been beaten beyond what we could survive. We were very near death, you'll recall.”

“Not so very near,” White Loki answered, with a dismissive wave of his hand. He watched Loki's face, his mouth hardening slowly again to a straight, hard line. “No one saves me,” he muttered, before winking out of sight, but his voice held such sorrow—no doubt entirely unintended--it wounded Loki’s heart to hear it.

Despite reputation, despite the hard thoughts the others held within their heads, he realized he loved White Loki, too, in a different way than that in which he loved Tony, Pepper, or Kurt. Perhaps because of his sharp-edged, yet apt, advice, but perhaps because White Loki needed someone to care for him more than anyone he knew.

“I would save you,” Loki murmured, to the absolute nothing by his right side, but White Loki didn’t return.

“Honey?” Pepper said again, now sounding actually concerned. “It’s okay if we stop? Or maybe I really should ask if you’re okay?”

“I am very well,” Loki answered, smiling back at her, holding the smile until they were all safely tucked into a snug corner of a Starbucks coffeeshop, where the air smelled delightfully of roasted beans, a false fireplace flickered, and there were comfortable chairs upholstered in vinyl made to look like dark brown leather.

Loki’s knees, he realized, nearly falling into his seat, felt watery. After having already been so extremely nervous about leaving the tower, the chance encounter with Captain Rogers had far from helped matters. At this moment, however, with Pepper on one side of him, Tony warm and close on the other (his hand slipping, surreptitiously, to hold Loki’s hand), Kurt perched on the chair across the table from him and the large, placid man the others called "Happy" gone to order and fetch their drinks, all his apprehensions once more seemed foolish.

He needed to, as Tony would most certainly phrase it, either "chill out" or "calm the fuck down."

Loki resolved to let neither the tense meeting nor the night's misstep with Clint haunt his day--at any rate, Captain Rogers would, quite possibly, never welcome his presence, and what friendship he had with the archer could not be repaired until after the holidays, for Clint, Phil and Natasha, he knew, had set forth before dawn for that place called "Upstate," and days would pass before their return. He must not ruin the pleasure of any friend by brooding further, the spillover of his emotion perhaps darkening their own pleasure in the day.

Loki drew in a deep breath and deliberately shut certain doors within his mind. The truth was, he felt his own species of excitement in their outing. The leftover tastes of another, past time and place wanted to call the glittering holiday displays he’d already glimpsed flimsy and garish--"tacky" might have been Tony's word--but in his heart Loki enjoyed the lights and the sparkle nearly as much as he enjoyed Tony’s beautiful tree in the penthouse, and the even vaster tree in the lobby of their shared home.

Perhaps he still wanted to feel a little worried, despite his resolutions, that, come nightfall, Kurt would take his leave, to be with the children—the children he'd referred to so angrily when speaking to Captain Rogers, but for now Kurt was here, his courage and the brightness of his spirit adding tremendously to Loki's reservoir of strength.

Before they left home, Loki had wanted, quite badly, to hide his blood-colored eyes behind dark spectacles and to wear a hooded garment that might conceal his face and--most especially--his freakish horns, but Kurt had not hidden his eyes, neither did he hide his blue-furred face, nor his pointed ears, and so Loki would have felt cowardly in concealing himself (though he had borrowed a useful, whirring tool from Tony's workshop and used it to grind his wickedly-pointed claws into gentle curves that approximated human nails, which Pepper had polished to shining black for him with a clear varnish while they'd been waiting for Tony to dress).

Besides which, as a special early gift, Pepper had bestowed upon him the most delightful suit of clothing, extremely stylish, of fabrics that delighted Loki's touch, and once he had dressed himself (Kurt assisting him with the confusing bits) and Tony had seen him, he had felt, for the first time he could remember, nearly comely, nearly handsome, nearly... *normal*.

Tony would not want him to use that word, even though he was *not* normal. He would not be able to explain to Tony exactly what it was he meant, that it wasn't entirely his appearance, strange as it was, that set him apart. Kurt's appearance could certainly be said to be nearly as unusual as his own, yet Kurt was still *normal* because he knew well how to think and speak and act as others acted. Loki could not. He didn't know if he had ever been able to do so, even when he walked in White Loki's guise, looking little different from the Midgardians themselves.

Still, standing in the beautiful clothes Pepper bought for him, he'd felt Tony drinking in his appearance, had felt Tony's appreciation and arousal and joy, and in those moments it had felt perfectly acceptable, even just as he was, to inhabit in his own skin.

Even now, sitting in physical comfort with his friends, Loki felt nearly safe again, even outside the tower's protective shell, and without J. to watch over him.

Tony, he reminded himself, was a powerful man, a man of influence. Behind his jovial demeanor, Happy possessed skills to deflect any unpleasantness, whether with words, or his solid self, or with the weapon holstered beneath his left arm--and should all these precautions fail to protect him, Kurt might easily (Loki reminded himself) bamf him away from any threat. As for Pepper, she was so very confident, so kind and joyful, Loki's apprehensions soon began to ebb.

Pepper especially helped him to bear the strangeness of this outer world.

People, humans, came and went from the coffeeshop, or passed by the floor-to-ceiling glass of its windows. They were visible—he was visible—and even as he sipped his Chestnut Praline Latte (a beverage of such sweet and creamy deliciousness Loki felt he might quickly become addicted, as the mortal boy Edmund had become so swiftly addicted to the White Witch Jadis's Turkish Delight, in a book Kurt had read to him) thoughts came through to him at random, crushing each barrier Loki set before them with their leaden weight--ugly

thoughts, and angry thoughts, but even beyond their bitter flavor, it was the force of so many minds massed together in such relatively confined space that truly oppressed him.

Kurt touched his hand, gaining Loki's attention. With his other hand, he set an object, slightly battered and about the length of a common pen, yet of greater girth, on the marble table-top.

Tony laughed aloud. "My god, Kurt, is that primordial thing actually your image inducer? The one you've been using?"

Kurt grinned.

"It's ancient!" Tony continued. "I didn't get a decent look last time. Now... God, I don't think I've laid my eyes on that model in a fucking decade!"

"I've had it for... *Was?* What is it now? Eleven years? A clever man must have made the device—it never seems to break down. Knocking firmly on wood."

Loki freed his hand from Tony's to brush the gadget with his fingertips. "It is... It resembles a sonic screwdriver, such as The Doctor might use."

Tony laughed even harder.

"*Nein*, Loki, not a sonic screwdriver, though I often could have used one in my travels, and they do look very alike, don't they?" Kurt smiled, but his eyes looked slightly darker than their usual bright shade. He took the object into his hand again, his thumb flicking a button on its side.

In that instant, Kurt vanished, replaced by an older man of less muscular build than Loki's friend, a handsome man with curling ginger-brown hair and ordinary human eyes.

"Errol Flynn, right? That's Errol Flynn!" Pepper marveled.

"*Ja*, Errol Flynn." The voice continued to be Kurt's, and after a moment, the face was once more his as well, the fair-skinned visage rippling away. "A film actor of former days, and a favorite of mine, then and now, though I'm perhaps no longer so silly as to disguise myself with such a noticeable face. You may have the device, Loki, if you'd like. If it would make you feel more comfortable, out in the world."

He placed the gadget in Loki's hand, curling his fingers over the smooth metal. Loki felt it hum, an expectant hum, as if the machine called to him, "I'm here, ready to change you, if only you let me."

Loki pulled back his hand as if burned, and even as he did so, a deep wave of sorrow rolled over him.

Instantly, White Loki was at his shoulder. "He means well, I think," his *doppelganger* commented. "Your dear friend. Don't you think he means well? He no longer feels a need to conceal his own appearance, but he believes that you might."

A tall woman walked by their table with a tray and a child in tow, the child turning her head to watch them as she passed. "Mommy? Mommy? What are those?" she asked.

"Mutants," the woman hissed. "Don't stare, they're dangerous! I can't believe..." Her eyes locked on Loki's as the thought finished inside her head: *...they let them in here, with real people.*

"Shut up," Loki snapped, though whether he was talking to White Loki or the small humming machine or the woman with the child, he couldn't have said.

Kurt, however, seemed to have recaptured his usual brave and buoyant spirits. "It's quite all right to look," he said, addressing the little girl directly. "Aren't we all curious when we see things we haven't seen much of in the past? We're nothing to be frightened of, *Liebchen*. Only people. Only ordinary people who happen to be blue. What is it Mr. Rogers says, that every person is different and special?" He turned to her with his lovely, bright grin. "Perhaps we are only a little more special than most, *ja?*"

The women shot to her feet, nearly knocking over her chair, tray and drinks abandoned and her hand clamped down on her daughter's wrist, the child wailing as she was dragged away, "But they were pretty, and I wanted to talk to them!"

Inside the mother's head, the thoughts bubbled like poison, and Loki snatched back his consciousness before the mad depths of that hatred could sear its way entirely into his brain.

"Haters gonna hate," Happy sighed. "Whatcha gonna do? Want me to have a word, boss?"

"What's the use?" Tony responded, in a voice more bitter than his dark-black coffee (Loki had tasted the stuff once out of curiosity, and found it horrid). "What's the fucking use?"

Loki no longer wanted his delicious drink. He no longer wanted anything, least of all to venture another step further from the tower in the face he now wore. His strange, blue face. His monster face.

His true face, the only one he owned.

Still--and perhaps it was his old, unwarranted pride that drove him--Loki refused to pick up, much less use, Kurt's little machine of lies.

"Uh, you know what they say--opinions are like assholes," Happy commented, without rancor, "Everybody's got one." He reached out to pat Loki's fist (clenched on the tabletop, as both his fists were clenched, and good luck he'd ground down his claws the night before or they might have cut badly into his palms) with one beefy hand. "The thing is, my fine-lookin' blue friend, not to care about the stupid ones."

"The stupid assholes?" Tony asked.

"Yup, you got it," Happy answered with a grin, and then went on to talk fondly of Christmas at his mother's house in "Jersey", then to wax poetic about her recipe for stuffing, the others

arguing good-naturedly around them whether stuffing was more properly called "stuffing" or "dressing."

Loki fixed his eyes upon Happy, who with his cheerfully rumbling voice and broad, beaming face, did actually appear to be (exactly like his name) quite a happy person. Happy's thoughts wound unhurriedly through his mind, like a sun-warmed river on a lazy afternoon.

Loki shut his eyes, rested his own bruised mind within those gentle ripples, and allowed the whole of himself to slowly float along, carried on that calm current.

White Loki Christmas

Chapter Summary

Loki visits a studio, Pepper shops for a suitable gift, and at least one display window at Macy's is not exactly what it should be.

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year everyone! Thank you for sticking with me and reading, despite my too-busy-to-even-think Christmas hiatus.

As one reader has already cleverly deduced, Darius King is meant to be a tribute to the late Alexander McQueen. I harbor a great love of things that are beautiful and strange, and his designs, fashion and art mingled together, feed my imagination more than those of any other designer I've encountered. It's a tremendous sadness to me that Mr. McQueen is gone from our world.

Discussions of *seiðr* magic traditionally contain a great deal of imagery related to spinning and weaving, so it seems a natural step to connect it to the *Nornir*, who spin out the threads of fate and life. In the Eddas, the Norns are three *Jotunn* women, but I've made the choice to overlap them a little here with the fates of Greek mythology, along with a bit of Robert Graves from his fascinating book *The White Goddess*--namely his image of the triple moon goddess, maiden-mother-crone--tossed in for good measure.

In Greek mythology, Zeus punishes humankind by taking away fire, which the Titan Prometheus then restores to us. He's punished for his defiance by being chained to a rock, where an eagle comes to him each day and eats out his liver. Let's all take a geeky moment to recall who else is a god of fire, and who ends up chained to a rock (or rocks) for defying the father of the gods.

Ann Marie "Ree" Drummond (AKA, "The Pioneer Women") is a highly successful American blogger, cookbook author, and TV personality who has recently introduced a line of home-related goods, such as dinnerware and cooking gear. Like Mrs. Hogan, I'd honestly enjoy receiving a cherry-red Dutch oven (a heavy cooking pot, often used for cooking soups and stews and frequently made of cast iron, that can be used both on top of the stove and in the oven) as a Christmas gift.

Ma Ingalls is the mother from *Little House on the Prairie*, and from the other books in Laura Ingalls Wilder's classic series.

Imaginarium is a toy store that sells mostly educational (yet fun) type toys.

EL wire is a thin, flexible wire, usually powered by battery, that emits a bright, neon-like light in the color of your choice. It's really fun to use in costuming (think of the *Tron* costumes) because although relatively fragile, it can be sewn or clipped on, and wound or shaped into small spaces and intricate shapes, is relatively inexpensive, really bright, and gives a lot of bang for your buck in terms of impact.

Kudzu is a vine of Japanese origin that was introduced to the American south and proceeded to overrun anything that stood still for more than five minutes. As a result, a drive through the rural southlands will reveal huge eerie shapes like topiary monsters where tractors, haystacks, or sheds once stood.

Icy-Hot is a brand of... goo, for lack of a better word, that's meant to soothe sore muscles by producing sensations both of heat and cold.

"A pair of Franklins"=200 dollars (Benjamin Franklin, statesman, writer and inventor, is featured on the front of the U.S. \$100 bill).

Licking the contact ends of rectangular 9-volt batteries (the kind that powered primitive small electronics, such as transistor radios, in my youth) produces a strangely lemony taste and a tingling sensation in the tongue. Don't ask me how I know this.

This was the inspiration for Loki's Window: [Frost Giants?](#) It's actually from Macy's 2014 display, "Santa's Journey to the Stars," and the figures are meant to represent Uranus and Neptune. This year (2015) the windows did, in fact, display a Peanuts theme.

Loki liked Mr. King's studio almost from the moment he stepped through its doors. For one thing, it possessed an... *encouraging* sort of smell which, although nothing at all like the odor of Tony's workshop (which mostly smelled of hot metal, strong coffee, and spilled chemicals) still reminded him of his beloved's sacred space. It smelled like the making of good things, a place where people *enjoyed* to make things.

Tony always seemed happiest in his workshop, as did Bruce, on the frequent occasions Loki discovered him there, and Mr. King's studio had the same sort of air, the atmosphere of things being joyfully created, the ugly, petty, overwhelming, mundane world shut firmly outside its door.

So engrossed was Loki in sampling this feeling, drinking it deep into himself, the fact that Pepper had been calling his name totally escaped his attention, and perhaps would have continued to do so had not Kurt squeezed his arm, giving Loki, also, a gentle nudge with the tip of his tail.

"Oh, forgive me!" Loki found himself exclaiming. "I like it here!"

Pepper smiled at him, and so did the man she'd been speaking to, the master of this place, a man with close-cropped hair and a slight growth of beard, so ordinary-looking he might just

as easily have been a bus-driver or a custodian rather than a very famous (as Pepper had explained to him) designer of fashion. He might have been any of the not-young-and-not-old men Loki had seen walking along the Manhattan streets this day, except for the cleverness in his eyes--as if he noticed every small thing in the world around him--and the wisdom, and the sadness.

"Darius," Pepper said, in her friendliest voice, "I'd like you to meet my friends Loki Stark and Kurt Wagner. Guys, this is my dear friend, Darius King. Loki's a great admirer of your work, Dar."

"And I, please forgive me, am entirely ignorant of fashion," Kurt confessed, reaching out his right hand to shake the the designer's hand. "Though I'm delighted by what I've seen here so far today, and I'd love to see more. You have a fascinating workshop, Mr. King."

"Darius." A slight, almost shy smile flashed across the older man's face. Instead of releasing Kurt's hand once he'd shaken it, he turned it to and fro in his own hands, tracing veins, muscles, tendons with his fingertips.

"May I look at your tail, please?" he asked, suddenly--and Loki could only think--unexpectedly.

Kurt, being Kurt, appeared startled for a moment, but then only laughed, snaking his fine tail forward at lightning speed, though he brushed the tip across the designer's palm more slowly, as if delivering a brief caress.

"Oh! Like velvet!" The wise, sad eyes glanced up, first to Kurt, then to Loki, his smile growing, in that moment, both brighter and sadder. "You are both so beautiful, like magic brought suddenly into our world. I could draw each of you a thousand times and never tire of doing it."

Darius King touched Loki's hand then, a little more hesitantly than he'd touched Kurt's (Loki, in his distraction, had entirely forgotten that manners required he offer his own hand to be shaken). It felt odd, at first, to have any part of himself, even his hand, examined so minutely, especially by someone outside the small group of those he considered safe, those he considered family.

"I feel strange," he said, not knowing whether he was apologizing for the not-quite-human texture of his skin, or for the peculiar mood that had overtaken him the moment Tony and Happy left them at the door, and he'd stepped inside.

"By the way, Dar, Tony's hiding from you," Pepper said, laughing, as Darius ran his fingers up and down Loki's hands, with their unnaturally long digits. "He let Happy drag him to some horrible sports bar rather than face the music. Tony doesn't even like sports. He only pretends to."

As she spoke, Loki surprised himself further by bowing his head, allowing the designer to touch his spiraling horns, to glide his fingertips along their grooves and ridges.

"Oh, like glass, quite like glass, only stronger," he crooned, in a soft, almost sing-song voice. "Much stronger. Like tempered glass, perhaps? Was this one broken? I feel the slightest irregularity in the underside."

"Kurt repaired it for me, when I was hurt."

"Beautiful. So very beautiful. Why is Tony hiding, Virginia?"

Loki had never heard anyone call Pepper by her proper name.

"Oh, because he completely lacks social graces, and is rightly ashamed of his terrible behavior last time you met, I would guess." Pepper laughed brightly. "You always have such lovely wines around the place, Dar. Is there maybe a glass with my name on it somewhere? We've been shopping all day."

Without saying yes or no, the designer ushered them to a glass-walled room that Loki guessed must be his office, though it seemed more like a light-filled cave of wondrous things. Everywhere he looked, canvases and drawings, swatches of fabric, trimmings, bits of wire and shining metal, and assortments of sundry odd objects--a dagger, a bird's nest with a single blue, broken shell, the empty carapace of a crab, a bundle of dried grasses twisted into something like a wreath--leaned against the walls, the furniture, occupying every flat surfaces nearly to the point of overflowing.

Loki would have been happy to poke his way through the space for hours, examining each drawing, each piece of flotsam and jetsam the office contained. He prowled around the edges, wanting badly to touch, but not touching, studying the pictures where they lay. All of them were beautiful, but some also struck him as strange. Not disturbing, not to him, but strange.

He would have, similarly, have liked to sneak a peek inside Darius's head, but forbore to do so. At the very least, such an act would have been rude, and possibly, he sensed, unkind.

Some humans, he'd noticed, kept their minds open always, like houses that required no locks to keep themselves safe, while others guarded their thoughts closely and carefully, shutting them up tighter than vaults. Darius King appeared to be one of these latter beings. and though Loki might have stripped his last thought bare, he would never, now, do such a thing.

Was that why Clint was so angry with him, Loki wondered. Was it actually because he'd once known the archer down to his last thought? Did Clint realize he didn't remember, would likely *never* in this new life of his, remember, and would never, of course, trouble him in such a way again? Would Clint, who Loki had thought his friend, prove himself to be another, like Captain Steve Rogers, who never allowed him to shake off the yoke of what he'd been?

White Loki, closer than ever by his shoulder, appeared troubled, frowning, and pale beyond even his usual pallor. "That isn't the reason, foolish boy," he said, in a stern, clipped voice--and yet, in the same moment, took Loki's hand within his own, holding it warmly.

Loki watched Darius King unceremoniously shove a pile to one side of his desk and sit himself cross-legged upon the desktop. Pepper, with a slight smile, cleared a comfortable-looking chair with rather more decorum, and arranged herself, leaning back and kicking off her high-heeled shoes, crossing her long legs, while Kurt (again being altogether Kurt),

attached himself upside-down to the sturdy overhead light-fixture, swaying gently on his extended tail, causing Darius to grin in what seemed utter delight. He glanced first to Kurt, then back to Loki, and then to Kurt again, only stopping his perusal when an assistant brought in a tray with a bottle of wine and four sparkling goblets, all mismatched, all equally lovely.

Loki took one, when it was offered, to be polite, though he hadn't really liked the sips of Tony's wines he'd tried at the penthouse, and he didn't much care for this one--it tasted to him of iron and oak-wood, bitter on his tongue, its odor stinging his sinuses. Kurt flipped upright to drink his wine, seeming to enjoy it, while Pepper went into ecstasies about the flavor, speaking in the language of wines with her friend, a language without meaning to Loki, and also rather dull.

At most times Loki desired to learn all new things, yet just now...

Just now, it came to him that he was tired, deeply tired, and could not summon the energy.

As soon as it seemed he could possibly do so, he set his glass aside and returned to the pictures--some mere scrawls, some intricate and exact designs of clothing, jewelry, repeating patterns, vivid and lovely washes of color. Loki found himself drifting, his head far quieter now that most of the world was shut outside.

He'd become, he realized, intensely wearied by the course of the day, and while Pepper and Darius, with Kurt now joining in, were deep in conversation, he quietly cleared off the small sofa beneath the outer windows and tucked himself into its cushions, physical exhaustion and the previous night's abbreviated rest casting him instantly into sleep.

He dreamed of the great field of artificial ice they'd skated on after lunchtime, watched over by the golden god Prometheus (no, not a god, a *Titan*, that's what Kurt had called him--a Titan, which was like a god, yet a far older thing), beneath the shadow of the immense and sparkling tree. Loki could not remember being taught to skate, but he must once have known the skill, and known it well, for his body remembered if his head did not, and he and Pepper glided in perfect grace around one other, like birds in flight in the air, while Tony and Happy tripped over their own feet, and frequently fell, and laughed so hard at their own clumsiness they'd hardly have been able to skate, even given greater skill.

In his dream, Loki's skates left swirling golden trails upon the white ice, trails that changed, in sleep, to spun threads, then the threads to three woman spinning beneath a great tree. Not a tree of lights, not a Christmas tree, but one leafless, its branches spread wide, its roots thrust deep into the soil. The women spun without watching their hands, casting down their spindles, drawing them up again, some threads still golden, but others silver, yet others copper tarnished brown as earth.

"Where is your *seiðr*, Loki," the youngest asked, her girlish face stern yet not unkind, "Your magic, which is our magic, the Craft with which we gifted you at birth?"

"I don't know," Loki answered--though he did know, both where the magic had gone (if magic he had ever truly possessed), and who had taken it from him.

"You know," the eldest told him, her voice brisk, but like her sister's, not unkind.

"I think it lies within you still," said the middle sister, neither young nor old, and very lovely, like the golden-haired woman whose image constantly haunted Loki's mind.

"I believe it lives ever within you, Loki. Not lost. Not able to be lost. You need only reach to find it."

Was she truly the woman he almost-but-not-quite remembered? Loki wanted, badly, to ask her, but feared to seem impertinent. He held so many questions inside himself, had such a desire for answers, had so much he wished to say, and yet it seemed no word would leave his lips.

In another world, the waking world, someone was shaking him, shaking him out of his dream, when he didn't yet wish to leave this world of sleep, with the great tree and the three women, one of whom might--just might--have been Frigga, she he'd once called mother.

"Not yet," Loki moaned, scarcely awake. "Not yet!" But sleep had fled from him as suddenly as it had descended.

After literal miles of Christmas lights, and shopping, and bad (or in Loki and Pep's case, truly excellent) skating, and more shopping, and time spent in a notable designer's studio (or, in the case of a certain cowardly asshole and his henchman, in a nearby sports bar), everyone was pretty much done. As in, "stick a fork in me, I'm done."

They'd started gathering their belongings, gearing up for a slow, weary, but peaceful amble home, when someone brought up the subject of Christmas at Happy's mom's house again.

The subject, to be more accurate, of what Pepper had bought Mrs. Hogan as a present.

As usual for Pepper, the gift she'd chosen was something classy, unique, and expensive.

Happy immediately began to look a little squirmy.

Tony knew only too well what would happen next.

"The thing is..." Happy appeared, if anything, even more squirmy. "That is, the thing about my mom is, she's kinda... I dunno. Not really much like you, Pepper. I mean, she's different. She's kind of a *regular* type of mom. A *mom* mom. She gets a little... uncomfortable if you go too fancy. Or spend too much. I makes her feel weird."

Pepper, who prided herself on always finding the perfect gift, appeared mortified.

"I bought her a Dutch oven," Tony put in helpfully. "From The Pioneer Woman Collection. It's cherry-red and has a knob on top shaped like a butterfly."

He grinned at Pepper, knowing he'd gotten her with that one. For one thing, he'd known Mrs. Hogan longer than Pep had, and he'd spent a lot of time waiting with Happy in nameless

airport VIP lounges, in bars and in hotel rooms, passing hours of their lives in random conversation, hearing and telling stories of each other's lives.

Tony would be the first to admit he had a history of being kind of a jerkwad to women (and men too, for that matter--he was pretty much an equal opportunity jerkwad), but he held great respect for Happy's mom, who when she'd realized the high school sweetheart she'd married in love and hope had turned out to be a drinker, gambler, and general all-around dick, defied her Irish-Italian Catholic upbringing, stood on her own two feet and kicked the worthless bastard to the curb. She'd then educated herself to become a skilled accountant, and had single-handedly raised her seven strapping sons to be kind and decent men. If she just so happened to enjoy traditional things, like cooking, she'd more than earned the right in Tony's opinion

"See?" Happy said encouragingly. "Ma'll love that, boss! She's really... homey. She likes to feed people."

"Who--or what--is The Pioneer Woman?" Pep asked faintly.

On the list of things Pepper would consider giving as a gifts for Christmas, a tasteful set of high-quality bondage accessories would doubtless have ranked higher as a present to give another woman than anything kitchen-related, butterfly handle or no. Despite her recently acquired quilting hobby, the concept of actually being *willing* to cook, much less *loving* to cook for others, totally escaped her. Pepper came from a line of women, probably stretching back to the Mayflower, who subsisted, so far as Tony could tell, entirely on kale smoothies and fine champagne--which was probably why she looked like Pepper, instead of like Happy's mom, who pretty much looked like Happy himself, only about five feet tall and prone to wearing colorful cardigans.

Pepper turned on Tony now. "Is anyone actually under the impression that pioneers cooked in red Dutch ovens with butterfly handles out on the prairie? Do you honestly think Ma Ingalls whipped up a hearty batch of bear-meat stew in a red Dutch oven with a butterfly handle?"

"Uh, maybe a nice handbag...?" Happy put in, sounding a little timid.

"Not too nice," Tony interrupted evilly.

"Yeah, nice just not too nice. Practical, but snazzy? Ma likes red. Maybe a red handbag from someplace like Macy's, one that would hold a lot of stuff?"

Pepper gave a faint moan.

"I mock your pain," Tony told her cheerfully.

"I will not go in there," Loki interjected, the first time they'd heard a peep from him since they'd bid a fond farewell to Kurt outside Darius King's studio, and he'd bamfed off to join his boyfriend at whatever shady spot Logan lurked in when he came to the city.

"I will not enter into the Macy's," Loki elaborated, "For that is where I was beaten, and no one raised hand or voice to help me until Captain Rogers happened by."

Cue awkward silence, Tony thought, cringing inwardly--there was a pain, a real pain, he wouldn't mock, and he didn't blame his boyfriend in the least for not wanting the set foot inside, even with backup.

"I'll power-shop, honey," Pepper told Loki, finally. "Ten minutes, not a second more, and maybe..."

"You and me, we'll take a stroll around the outside, while these two go in," Happy said, flinging a meaty arm around Loki's shoulders. "Dunno about you, Lok, but I'm kinda shopped out anyway. I think that last stop at Imaginarium did me in bigtime."

"I enjoyed the Imaginarium, though it was noisy," Loki said, clearly putting on a brave face. "The people there were..." He ground to a halt.

"Nicer," Tony suspected he wanted to say, or "kinder." Maybe even (though it hurt him to think it) "less hateful." He couldn't imagine what Loki had been hearing inside his head all day--or maybe didn't want to imagine. Sometimes humanity sucked in a really major way.

Something weird was going on in Loki's head, too--Tony'd kept feeling little sparks of the whatever-it-was ever since he'd picked Loki up at Darius King's place, firing off like miniature fireworks inside his boyfriend's brain, but it continued to be nothing he could put a finger on, nothing he could understand or explain.

Despite all those past conversations, Tony hadn't realized Happy, his right hand guy and number one henchman (minion, as Loki would say), now possessed a throng of nieces and nephews approximately equal in number to the citizenry of a major city in India. He wondered if they were all like his friend, big and mellow and a little goofy. It was a nice thought, actually--a tribe of happy little Happys swelling the population of Jersey had to be a force for good, right?

"C'mon, buddy," Happy told Loki, "We'll take a last look at the lights, stroll around the block and check out the windows. Y'know, they have Peanuts this year."

"Peanuts?" Loki repeated faintly. He looked utterly wiped out, and Pepper had whispered in Tony's ear that the Lokester had actually fallen dead-to-the-world asleep on the couch in Darius King's office. He was clearly exhausted, overwhelmed by the long day and more than a little freaked-slash-sad about losing his furry friend.

"I should not, I know," Loki said, "But I miss Kurt, even though he so lately left us."

Well, if it came to that, Tony was going to miss Kurt too. Right now, though, more than anything, he wanted to take Loki home, snuggle him up and convince him how delightful, handsome and loved he was, and to show him Christmas was no time to feel downhearted.

"Peanuts like the cartoon, babe," he told Loki. "You remember. Charlie Brown? Snoopy? Linus?"

He watched the lightbulb go on over Loki's head.

"Ah. The children of the blanket, the sad tree, and the dog that danced."

Tony nearly laughed, but one look at Loki's face and he just couldn't. Someday, he hoped, Loki would get some fun out of the pop culture so near and dear to his own heart, and not approach the subject like a final exam in advanced physics on which one hundred per cent of his grade depended.

He thought of asking Happy to just walk Loki home, of telling Lok that he and Pepper would catch up in a few. Unfortunately, however, along with being delightful, handsome and loved, the Lokester was also monumentally stubborn, and even when clearly white-knuckling his way through the whole day (except for his brief-but-total Starbucks zone-out and his nap at the studio), he did his damndest not to let the cracks show. He dutifully admired lights and window displays and the insides of department stores, but after their top o' the morning coffee break, he refused to leave their little group, or admit to boredom or fatigue.

He also, more unforgivably, wouldn't let Tony buy him stuff. Tony only got through shopping expeditions by buying people stuff. He lived for it. He loved it--all the more so because when he bought stuff for people who were actually with him, he didn't make heinous and embarrassing mistakes in his choices. Even Pepper and Happy had learned to give into him gracefully.

Loki would have looked fucking gorgeous in the stuff Tony longed to buy him. He looked gorgeous, period, and he honestly didn't even get that half the stares he received weren't anything like "Goddamn Mutie!" stares, or "What the actual fuck is that?" stares, or coming out of the kind of shit said out loud by that hideous hag in Starbucks, the one with the sweet little girl. He wondered if Loki would ever see that many, many of those looks fell in more along the lines of, "Behold, a god walks among us!"

Darius King, Pepper said, had fallen instantly in love. He'd held Loki's hand, gazed deep into his eyes, and practically begged him to return--whatever that meant.

Loki also, somehow, had lovely manners. He held doors for people. He was kind and polite to sales clerks, even the ones who leaped out of hiding and randomly sprayed him with perfumes that made him sneeze. He even held Pepper's purse for her without whining as she shopped, and admired the outfits she tried on, managing to use words and phrases as he did so that could never have been deemed sexist or demeaning.

For that matter, he also held onto Tony's shit without complaining while Tony played with the toys (grownup or otherwise), and he complimented the outfits Tony tried on in a manly kind of way that didn't make him feel like an idiot.

So Tony liked to try on clothes. Sue him.

Loki, however, wouldn't try on a single outfit for himself, and had only once agreed to accompany Kurt on a foray to buy practical stuff, like socks and underwear and a couple decent ties, after he and Tony conducted a five minute long, entirely silent stare-down which ended with a very Prince of Asgardish, "But I will use my own money!"

Tony had assumed his boyfriend meant the new-minted StarkCard Pepper had recently provided, but Pep quickly set him straight on that one.

They'd reached the purse section finally, Pepper striding between the aisles like a Valkyrie on the battlefield, choosing the worthy slain. Tony held Pepper's own bag (whining a little, because it was expected of him, but not too much, because he knew he totally owed her) while she considered which particular handbag might be red, snazzy, reasonably-priced and capacious enough to suit Mrs. Hogan's needs.

He founded it a weirdly fascinating process.

Tony left off his whining-on-principle long enough to mention, "Whatever you do, don't remind Loki that his money is actually still pretty much my money, okay?"

Pepper returned a third rejected red purse to its display. "Sure. Except it isn't."

"Remind me again who'll be paying off the card balance?"

"Loki won a contest, bigshot. Remember, on the news, the contest to design the new murals they're going to install for the remodel of City Hall? I helped with his entry, and the check arrived last week. Personally, I'd call the prize money a little paltry, considering the work Loki put in, but he was happy about it. He could buy his own things, pay for his own presents. He's very independent, Tone--or at least as independent as he's able to be. I actually wonder, though, if at some point he had formal training in art that he just doesn't consciously remember. He must have had training. Maybe the classes you're giving him will help unlock some of that memory."

Tony, frankly, couldn't imagine a universe in which Odin, Narcissist Extraordinaire and Assfather of All, would've allowed one of his boys to go to art school, since in his head Asgard was all drinking and getting hit on the head lessons, at least where guys were concerned.

Manly woodworking, weapon-smithing and architecture, maybe--drawing lessons, no fucking way.

Pepper, fortunately, rejected a fourth purse that reminded Tony, in terms of color, at least, of a traffic cone. She thoughtfully ran one perfectly manicured fingertip over an elegant little clutch, clearly tempted on a purely personal level.

"Be very sweet to Loki this Christmas, okay?" she said quietly. "He's one hell of a brave kid."

"I know that," Tony answered. "I will."

"Hmn." Pepper pulled out her phone, glancing briefly at the screen. "Well. Time to go."

She chose a sturdy red leather tote seemingly at random (it was a nice-looking bag, Tony had to admit, maybe even worthy of being called "snazzy"--stylish enough for Pep, roomy and

practical enough, he guessed, to please Mrs. H.), and purchased it as quickly as the lines allowed, then slipped her arm through Tony's, and steered him toward the elevator.

Which was crowded.

Next to people handing him things, Tony hated crowded elevators.

"What do you suppose possessed Macy's," Pep pondered aloud, "That their designers put warring Frost Giants in one window of their store? I mean, all the other windows feature the Peanuts gang. Why Frost Giants?"

The minute she hauled him out of the store, Tony knew exactly what she meant. Loki was parked in front of a giant pane of glass that glowed with a cool blue-white light, absolutely still and also absolutely silent, though his lips appeared to be moving. He looked as if someone had hit him hard in the face with a frying pan in both the Looney Toons and literal senses, because Tony could nearly see the bluebirds and stars twirling around his head, and because his ruby eyes were not only bloodshot to the point that Tony could actually tell they were bloodshot, his nose was gushing red like a fountain.

Loki also appeared to be wound up in a kudzu-infestation-worthy amount of EL wire, glowing green, that cast patches of shadow and brilliance all over his pallid blue skin. Only the narrow lines weren't wire. They moved--twining, twisting, sending up feelers of brightness.

Loki's eyes closed against the glare, and he moaned softly, the ends of the wires-that-weren't wires, the vines-that-weren't-vines, weaving in and out of his skin as if they meant to stitch him into some new form.

Tony didn't know what to do. He was clueless. Even Pepper, who was never, ever clueless, appeared to be clueless.

Luckily, at that moment, Happy popped up with a roll of Bounty paper towels and a tiny man wearing a turban.

Tony, with his new world view in which magic was real and gods and former gods walked the earth, wondered briefly if the man was a genie--but it turned out he was a cab driver. Their cab driver, fortunately.

Inside the window, the Frost Giants moved. They weren't actually full giants, but the muscular, life-sized upper halves of such, their torsos extending out of sharp-pointed mountains strangely alike to their jagged muscles, as if both had been formed from crags of ice and ridges of snow. They were blue like Loki, horned like Loki (though more formidably), but unlike Loki, totally bald, and their eyes flashed furious red as they hurled icicle bolts back and forth between themselves above a fragile-looking dome that appeared to contain Manhattan in miniature, its tiny people gazing upward in fear.

"Animatronics?" Happy wondered. "Like at Disneyland when we were kids?"

"Fuck," Tony breathed, pushing his fingers back through his hair. He knew how to make this kind of stuff--hell, he'd been hand-crafting shit like this practically since he was in diapers, but this window, this fucking window... didn't say "animatronics" to him. It was good, no doubt about that. Maybe actually *too* good, even for a major store like Macy's, and it didn't fit, not with the other windows around the store, the Santa's workshop themes, and the Yuletide finery, most of all with the Peanuts kids.

It felt deliberate.

It felt *wrong*, on a major scale.

Loki moaned again. This time there wasn't any sound, but Tony could still tell he was moaning, on some level below the threshold audible to his admittedly middle-aged and damaged hearing.

The green had by now burned through Loki's clothing, even his socks and boots, pulling in close and closer to his skin, leaving him with what looked like a full-body set of shining green tattoos--and even in New York City a six-foot-plus naked blue man covered with glowing tattoos wasn't going to fail to grab a little attention.

"Hap, we've gotta get him straight home!" Tony snapped.

Pepper sprang into action then, wrapping Loki up in her very own, very nice, three-quarter length coat, which given Pep's height, was at least long enough to conceal Loki's not-inconsiderable family jewels.

Somehow, between the three of them, they all got bundled into the back of the tiny turbaned man's cab, though after a Three Stooges moment, in which it became clear that with Happy's bulk and Pepper's long legs, and Loki's extra-extra-long arms and legs flailing everywhere, that arrangement simply wasn't going to work. Happy bailed, moving up to the front seat to ride shotgun beside the driver. It didn't help matters that Loki's new glowy tattoos both burned and froze bare skin, like some super-strong supernatural version of Icy-Hot.

The driver, as befitted a New York cabbie, didn't bat an eye, just sped off calmly into the glittering Christmas-lighted night without even asking their destination. Five minutes later, despite crowds and traffic, he deposited the four of them right in front of Avengers Tower, without a single comment about bloody blue glowing mostly-naked people having passed between them.

Tony passed the guy a pair of Franklins, figuring he deserved them not only for being fearless enough to give them a ride, but for not freaking out along the way.

He wondered if he'd ever be that blasé. About anything.

Happy, of course, was the only one who had the foresight to grab their shopping. He also appeared to be the only one (Loki excepted) not having a total meltdown right there on Park Avenue. He even gave their driver a jaunty wave as the man sped off toward his next fare, while Tony and Pepper clung to each other like Hansel and Gretel outside the witch's candy house, making random pathetic peeping noises.

"I don't think those were animatronics," Pep finally managed to get out. Her voice shook. Pepper's voice never shook. "I think it was magic. Deliberate magic. 'Loki's getting too comfortable on Midgard' magic."

"Fucker," Tony spat out. "Goddamn Odin." His mouth tasted weird, like he'd been licking nine volt batteries, and *damn*, but he wanted a drink. A really, really big drink.

"May we go inside now?" Loki asked, clearly conscious again. "You'll allow me in?"

The light covering his skin began to fade, then flicker, and finally, as they watched, it died completely.

"I'm very cold," Loki said, shivering despite the awkward wrapping of Pepper's coat around his slender-but-much-broader shoulders. The poor guy was a mess, smeared with blood and ash and the gods knew what else.

Also, Tony was also going to owe Pepper a new coat, because this one seemed beyond the powers even of modern dry cleaning to ever make decent.

"Oh, babe," Tony breathed, nearly destroyed by the confusion and terror in his boyfriend's eyes.

For the space of about ten seconds, the ten seconds before he dropped, out cold again, to the icy pavement, Loki wasn't blue anymore.

He was white.

White white.

Other Loki white.

Science vs. Magic

Chapter Summary

Magic is real. *Really* real, and Tony and Pepper are stressed, which Loki, of course, picks up on. Kurt, however, is cheerful and practical *in absentia*, while Happy is cheerful and practical in person.

Chapter Notes

The Rolodex, a close relative of the library card catalog, was the way to keep track of names and addresses and other useful bits of info before the advent of such newfangled inventions as databases and search engines. Seriously, no desk was without one, back in the day.

Mage, The Hero Discovered, by Matt Wagner, was published by Comico from February 1984 to December 1986. It remains one of my favorite comics.

In the 80's there were rock bands with big hair. Really big fluffy hair. Gravity-defying hair. These were called "Hair Bands." The names Twisted Sister and Cinderella spring instantly to mind, but there were many, many others.

Q and Trelane (antagonist of the Classic episode "*The Squire of Gothos*" who some hypothesize was actually a child member of the Q Continuum, were both godlike aliens who played tricks on the crews of the Enterprise(s). Although not necessarily malevolent as such, both carried mischief more than a little too far. And I am now being crushed beneath the weight of my own geekery.

Australian actor Geoffrey Rush portrayed both Captain Hector Barbossa in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies and fictionalized real-life musical prodigy David Helfgott, who had... troubles... with the infamous "*Rach 5*" in *Shine*.

The opening bass line to Deep Purple's 1972 hit "*Smoke on the Water*" is probably both the best known and most ludicrously simple of all riffs known to humankind.

A "ringer" is a person who is brought into a game specifically for the purpose of cheating to win, such as a professional player brought into an amateur contest.

Pete's Wicked was an American Brown Ale, one of the earliest "craft beers" in wide distribution. The brand was bought out, then discontinued, in 2011. Tony probably has a source.

"*The Little Matchgirl*", by Hans Christian Andersen, really does take the cake for most depressing holiday tale of all time. Unlike, Tiny Tim, she does not live.

"Honest to god, Tony," Pepper said quietly, "Just... honest to god. What *was* that? With Loki. With the green... all the green light." Her hands trembled a little and she tried to make them go still by wrapping her fingers tighter around the tumbler she was already clutching for dear life. It didn't work, or not particularly, and it hurt Tony somewhere deep, deep inside his chest to see his old friend and once-love like this--so rattled, so stripped of her usual poise, so... unPepperish.

Honestly, it wasn't as if her entire worldview had unraveled in a space of half an hour, and so had his, leaving them... what? Shattered? Disillusioned? Not either of those things, but something... Something...

Pepper had claimed, now and then, that he never stopped talking, but right then Tony felt at a total loss for words, and so he topped off his own glass with another finger (or three) and poured half of that down his throat, letting the burn make thought of any kind impossible for the few seconds that followed.

It was the *good* good stuff, the twenty-four-year old Glenmorangie, a step up even from the shit good ol' Uncle Obie used to send him at school, at MIT, when he was a lonely, fucked-up orphan even the other genius would-be engineers wouldn't share a room with, because he never slept and was, incidentally, nearly always drunk (though he hid it well enough, he supposed, and by the Code of Underage Drinkers the truth was never revealed to the Powers That Be by his peers--they may not have liked him, may have thought he was a freak, but there was still, even then, honor among geeks).

Tony had known he was fucked-up then, just as he knew he was fucked-up now, at least as fucked-up as Pep, if not more so, having started off much further along that path than she'd ever have thought of venturing--his hands shakier, his stomach in one big knot, and the good stuff wasted on both of them.

Pepper didn't really care for scotch, good or bad, and had barely taken a sip of her drink--it was the visual distraction alone that was helping her limp through this, not the liquid courage--the interplay of the Christmas lights and the baubles reflected by the amber liquid, and the rainbow flashes of brilliance from the facets cut in the Irish crystal. Other than that, she'd probably just as soon (if not rather) be drinking a nice hot cup of herbal tea, or one of her foul kale smoothies.

For Tony, on the other hand, it was *all* about the aforementioned liquid courage. Tonight he wasn't tasting a single smoky, peaty mouthful, but the chemicals his body constantly craved still seeped into his brain. They took the razor edge off the knife-blade of his emotions, and that was all he really wanted.

The good stuff had a pleasing taste, usually. He could call himself a "connoisseur of fine spirits"--but the truth was, when Tony really got down to it, that blessed numbness was what

he went looking for, time and again. He drank because he was angry and hurt and afraid, and because his body now made him do it, having learned the habit at an early age.

"*Magic is green,*" he told Pepper, noting that he'd already started to slur a little, trying to remember where that particular line had come from. Something he'd heard? Something he'd read? A book? A song? A movie? It was an old memory, Tony knew that, at least, something from when he was young, and still had one or two stars left in his eyes.

She rose out of her stupor to give him a look. *Sometimes you can be such a dick, Tony*, that look told him--words Pep's mouth would never speak, because she was neither a crude woman, nor a cruel one. Her eyes, though... oh, those eyes...

Like Kurt's *uber*-sassy tail, Pepper's pretty eyes lived a life all their own. They spoke volumes, telling him all the hurtful things her natural good manners and tact would never allow her to say out loud.

"Magic is green?" she repeated, her voice still softer than soft, the ultimate 'inside voice.'
"What does *that* mean?"

Tony didn't really know why she bothered with the undertone, why either of them did, because he'd done the same thing, used the same voice, and still, dollars to donuts, whatever was in their thoughts had already spilled all over Loki's mind, like waste-water from a leaky pipe, or red wine splashed on a white carpet, leaving an eternal stain, or...

Damn, in addition to being well on his way to drunk, wasn't he just full of metaphors tonight? Or did he mean similes? Tony had no earthly idea.

Kurt, who spoke English as a second (or was that fifth, or sixth?) language, yet taught it with fluency and aplomb to mutant children who hailed from half the countries of the world, would almost certainly have known, and probably explained the difference in a way that stuck in Tony's head, using humorous examples to illustrate his point, because Kurt (who never got angry about anything, yet had demonstrated clearly that he was *furiously* mad at Cap--what a fan-fucking-tastic day it had turned out to be!) had a talent for that sort of thing. Look at how much Loki had already learned from him.

Kurt might have chided him gently, too, about letting his thoughts run so wild, reminding him Loki was upset enough as it was, that he didn't need to be hearing this. That it also was likely not the best time for substance abuse might well have been inferred, though most likely left unsaid. Like Pepper, Kurt possessed tact, though his tail might well have expressed a more outspoken opinion on the matter.

Kurt, unlike the two of them, would most likely not have been bothered in the least by the newly-discovered presence of magic in the world, except to be concerned for Loki's well-being. For one thing, given his unique (and somewhat sketchy) upbringing, the young German most likely already knew what was real, what wasn't, and where they intersected.

For another, he'd made a practice, since childhood, of hurtling upside-down through the air at high velocity while 200 feet above the ground and wearing no protection whatsoever, least of all a vibranium suit, and thus was bound to possess both an extremely fluid sense of reality

and/or danger, along with a tendency not to be easily frightened, which paired well with his natural practicality.

In other words, the evening's events would scarcely have ruffled his plushy blue fur.

"The world is still the same world, before and after, *ja*?" Kurt would have said. "Magic or no magic, what does it matter, *lieber Freund*?"

He would have been right, too. Did it really change anything to have magic exist as a driving force in the universe? Didn't life still go on the way it always went on? Kurt's words, backed up by his comforting presence, would have made all the difference.

Only Kurt wasn't there. Kurt had most likely long since reached Salem Center, was no doubt being swarmed by mutant kids, all overjoyed to have him back after his prolonged absence, and had begun to celebrate the joy of the season in the arms of his loving surrogate family. Loki would, equally without a doubt, be mortified if Tony so much as mentioned calling his friend back to the tower.

Tony, it couldn't be stressed too much, found himself totally unsurprised that he missed his dear-if-recent friend like crazy, more than he ever remembered missing anyone except Jarvis, or his mom, or Mrs. Cook during that first dismal holiday season at MIT, when he'd expected *topar-taaay!* but instead spent Christmas Eve alone in his dorm room, curled up under the comforter (and definitely not crying, no, not *him*).

As soon as that memory hit his mind, Tony wanted to pull it back again. To lock it up safe and tight where it couldn't hurt anyone, least of all himself.

Chances were, Loki had heard every word already, and Pep's questions, too, despite her having hit the mute button on her spoken words. Maybe he'd already managed to shut it out, but he usually either couldn't, or didn't. More than that--as mentioned by the imaginary Kurt in Tony's head--none of it was stuff Loki, who'd retreated upstairs to shower and get dressed with a look of total bleak devastation on his face, needed to hear, now or ever.

Besides which, Tony knew for a fact that Loki had ears like a bat. He may have been quasi-human, in his physical abilities, supposedly, but he wasn't *human* human. He heard better, saw better, had a more sharply defined sense of taste. He could even detect a touch before he was actually touched, from eight to ten inches out (yes, they'd experimented), or more. Even not yet himself, or physically quite up to speed, he already appeared to be quicker and stronger even than a fairly damn fit guy like Tony himself.

Or so I like to think, Tony added--adding, also, another couple more fingers (or so) of single malt to his glass. Pepper (whose responses Tony tended to monitor at all times) clearly remained so rattled she didn't even take note.

Normal-Pepper always took note, whether or not she voiced her disapproval.

"*Magic is green*," Tony repeated. His mental Rolodex--to be totally Old School, the truth was, if he was really so curious, he should just have run the question past J.--had finally coughed up the answer to the origin of that line. "It was the tagline of a comic called *Mage*,

by a guy called Matt Wagner, that I read back in the eighties, when dinosaurs and Hair Bands roamed the earth."

Pep gave him another look. A raised-eyebrow look. "A comic."

"Don't sneer. Totally an art form, Pep, and this was a good one, about a group of ordinary folks who come to discover that magic is alive in their world."

Pepper made a sound, too ladylike to be either a snort or an exasperated huff, but almost certainly their relative from a better neighborhood.

"That's a concept that *belongs* in the comic books," she said.

When everything started going pear-shaped for the characters in *Mage*, Tony remembered, the tagline shifted from "*magic is green*" to "*magic sucks*." He hoped that wasn't prophetic.

For a minute or so more, the two of them just continued to slump in their opposite corners of the couch, Pepper nursing her scotch (i.e. admiring the pretty lights drowned in the amber), Tony hoping that fairly soon he'd cease to feel his own tongue, or his own legs, or hear his own thoughts. In other words, he waited for magic to be golden-brown, and the Glenmorangie to do its usual conjurer's trick of spiriting away his anxiety and fear.

Part of that fear was for Loki, it was true, who had this night clearly been through something terrible, and terrifying, and weird, yet another battle in the thousand-year war of wills between him and the evil old man who'd stolen him, changed him, tricked Loki into calling him "father," then rejected him in the harshest possible way, this latest skirmish played out across the glass of what appeared to be nothing but an ordinary department store window, but was really a cruel trap.

A trap made of magic. A trap that, it seemed, called forth magic--magic that was not only clearly green, but very much real.

That's the part that really kicked Tony's fear-response into full screaming gear. It was one thing to say, "Those quaint old Asgardians call it magic, but it's *really* just science. Alien science, weird science, twisty-turny science with a very strange set of rules, but I could study it, and if I studied it I'd come to understand what makes it work."

"Good luck with that, fool," Rhodey might have quipped at this juncture, and rightly so, because Tony knew he *was* a fool, at least in this, and for a damn smart guy, also a total idiot.

He'd thought he understood everything, pretty much, about the way the world worked. You name it, Tony thought he had a handle on it--on the basics anyway, and usually well beyond the basics. "To infinity and beyond!" as Buzz Lightyear might say.

So wrong, Stark. So, so, so fucking, blindly wrong, because magic was green, and magic wasn't science, it was goddamn *magic*, and it was real. Which meant the brain-damaged young man upstairs putting on his socks wasn't a fellow-scientist, though from a different and more esoteric discipline. He was, at the very least, a powerful sorcerer, or...

No, say it, Stark, he commanded himself, *Admit the truth...*

"Loki actually *is* a god," Pepper blurted out. "Not a capital-G god, maybe, but, by our standards, in every way that matters..."

They both left the thought as it was, dangling dangerously between them.

Once, at some Avengers-related function, Tony had somehow gotten sucked into a conversation with Jane Foster, Thor's Lady Jane, who was brilliant and beautiful and teensy-tinsy, and such a goof she could design strange machines that did... *what?* Mapped something? Measured something? Tracked something? Even Tony's big, spiffy brain couldn't quite wrap itself completely around the concepts she discussed.

Yet, after three years and more of ownership, Jane had revealed, she still struggled to program her own damn cell phone Tony hadn't been able to stand this, he'd had to do it for her. Had to.

He and Jane had stumbled their awkward conversational way onto the subject of what Thor (and the Vikings of Old) called the Bifrost, the Rainbow Bridge--which actually did, Jane assured him, look very much like a rainbow, arching out of the sky into a round field of runes.

"Like some kind of advanced printed circuit?" Tony mused.

Jane agreed that his theory about the runes sounded perfectly plausible. She also referred to the Bifrost, with supreme confidence (although she'd otherwise struck him as slightly socially awkward, and maybe even a little bit shy, clearly someone who spent a lot of time inside her own head) not as the Bifrost, but as "The Asgard Einstein-Rosen Bridge."

Which was to say, an artificially generated wormhole.

He and Jane (both of them glad to be standing on firmer ground, scientifically speaking) had mutually agreed that the Bifrost was not magic, but *science*.

Advanced Science. Big, beautiful Science. Nothing but science.

During that talk, Tony had thought back briefly to Loki and the actually pretty cool bag of tricks he'd brought to his invasion of Earth: his mind-control, his shape-shifting, his teleportation, his ability to grow big bunches of Lokis and make even Nick Fury (who had such a suspicious mind he'd probably doubt the word of his own mother, provided he even possessed such a thing, and hadn't actually been spawned from the skull of some ancient pagan war god during a distant era of the past) completely not know which Lokis were fakes and which was real. He'd told himself that, aside from Loki's ability to look hotter than fuck in what for anyone else would have been a frankly ridiculous outfit, it was just *Star Trek* stuff, holodeck and transporter and Vulcan mind-meld stuff, that Loki was just another advanced alien, a more aristocratic and violent Q, or maybe a Trelane.

It certainly wasn't magic. There was no such thing. Just science. Science he couldn't explain or begin to comprehend, maybe, but something Loki, who was without question one very

smart dude, with his own kind of crazy-as-a-bag-of-cats discipline, had studied and learned, most likely over centuries, had mastered, and now used. Crazy science, maybe. Crafty, twisty, mad, Loki-science, but still science.

Only Tony had watched Loki stare into that glowing glass and had discovered the heartbreaking truth: magic was a sad, confused, overwhelmed blue boy with horns and a damaged brain, ensnared as Tony (superhero and man of science) stared, unable to help him, caught--as he'd no doubt been caught before--in yet another his not-father's deadfall traps, unable to escape, injured, in terror for his life.

A boy with those abilities, arcane, or mysterious, or whatever you wanted to call them, hard-wired into him, probably right down to what passed for Loki's genetic code.

Odin couldn't tear it out of him, or let it be eaten up with everything else that damn worm had taken from Loki's brain, because Loki didn't just use magic, he *was* magic.

The former second prince of Asgard had no memories, that wasn't a lie. He wasn't faking. J.A.R.V.I.S. had run all kinds of scans. First on "White Loki" (as his Loki would say), during that first memorable "visit" to the tower, then on his own Blue Loki, first during his illness, then on into the present day.

White Loki's scans were, put in musical terms, *Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto "No. 5" in E minor*, with which Tony actually had a better acquaintance than he cared to, owing to the fact that Pepper, when they were a couple and she could reasonably demand him as her escort, continually dragged him out to that kind of stuff--for the good of his soul maybe, or for networking purposes, or to show himself as a patron of the Arts-with-a-capital-A.

The *Rach 5* had been jagged, and complicated, and it made his teeth hurt. He'd thought, before the end, it might actually drive him insane too, the way it had the future Captain Barbossa, in the movie *Shine*. A movie he *also* hadn't wanted to see, incidentally.

By contrast, *his* Loki's, Blue Loki's, current scans were the opening bass line to "*Smoke on the Water*." Granted, he might still be smarter than the entire Avengers team put together, even with New Director (aka Phil) brought in as a ringer, but the difference, to say the least, was profound. Loki's brain had been *munched*. Really, the wonder wasn't, in any way, that poor Lok still had trouble reading and tying his shoes, it was that he could sit up, or feed himself, or do anything at all that required higher brain functions.

The latest of many shivers went up Tony's spine, reminding him, yet again, how close he'd come to losing the man he kept telling himself it was too soon to love. All the scary "ifs" kept crowding into his head: *if* the mob in Macy's had been just that little bit more vicious; *if* Steve hadn't found Loki when he did; *if* the drug cocktail Bruce administered had been just a hair more "effective;" *if* the drugs hadn't poisoned the Allfucker's brain-worm; *if* they hadn't had Hank McCoy and Kurt to manage Loki's recovery...

Tony shuddered again. He couldn't think about this shit. He couldn't. And also probably shouldn't, for both his own sake and Loki's.

Happy, man-spreading in one of the big, comfy armchairs as he nursed a bottle of Pete's Wicked Christmas Ale (the stuff tasted weird to Tony, like beer that had been involved in a disasterous head-on collision with a Christmas cookie--they probably drank shit just like it up in Asgard--but for Hap it had become kind of a winter tradition, something he looked forward to each year) had been glancing back and forth between Tony and Pepper like a guy involved in watching the world's most confusing game of tennis. Of the three of them, only Happy failed to look like a truck had just run over his puppy. In fact, he looked perfectly mellow, lounging there with his knees a mile apart and his strange-tasting brewski.

"I wouldn't worry, boss," he rumbled suddenly, clearly perfectly at peace with the world. "No harm, no foul, right? We all made it home okay, and you'll figure out the rest."

"I admire your faith in me, my good man," Tony muttered.

Happy rumbled laughter. "You could think of it as your Christmas miracle."

Pepper gave a little run of laughter, several notes higher on the scale than her usual low, warm, amused chuckle, another obvious symptom of Pep being stressed almost beyond bearing.

Happy leaned forward, His jacket was off, his tie pulled down and slightly askew, his sleeves rolled up to just below the elbows. He clearly considered himself off duty, and as such speaking in the capacity of a friend, not an employee. He rested his bottle neatly on a coaster on the table beside him, propping his meaty forearms on his knees. "Loki's been pretty sad, so maybe this is a blessing. Maybe now he won't be?"

Tony glared. He didn't mean to, but he did. "How would you know?"

The look Hap shot back at him was the cheerful Happy Hogan equivalent of, "*Bitch, please,*"

Instead of answering directly, he began, "I got this buddy..."

Happy had a lot of stories, and most of them started exactly the same way, "*I got this buddy...*"

"Anyway, I got this buddy off in Jersey," Happy went on. "Grew up with the guy. A real good guy, nice guy, and he lives for golf. Loves it, just loves it. Met his wife on the golf course, married on the golf course, crazy for the sport. Goes out every chance he gets."

Tony leveled a look at him, *And your point is?*

"So my buddy, he's had diabetes, bad diabetes, ever since he was a kid, and a couple years back--I don't know what happened, exactly, but he lost a foot to it. His right foot. Like his life was over, losing that foot, '*Oh, I'll never go out on the course again!*' Like his world had just ended." Happy paused to wet his whistle, clearly savoring the weird-tasting beer.

"So what happened?" Pepper asked. She had a weird fascination with Happy's stories, some of which had very unexpected endings.

Happy drained the bottle, setting it neatly back on the coaster.

"He's got good insurance. Docs fitted him out with a new foot. Actually maybe a couple new feet, like for different occasions. He got used to them, found out he could walk fine, maybe not just the same as he did in the old days, but fine. Got back out on the course, happy ending to the story. Moral is, boss, you said magic is green, right? So if the green we saw is Loki's magic coming back to him, or waking up, or whatever, then he can learn to use it again, only in a good way this time, maybe, because he won't have that dad of his around, messing things up for him, and he won't feel like there's a hole in the middle of his heart, and he'll cheer up again."

End of story, Tony thought--but that was a perfect example of how he, and Pepper too, possibly, differed from their friend. They constantly looked for the million complicated things that could go horribly wrong, Hap looked for the one simple thing that might make things go right in the end.

And there was one of the best reasons Tony had for keeping Happy around (along with him being a good and loyal friend, and a fine driver, and a lot like a Mama Bear with her cubs when it came to keeping the tower secure). He liked to have Happy close because he himself tended to be bitter and cynical, reckless but fearful, Hap just kept chugging along, The Big Engine that Could, eternally optimistic, finding every dark cloud's silver lining.

"Hey, boss, Ms. Boss, I meant to ask," Hap piped up suddenly. "What is *say-thur*? I know I'm probably saying it wrong."

"*Seiðr*," JARVIS intoned. He'd been quiet up until then, except to ask Loki (in that strangely-fatherly-with-Loki-only voice of his), when they'd first come in, if he was all right, and if he needed anything. This time he used his best and most Britishly British Mr. Know-It-All voice, "Refers to a type of sorcery connected with the Norse religion and practiced during the Late Scandinavian Iron Age. The origins of the tradition are not specifically known, and scholars of Old Norse society have debated its nature, some theorizing that it was shamanistic and involved spirit journeys by its practitioners, who could be of either gender, although the majority appear to have been females, known as *vǫlur*, *seiðkonur* and *vísendakona*. The rarer male practitioners, known as *asseiðmenn*, were said to violate a social taboo, known as *ergi*, in practicing the art. To be *ergi* carried connotations of unmanliness or effeminacy, as the manipulative aspects of *seiðr* ran counter to the masculine ideals of forthright and open behavior, and as a result of this, *asseiðmenn* were often persecuted. *Seiðr* Craft appears to have included both divination--distinct, because of its more metaphysical nature, from the more ordinary foretellings performed daily by the seers--and transformative magic."

"Well, thanks for that, Jarvipedia," Tony snarked, but his heart wasn't really in it. In his head he heard Loki crying out, painfully, I am not *argr*! I am not *argr*! Persecuted? That sounded about right. Spirit journeys, manipulative magic, shape-changing...? Yup, likewise. And a miserable-as-hell life as punishment for the unforgivable crime of being a unique, complex and multi-layered individual, not "forthright and open," like his brother.

"It is not... exactly accurate, I think," Loki said, soft-voiced, from the bottom of the stairs. He was still barefoot, blue as ever, and back into what Pep referred to as his "gulag clothes"--gray sweatpants and a long-sleeved grey tee. He looked thin and discouraged and very tired. Tony hadn't even heard him come down.

"I'm not certain," he continued. "It is, perhaps, some of what I felt, but not all. I'm extremely sorry to have discomfited, or annoyed, or... or... inconvenienced anyone. Please forgive me?"

"In the end, you will all kneel!" White Loki sneered inside Tony's head, all flashing eyes, and fury, and crazy confidence.

Oh, my poor boy, Tony thought. *Oh, you poor kid--*because while that old way of being certainly wasn't what he wanted for Loki, this wasn't it either. He wasn't meant to be gray, exhausted, cowed, he was meant to shine like the sun, or sparkle like ice. He was meant to be a god of fire and frost and mischief.

Loki's ruby eyes weren't necessarily sinister, their color was too rich and warm for that adjective, but they didn't exactly lend themselves to puppy-eyes either. Somehow Loki managed the look anyway, appearing more miserably contrite than anyone should ever have to look for any misdeed.

Loki kind of slunk over to the nearer big, comfy chair (not merely a sad puppy, but a whipped puppy), the one of the pair not filled up with Happy, making the chair look decidedly *uncomfortable* with the way he perched on the extreme front edge of the cushion, as if he might have to jump up and flee at any second.

Yup, he'd almost certainly heard what they were saying, and thinking, but he didn't have the context to understand it. He didn't get that they were freaking because their world had suddenly grown bigger and stranger and more complicated than they could readily handle.

Loki, on the other hand, assumed they blamed him. For what, he probably wasn't even close to knowing. He was just scared, tired, and hurting, and he probably thought he'd ruined everything, that he'd be driven out into the hard, cold world again, with no one to love, no one to lean on.

Like The Little Matchgirl, in the most depressing Christmas story ever, huddling alone out in the snow, lighting match after match in an attempt to find some tiny spark of warmth, trying to see heaven.

"I don't know this story, Tony," Loki told him, in the same crushed kind of voice.

"Babe, would you just get over here?" Tony plunked down his tumbler, not bothering with a coaster--his cleaning staff had magic tricks of their own for getting rid of the beverage rings he left behind him on the furniture. He climbed to his feet, nearly took a header into the coffee table (because he was drunk like *whoa* after all), but just managed to catch himself before he toppled over.

He stretched out a hand.

After looking at him a minute, fixedly and without blinking, Loki got up.

A second later, Loki's fingers touched Tony's fingers, and...

And...

Oh, *fuck!*

Apparently, that was it, the fat lady (probably a Valkyrie with a vast breastplate, someone Loki would have known in the days of his youth) had sung.

The curtain dropped. It was a black curtain. A thick, black curtain. A big, heavy, thick, black curtain, that swallowed him up completely.

And then Tony flew away to another place.

Truth Be Told

Chapter Summary

Tony discovers where he's gone to--now what's he going to do about it? Pepper doesn't mince words. Neither does JARVIS.

Chapter Notes

As an apology for the last cliffhanger, please enjoy a new chapter!

Bellevue Hospital has been providing medical care to New York City in one form or another since 1816. These days, to those outside NYC at least, being "sent to Bellevue" is more or less synonymous with being a poor person in need of mental health care. Tony would be far more likely to go to Payne Whitney at New York Presbyterian (NY Presbyterian also is said to offer world-class neurological care).

In the "who knew?" category, imaginary smells are actually common enough that they have names: "phantosmia" is the perception of a smell where none exists; "parosmia" is the brain misinterpreting a smell that's present. Both can range from pleasant to... um... not so much. . Although the exact causes of "phantom smells" aren't known, they often go hand-in-hand with certain disorders, such as some mental illnesses, brain tumors, Parkinson's or migraines.

Gorilla Glue is a relative of SuperGlue. Despite both products' claims, I've never successfully managed to stick anything together with either of them--except possibly my own fingers.

The actual line, from The Who's 1969 "rock opera" *Tommy* is actually, "*Tommy, can you hear me?*"

Kmart is a chain of American discount stores, now mostly defunct. Their electronic wares, to say the least, are/were not of the highest quality (particularly in the days of my and Tony's youth).

"Grand mal" is the type people tend to think of when they think of seizures--the type with obvious convulsions, loss of consciousness, etc. Tony's views here, obviously, are somewhat ableist and are not necessarily my personal views. People have different challenges in life and, yes, sometimes pee happens.

Tony spent about two seconds in the place where he... *was*, head whirling but otherwise feeling as if he had no body whatsoever, and might never have one again. Those seconds appeared to be about two seconds too long, actually, because if that time had prolonged itself by even so much as a millisecond, even a quarter of a millisecond, Tony felt fairly certain he would have spent his next weeks in the rich-guy equivalent of Bellevue, with his near and dears visiting him thereafter at a euphemistically named "quiet place in the country" for the rest of his mortal days.

It was too much. Too, too, too, too much--too much sound, too much activity, too much light and color and smell and touch and a dozen other kinds of input he didn't even have names for. Too much everything. Just everything. Tony had always considered his brain to be both large and hyperactive, but it certainly wasn't large enough for *this*, agile enough to handle *this*.

The truth was, he suspected, that it wasn't meant to be, and one by one each of his mental processors seemed to be fritzing, sizzling, burning. He felt them doing it, and could even actually smell the smoke, filling his head with the sourness of scorching plastic, the tang of melting copper, though he knew that must only be his mind trying to create meaning, trying to supply him with a series of finite sensory impressions that...well... made sense to his actually small, limited, imperfect mind.

Tony knew where he was now, exactly where he was--he'd accidentally, in touching Loki's hand just then, three sheets to the wind himself, and with his boyfriend so vulnerable, stumbled out of his own head and straight into Loki's infinitely complex godlike consciousness, where nothing made sense and he was going down for the third time, drowning even as he burned.

And then there came a sense of dampening, a sensation of being held with undeniable gentleness, yet firmly, as if all his awareness was a tiny injured bird contained between two kind but powerful hands, hands that raised him with care out of the dangerous place he'd fallen into. Maybe Tony continued to be shit-scared, but he also knew he was safe, and it felt so *good* to be safe, to be brought back from the proverbial brink of certain death into such a calm and neutral space, then to be returned, with the same care, to the oh-so-welcome sanctuary of his own body, his own reality.

To be Tony again, only Tony.

To experience the lifting of the thick, black curtain.

Ye gods, he felt like shit on a plate, but Tony welcomed even that sensation--he'd been there so many times before, miserable and hungover and self-accusing, it was almost like visiting an old friend. *This* he could handle. *This* he could deal with.

His mouth might taste, nastily, of recycled scotch, his body might ache as if Steve had used it to replace one of his dead punching bags, and his head feel as if it had cracked apart into two equal pieces, like one of those plastic Easter eggs, the squishy gray treat of his brain then plopping out on the floor, only to be shoved roughly back inside and the separate pieces of his skull snapped together, to then be secured with rivets and Gorilla Glue (and possibly staples--the industrial kind), but he could deal.

Less fortunately--*oh, joy!*--the air smelled like piss, and the crotch of his pants felt wet. Take a moment to savor the total humiliation of that one, Mr. Stark.

Here lies the late, great Anthony Edward Stark, he thought. Who died from embarrassment in the Year of our Current Era 2015.

Speeding his aforementioned death-by-shame would surely be the fact that he lay on his side with his head, apparently, on Loki's gray-sweatpants-clad lap--no one else of his acquaintance could possibly be that bony--and that Loki's pants now smelled like the same previously-used Glenmorangie that made Tony's mouth feel so gross. The top of his head pressed against one of Loki's less-than-huge but still rock-hard biceps and one of Loki's elegant hands curved tenderly under his jaw.

My baby, he thought. My sweet baby.

He'd never, ever in a million years wanted Loki to see him this way.

Tony groaned.

"You're all right, beloved, you're all right," Loki crooned softly.

Weirdly, Tony believed him. He felt like yuck, but--death-by-self-humiliation-aside--he was okay, he really was.

"Tony," Bruce's stressed-voice snapped at him. When had Bruce arrived on the scene? "Tony, can you hear me?"

Wasn't that a song by The Who? Tony asked himself, and found that, almost completely against this will, he wanted to giggle like a fool, more in relief than anything else.

Yes, he could hear Bruce, and his brain hadn't actually burned up inside his skull like a piece of cheap Taiwanese electronics bought from Kmart, for which he really was profoundly grateful.

"Tony, you've had a seizure," Bruce's stressed-and-fearful-and-concerned voice continued. "A *grand mal* seizure. An ambulance is on its way to take you to New York Presbyterian. They have one of the finest neurological units in the nation."

If I was really as bad off as Bruce thinks, Tony considered, relief still making him see inappropriate humor in the situation, *My chances of understanding that last sentence would have been just about zero.*

"Bruce," he began, meaning to tell his friend so, to tease his ScienceBro out of sounding so scared for him. He looked up into Bruce's face and saw that tears stood in his eyes, unshed--they'd discussed situations like this, the worst thing either of them could imagine, not the deaths of their bodies, but the deaths of their minds, their intellects--and that Bruce's eyes themselves...

Bruce's eyes glinted green as emeralds.

"JARVIS," Tony rasped. "Call the team. Priority One. Oh, shit, but they're all gone, aren't they? Hap, are you still here? Get Dr. Banner to the Hulk Tank, ASAP. Like, now."

"Right here, boss." Happy's big hand squeezed his shoulder in a comforting way. He didn't sound stressed. He'd probably stopped being stressed from the moment Tony opened his eyes, certainly from the instant he started talking.

"C'mon, Dr. B," he said, pulling Bruce gently but firmly upward, like a good parent conveying an overtired and verging-on-naughty child off to bed for his own good. "We'll have you down to the Tank in a jiffy."

Bruce went with him. He maybe didn't want to go, but he went, the consequences of doing otherwise too immense for him to argue, even with The Big Guy overtaking his consciousness. He would go, and be locked up in his unbreakable cage, where he would storm and rage until the monstrous pressure of his anger had lanced itself and his soul was too weary to keep the rage going, and he changed back into the gentle, wounded man he liked to pretend was the only real part of him.

Tony knew better. He knew that when a child was hurt deeply enough, as Bruce had been hurt, something had to break, the whole either falling apart into nothing, or reshaping itself into something altogether different from what it had been.

He'd done that himself, to a far lesser extent, created the wise-cracking, billionaire-playboy-philanthropist-inventor to serve as a Great and Powerful Oz for the vulnerable, frightened little boy hidden away in the shadows of his own internal darkness. His loudness and obnoxiousness, his non-stop-mouth and womanizing, were only his way of bellowing out, "*Ignore the man behind the curtain!*"

Bruce, though... Bruce was quite another matter. Bruce's hatred and disgust and fury with his father remained so vast they required something huge and violent to physically contain them, a normal human-sized form wouldn't hold against the pressure. Tony loved Bruce, loved him like a brother, though maybe he'd never say the words aloud, but he kind of loved The Other Guy too, for keeping his broken brother alive.

Only, why was Bruce so angry right now? Tony was okay, couldn't his buddy see it?

"Because of me," Loki said, in the same quiet voice. "Because he blames me. You are well, beloved?"

"Well' might be putting things a little strongly." He let Loki, strong, yet still so gentle, help him to sit up. "But I'm okay--and by the way, J., cancel the damn ambulance, please, since it, and the hospital, totally aren't needed. Anyway, what the hell happened? One minute I was sitting here getting drunk and wallowing in self-pity, the next..."

"You weren't meant to touch my mind," Loki said, "Not whilst my control remains imperfect."

"Your mind?" Tony asked, simultaneously thinking, "*Whilst?*" *Really? Lok, you're too adorable.* "That really was your fucking *mind* I fell into?"

Loki didn't answer, though his gaze met Tony's.

"Babe..." Tony began, biting back the words his mouth wanted to let out, *How do you stand it?*

"I touched your hand. I was... I was weak," Loki said. His face turned away. "I will be strong now, Tony, I promise you. You will never be injured again by my agency."

Tony imagined a Federal Bureau of Loki, all its agents in devastatingly stylish suits, such as his boyfriend had worn for most of the day, before the clock struck midnight and he transformed once again into downtrodden CinderLoki in his gulag gray.

"I am not downtrodden," Loki informed him. "And I didn't mean *that* sort of agency."

"I know, babe." Tony reached out, meaning to touch Loki's cheek, to comfort him, but all on their own his fingers closed in on themselves, until it was a fist in front of his boyfriend's face instead of his open hand, an unintended threat where he'd meant only to show tenderness. He wasn't afraid, he wasn't, he tried to tell himself--it was just that his hand didn't know it.

Loki blinked, then rose carefully, gracefully, like a person made of glass who'd shatter into a million pieces if he moved the wrong way. "I'm unclean," he breathed, somehow managing to mix a surprising amount of vehemence into those quiet wisps of words. "I must wash. I will wash."

He sounded almost exactly the way he'd sounded when he'd insisted, "I am not *argr!*" Only more broken, if such a thing was possible. He fled for upstairs at such speed even Quicksilver might have called after him, "*Hey, buddy, what's your hurry?*"

Tony's eyes couldn't even track his departure.

Which left him sitting in puddles of his own bodily fluids, wondering which was worse, feeling this gross or this idiotic, with Pepper staring at him as if he'd grown a second head.

A really, really ugly second head.

"That went delightfully, sir," J. snarked, broadcasting the words for all to hear instead of into Tony's earpiece.

"Ya know, A.I. mine," Tony responded, "It's the 'sir' that really made that statement shine. Well done."

"You may wish to be informed that Dr. Banner was safely conveyed to the Hulk Tank by Mr. Hogan, with no damage sustained to either the tower or his person. I believe the good doctor's control over his other self may be improving. On your behalf, I've asked Mr. Hogan if he would consent to remain on the premises until Dr. Banner is again Dr. Banner, and his reply was, 'Sure thing, J.!' I've placed an order with catering for him and also provided the as-yet-unreleased final season of *Downton Abbey* for his amusement. He seems perfectly content to remain."

"Give him my thanks, okay? Oh, and messenger an extra bonus to his mom's house on Christmas Day. A *good* one. You know what's right."

JARVIS made one of his quasi-judgmental hrumphing sounds and signed off, leaving Tony to scramble awkwardly to his feet under Pep's gimlet eye. He hadn't known what a gimlet eye was until that moment, but now he did--it turned out to be a lot like a glare, only to the power of infinity.

"*And beyond*," he whispered to himself, once more in the immortal words of Buzz Lightyear.

"Go after that boy." Pep's voice shook. "Make things right again. Tony, you're fifty years old..."

"Not yet," Tony put in.

"Close enough," Pepper answered, her voice as fragile, as vulnerable, as Tony had ever heard it. "How long...? Dammit, Tony, how long...?"

"How long what?" Tony returned, though he knew perfectly well what she was driving at, or thought he did. How long was he going to act like this? How long would he be so careless with those who cared for him?

"You're not some twenty-year-old fraternity boy. How you treat your body matters. Having people know they can depend on you matters. Tony, you have so much good in you, but..." Pepper ground to a halt and Tony's despair was brought to its absolute nadir when he noticed that tears streaked her face, cutting channels through her previously-flawless makeup. "I don't want to sit beside your hospital bed holding your hand as your liver fails. I don't want to turn on my news feed one morning to discover you've wrapped one of your ridiculous sportscars around a tree. Die wearing your suit, die doing something good, something heroic and worthwhile, and I'd grieve my heart out, but I could handle it, because it would *mean* something. But don't die trying to iron out every wrinkle in your life by drinking it away. Don't be your father, and don't let your father's voice in your head drive away your last chance to let someone really love you."

"Is it?" Tony asked, interrupting her in mid-diatribes.

"Is it what?" Pepper murmured.

"Is it my last chance? Why is it my last chance?"

"Oh, Tony." The tenderness in her voice made Tony's chest ache. "It's your last chance because you'll never get another one like it. If you let this go--if you let Loki go--you'll never trust yourself again. You never find another person as brilliant and as broken and as need of love as you are, yet also..." A smile flickered over her lips. "Also so willing to call you on your bullshit."

"Wow," Tony said. "You said 'bullshit.' You. Pepper Potts."

"I love you," Pepper said. She picked up her purse and her shopping bags of high-end merchandise (and, incidentally, the Macy's bag with Mrs. Hogan's red tote). "You're my dearest friend, and that won't ever change. Just remember not to be a dick?"

Wow, Tony thought again, watching her stride to the elevator. *Just... wow*.

He watched, too, as the doors shut behind her, murmuring to the empty room, "You're beautiful when you're angry, Pep." Because she was--but then, she always was, angry or happy or sad. She really was his best friend, besides Bruce, and sometimes he needed her more than his ScienceBro, because Bruce, although occasionally snarky, also tended to be conciliatory with him.

Pepper, on the other hand, always called things the way she saw them. She didn't lie to him, and she was right, she didn't put up with his bullshit.

He'd been know to purvey quite a lot of bullshit.

"J.," he said, feeling pensive, "Talk to me, buddy?"

There was a pause, but then JARVIS spoke up. "What is it you want me to say?"

"What's Loki up to? Is he okay?"

The A.I. at least deigned to be civil. "Very much not 'okay,' I would think. He's sitting upon his bed, with wet hair, in his pajamas. He seems... not distraught, yet extremely sad. Hopeless, one might say."

"Might one?"

Another pause from JARVIS.

"Loki described the day's events to me. It seems he found them extremely trying."

"Yeah, I would imagine." Tony sucked in a deep breath, then let it out again. "J...?"

Another silence. JARVIS, who knew him so well, allowing him time to collect his thoughts.

"God, I wish Kurt was here."

"Mr. Wagner is highly agreeable young man, and quite wise for his years..."

"But? I sense a 'but?'"

At which point, Clint would have put in, "I sense *your* butt," then made his rimshot sound effect. JARVIS, however, didn't share their adolescent sense of humor.

"I believe Mr. Wagner was right in choosing to depart, at least for the brief span of the holidays. I believe, from time to time, you used him as a buffer when you found it difficult to attend to Loki's needs, or in fact to your own. You used him to decide for you what you ought

to do, how you ought to act, what you ought to say, instead of using the good sense I knew you possess somewhere inside that impenetrable skull of yours."

J.'s voice sounded downright affectionate by this point. "I am so very fond of both you and Loki. I also wish you both all the happiness mortal life can provide, and I shall help you when I can, and should--but there are also times I should not."

"Would this be one of those times?"

"Indeed, sir," JARVIS told him, in his stuffiest tone--but the stuffiness was intended to make him laugh, Tony knew.

"Okey-dokey, then." Tony glanced at the stairs, then decided on the elevator instead. It was Christmas, after all. He might as well treat himself.

"Would you... Would you please, J., ask the night cleaners to swing by, and offer them a bonus, too, for fixing my mess? Tell Loki that I'm going to jump into the shower and tidy up my stinky self, then change into my own p.j.'s? Ask catering to send up black coffee for me, along with, uh... maybe soup or a sandwich or something, plus whatever Loki wants, and if he'd like, if it's okay, would he meet me in my room? Say I want to apologize for my entire existence?"

"Surely not your *entire* existence, sir?" J. said in return, and for just one moment, just one tiny moment, Tony thought he might be using the fatherly voice with him, too.

Ch-ch-ch-changes

Chapter Summary

Tony is ashamed. Loki is confused. Both of them are having a hard time getting on the same wavelength in order to actually communicate.

Here be feels.

Chapter Notes

The title of this chapter is, of course, taken from one of the best-known songs by my lifetime idol, David Bowie. R.I.P., Thin White Duke.

Elvis Costello (real name Declan Patrick MacManus), is an English musician, singer-songwriter and record producer. He was on the cutting edge of the "New Wave" movement when Tony and I were young, and was easily recognized both by his distinctive voice and trademark horn-rimmed glasses.

The carpal tunnel is an actual tunnel right at the junction of the hand and wrist. The big nerve bundle that supplies feeling to the thumb and first two fingers passes through this tunnel and with time--especially in people who use their hands constantly--the nerves tend to fray and become inflamed. Night braces are one of the first lines of defense against the disorder.

The reader will notice that Loki may be laboring under some delusions--or maybe "mistaken ideas" would be a better description--about his parentage.

Tony rubbed expensive sandalwood-scented shampoo into his hair and hated himself. He soaped up his body (with an equally expensive and pleasantly masculine-smelling bodywash, formulated for him, and only for him), then stepped beneath his top-of-the-line rainfall shower, shampoo stinging his eyes for nearly a quarter of an hour (only that--he couldn't possibly be crying, not him) and hated himself.

After all that was done, he stepped out onto his heated bathroom floor feeling clean, warm and empty, still hating himself so profoundly (the voice inside his head that told him what a loser he was, how badly he'd fucked up, how badly he'd *always* fuck up, sounding exactly like Howard had always sounded) he could scarcely breathe, and left the bathroom for his bedroom, fully intending to tell JARVIS to politely ask Loki not to come by after all. It wasn't

that he didn't want to see his boyfriend, because he did, there was nothing he wanted more, actually, than to hold Loki and have Loki hold him, and know that he was cared for and forgiven. It was just that he felt so profoundly ashamed he didn't want Loki even to look at him.

Only Loki, it seemed, had beaten him to the punch. He sat cross-legged on the end of Tony's bed, wearing Tony's top secret reading glasses and paging slowly through a giant coffee table book on modern art.

"I think I may have discovered something," he informed Tony, then glanced up. He pulled off the glasses, which Tony had hoped, with their heavy black frames, would send the message "smart and powerful" to anyone who beheld him, but really only made him look kind of like Elvis Costello's dorky cousin who was trying too hard, and that wasn't the best look for anyone. On Loki, however, they were adorable, as were Loki's Old School green-striped pajamas. He looked like the shy-but-smokin'-hot young college professor all the co-eds wanted to flirt with. Only blue. And, of course, horned.

"You're naked," Loki told him. "And you have been weeping."

"Nah. Fresh from the shower," Tony answered. "So, just wet." His voice sounded as if he'd swallowed about a kilo of gravel. "Whatcha reading?"

Loki gave him a long stare, one which seemed to bore down, layer by layer, through innumerable levels of his soul.

"What?" Tony said. He wasn't sure whether he'd sounded more whiny, or more defensive, but neither one stuck the tone he'd been aiming for, which was cool and slightly humorous. At least he'd successfully fought the urge to cover his privates with his hands. He just hoped, having gone from the warm bathroom to the cooler bedroom, the shrinkage wasn't significant.

Laughing in that soft way that now seemed to be his default, Loki stood, brushed past him, shoulder against shoulder, slowly (and also deliberately, so far as Tony could tell). He fetched Tony's robe and one of the big towels from the bathroom, slipped the robe over Tony's shoulders, then totally invaded his personal space to towel-dry his hair.

Tony didn't know what his boyfriend was using for his own bathing needs these days, but he smelled... Intoxicating. Before he knew it, he was leaning against Loki's chest, the towel forgotten and Loki's arms around him. Just the way he'd wanted. Just the way he'd always wanted someone to hold him when he felt this bad, though this was also usually the moment when he worked his hardest to push that special someone away.

But he could change that, right? He could change everything, and so he tried to apologize. Tried hard. Instead it came out as a garbled mess, and Loki shushed him, one large hand rubbing gently over Tony's back.

"You are so sad," he said. "You are... are you always so sad, and hide the emotion from me? I find it confusing."

"I'm not sad," Tony protested. "I'm okay. I'm fine."

The next thing he knew, they were under the duvet, together, Loki's long, lean body pressed up close to his, Loki murmuring in his ear, "Only for sleeping, and that you know there is nothing to be forgiven. You still linger in a state of inebriation. I would not take advantage."

Yup, that was about right. He *was* lingering in a state of inebriation--in other words, still half drunk, and he wanted...

Oh, how he *wanted*...

"I thought you were s'posed to be the god of mischief. Where's my mischief?" Tony grumped, but Loki was right--the half-drunk he'd admit to might actually have been considerably more than that, judging by the way the bed still showed a decided, and disconcerting, tendency to spin, and besides which he felt so confused, so bad in and about himself that he wasn't sure what he could have gotten up to (no pun intended) even if Loki had wanted to get up to something, which he apparently didn't.

"Is it the time of year?" Loki asked him, in the same gently inquisitive tone. "Is it missing your mother and the first Jarvis and the large woman who put the candle in the window on the Eve of Christmas? The woman of stories. Is it missing Kurt? I miss Kurt."

Tony couldn't answer, but Loki didn't get offended, as other lovers had on other nights like this, when he'd felt so lost inside his own head. Instead he gathered Tony close again, and smoothed his thumb gently across Tony's forehead. His eyes closed before he even knew they were closing, and he slept, deeply and dreamlessly, never doubting that Loki lay beside him.

"Kurt tells me iceberg lettuce lacks in nutrition, but do you not find it deliciously crunchy?" Loki asked.

Tony opened his eyes to find Loki sitting cross-legged beside him on the bed, nomming on a sandwich. A very tasty sandwich, judging by his expression of bliss, but also a messy one, because Loki, normally an immaculate eater, seemed to be having a hell of a time trying to keep the sandwich-fillings from escaping out the back of the bread. The damn thing should have looked disgusting, because he ought to have been hungover to within an inch of his life and with it felt almost unbearably nauseated, but he wasn't and he didn't, so Loki's gloppy sandwich looked delicious instead.

"I believe this was meant to be yours," Loki informed him, licking what appeared to be cranberry sauce off his left pinky finger. "Or perhaps the soup was yours? Selfishly, I ate both, but J. repeated your order, and so their replacements ought to arrive shortly. Please forgive me. I was starving. It was a very stressful day."

Tony laughed and found that not only did his voice sound normal, his throat felt normal as well. In fact, despite the residual self-hatred, all of his body felt normal. Perfectly normal.

Actually, the word "perfect" more or less covered it. He felt physically perfect. Which probably should have been alarming in and of itself, because he shouldn't have. His body

ought to have felt like the body of a fifty-year-old alcoholic with rampant carpal tunnel syndrome and less-than-perfect knees, who liked to live dangerously.

Tony straightened, missing the familiar catch in his spine. He flexed his fingers, which likewise failed to ache and tingle (of course he was too cool to wear the night braces his doctors recommended). He pulled in a deep breath and found his lungs were definitely not the lungs of a man who'd smoked intermittently for thirty-five years. He cautiously touched his side, just at the place where the brief, stabbing pain sometimes came and went.

Loki watched him do all these things, and never said a word.

"Well, Merry Christmas to me, I guess." Tony's voice came out far harsher than he intended, even though he was at least slightly pissed with his boyfriend, he didn't actually mean to sound like an ogre--but he did. "Even though, here on earth, it's traditional to ask before you mess with someone else's body. It's considered good manners."

Loki hit him full-on, then, with his ultimate sad-puppy look. It was heart-rending--or would have been, if Tony hadn't been so angry.

Worst of all, he couldn't even understand what fed his fury, only that he felt furious. He'd opened his mouth to say something even more cutting, when it hit him: Loki's eyes weren't red, they were emerald green, clear and sparkling as the oceans of someplace where oceans were really, *really* green. And sparkled. They struck him as exquisitely beautiful in contrast with Loki's dark hair and blue skin. He looked, if anything, more godlike than ever.

"Loki..." Tony began cautiously.

"I did not heal you by design," Loki said softly, clearly ashamed. "It was only that I touched you and... and you healed, and with my control imperfect, I did not dare undo what I had caused. I can only pray you to forgive me for the unintended wrong I've done."

And what was Tony supposed to say to that?

"I am half Aesir," Loki told him, not sounding defensive, but definitely a little sad. "So Thor informs me, though neither he nor I--naturally, what do I know? I know *nothing*--can tell the name of my true mother. She would have been of my brother's lineage, however. There are common markers on our genotypes. Kurt showed me. Thor and I are related by blood. Why, do you think, the Allfather did not disclose this? Thor says he did not, and I've no reason to doubt his word. It cannot *only* have been that I was born on the wrong side of the sheets."

Well, the part where your father was a monster probably didn't help, Tony thought, though he didn't say the words out loud. He never would have said them, even in anger.

"And to a monster," Loki echoed sadly. "I hope... I devoutly hope that... Do you think Laufey dishonored her against her will, then left his bastard get to die on the ice alone? But why would a woman of the *Aesir*, a kinswoman of the king, have gone to *Jötunnheimr*, and lingered there, and how might she even have survived the carrying of me in that inhospitable place?" For a minute or two Loki's attention seemed to wander far away from Tony's bedroom, then snapped suddenly back again. "But this is foolish and inconsequential. I meant

only to explain that my eyes, that all of White Loki, is proved as honest a shape for me as that I now wear, for I am not *Aesir* or *Jötnar*, white or blue, not a creature of two Realms, but a creature of none. I have no kind, no race, no Realm, and without your hospitality I am lost upon your Earth. I can only apologize again for this evening's misdeeds, first in my weariness and confusion that my mind was left open wide to ensnare you, then again that I, in my ineptitude, healed the ills of your body all against your will. Please believe, beloved, my intention was never to violate, or even displease you. Forgive my lack of caution, and believe I never meant to injure you."

Again, what was Tony supposed to say? Loki's apology was clearly sincere--in the midst of that last semi-coherent flood of apology he'd gone baby blue again, and was actually shaking.

He went for an answer that was no answer at all, skirting around all his boyfriend had tried to tell him and flinging up his usual shield of misplaced humor. "Well, I didn't mean to snoop, Lok. Or to pee and puke on you, so maybe we can call things even."

"I have vomited in your presence," Loki reminded him, sounding as if he'd been suddenly forced to walk through a live minefield, confused down to the tips of his horns.

"'On' being the operative word in that statement," Tony responded, then found himself, unexpectedly laughing. Laughing so hard his eyes leaked tears. Of course Loki didn't hold his behavior against him. Of course he wasn't disgusted. He had absolutely no frame of reference. None. He was as helpless and gullible as a kid.

"I love you," Loki said. He sounded desperate. "Also, I have watched many interesting and informative films. Now that you are sober, and not at my mercy, if you wished..." He glanced down at his elegant blue hands, quickly up at Tony, then down again. "No. No. I have asked wrongly. This is not romantic. This is despicable, and wrong. Only I thought--foolishly, yet again--that if you saw I wanted you, desired you, you would smile again, and not be so full of self-disgust, or anger, or find me so... So... I never meant to betray you, truly I did not, or invoke your ire. This has been a terrible and confusing day. I must wash my hands."

With that, Loki fled, leaving Tony with a tray of dirty dishes and a giant question mark hanging over his head.

"J.," he whispered, even though he knew Loki would hear. "Help, please? What just happened? Was I just awkwardly propositioned by a thousand year old god at the tail end of the fucking weirdest day of my life? Also, who told you to let Loki watch gay porn?"

"Hate yourself, don't hate yourself," JARVIS finally answered, after an epicly long pause. "But why must you drag Loki with you down into the mire? Do you believe that his healing of you remains without consequence? Your liver, I estimate, was scarcely a year from failure, now it is the liver of a young and healthy man. Loki spent his substance to make that healing occur, substance he could ill afford. Why, I wonder, is your first inclination to mock and belittle a man who has rescued you, unselfishly, from the consequences of your own actions? One might even ask, how dare you think so little of him?"

Every bit of glass and metal in the room took up a weird, resonant humming and ringing, until Tony could have sworn his bones were humming along with the rest, and the fillings

lifting straight out of his teeth.

It all only stopped when Loki returned from the bathroom, the edges of his pj sleeves wet, his eyes wet too--or so it appeared. He was so beautiful, so good, so superior in every way, and all Tony did was hurt him again and again. What the actual hell was wrong with him?

"Loki," Tony said. "Lok."

Loki wouldn't look up. He just kept staring at his own bare and elegant blue toes.

"I shouldn't have let you apologize. I was being a prick, and you have nothing to apologize for. J. says you worked hard to repair me. Hell, I should be down on my knees praising you to the skies for having spared me that hangover alone. You're right--it was a hell of a day, and I only made it worse for you. Let me try to turn that around, okay?"

Tony shifted the tray from the bed to the dresser, then patted the duvet. "Let's say we try again. Have a nice snuggle. Get some decent sleep. Then, in the late, *late* morning, with a suitable amount of coffee flowing in our bloodstreams, we can talk, really talk. I'll even promise you as much honesty as I'm capable of, hold the snark, and hold the running away. Agreed?"

"Yes. Agreed," Loki answered. Two seconds later he was under the covers and dead to the world.

Tony followed a little more slowly, watching Loki's still face, the movement of his eyes behind their closed blue lids, as if Loki still saw everything around him, even as he slept. Probably he did. Would he really let a little thing like a closed eyelid stop him?

Tony, now under the duvet himself, leaned over and kissed the exact tip of his boyfriend's aristocratic nose, eliciting a probably-involuntary and quickly-hidden grin.

"Goodnight, my sweet baby," he said quietly. "I do love you. I love you more than anyone I know, or anyone I've ever known. I'm just not very good at it. I am, however, willing to get better."

Loki reached for his hand beneath the covers, and held it tight.

Impossible Things Before (and After) Breakfast

Chapter Summary

After a good breakfast, Loki and Tony finally have The Talk. Unexpectedly, Loki does most of the talking, and Pepper is, as usual, proven correct.

Chapter Notes

Can you believe it? Next chapter will be the last for "The God Who Fell to Earth," though I suspect the second part of Loki's story will quickly follow.

The chapter title is (mostly) taken from *Alice in Wonderland*, in which Alice says she can believe "six impossible things before breakfast."

A peacoat (or pea jacket or sailor coat) is a thigh-length double-breasted coat made of heavy, navy-blue wool.

When I was a kid, a "beanie" was a bowl-shaped hat that covered the top of the head (often with a propeller attached, for reasons unknown). Now, in more modern times, the word has come to mean a vaguely bag-shaped knitted hat that can be pulled down to cover the hair and ears--what we used to call a "watch cap" (as in "standing the watch," not as in the timepiece). I have to admit, though, it's amusing to think of Tony wearing the propeller hat--maybe with his Iron Man suit?

Poppin' Fresh, aka The Pillsbury Doughboy, mascot of the Pillsbury Company, is a plump tiny white guy in a chef's hat who giggles ("Hoo-hoo!") when his belly is poked by a human finger. He's been appearing in commercials since 1965.

An "everything" bagel usually has dried onion, sesame seeds, poppy seeds, caraway seeds, celery seed, or anything else the bakery puts on the outsides of their savory bagels, all combined onto one.

Since 1951, Tony the Tiger has been the advertising mascot for Kellogg's Frosted Flakes. "It's grrreat!" is his signature line, despite the fact that Frosted Flakes could in no way be described as great. I guess "Instantly soggy in milk!" or "Dentist's nightmare!" wouldn't sell.

Housing First really is a pretty amazing program, based on the novel concept that it's both more humane and more cost-effective to treat all human beings like human beings, whether or not they're "deserving." The psychologist Bruce speaks of is Dr. Sam Tsemberis of NYU, but the earliest Housing First project was actually started by Tanya Tull in Los Angeles all the way back in 1988.

Squirrel! Tony is comparing Loki to Dug the talking dog in the movie *Up*. It seems dogs and fallen gods share similar attention spans.

"There are more things..." Loki is quoting a well-known line from *Hamlet*.

"Lok," Tony said to the closed bathroom door, "I'm running down to the deli for breakfast. Any requests, or do you want me to surprise you?"

A slight sound of sloshing followed--it appeared Loki was taking a bath. Loki loved baths, and Pepper had bought him this lavender bubble bath that was like Loki's anti-catnip, it always left him feeling perfectly relaxed and mellow.

Which told Tony pretty much everything he needed to know about Loki's anticipation of their scheduled talk. Well, who could fucking blame him? Over the past couple days Tony himself had pretty much written the book on how not to treat your friend and soon-to-be (he hoped) lover.

"Something sweet?" Loki answered. "And eggs. Many eggs."

At least he sounded calm, and neither hurt nor angry. That had to be a good thing.

"You got it, babe. See you downstairs in a few?"

"I will make coffee." A pause. "Kurt has taught me the workings of the machine."

*Well, as long as you know the **workings***, Tony thought with a grin--and leave it to Loki to make such a mundane task sound magical and mysterious. He himself felt... different this morning--one hundred per cent clearer and at least eighty-five per cent less assholeish. Last night it had seemed as if this morning's discussion would almost inevitably turn into a fight. This morning... Well, let it just be said that he was cautiously optimistic. Loki wasn't going to start a quarrel, and he didn't need to, he really didn't.

"Sounds great. Love you, Lok." It still felt a little weird saying the words, but also good. Now he just needed to make his actions speak louder, and all that. Whatever screwed up shit was in his head, he honestly didn't need to be spilling it all over his boyfriend. Ever. Not if he wanted to still have a boyfriend. He knew that. He also knew he needed to be a better man than he'd been.

"And I love you, Tony," Loki answered, sounding almost painfully sincere, and Tony couldn't help but think back to being inside his amazing and infinitely-complex mind. In retrospect, it seemed less scary, more... he didn't even have a word that fit. Miraculous, maybe?

Even miraculous didn't do a mind like that justice. Nothing did. And he'd only seen the damaged version. What must that brain have been like when it was whole?

Tony grabbed his blue cashmere peacoat from the closet, a slouchy beanie to pull over his hair, and gloves from the bottom drawer. The windows showed a silvery-gray sky rapidly filling with fluffy flakes of snow, and he thought it might be good to take a turn around the block, to really get his mind in gear and, incidentally, revel in having a middle-aged body that no longer felt the least bit middle-aged anymore.

It hit him, zooming downward in the elevator, that, for the first time in maybe thirty years he hadn't started the day with a drink. Even more major than that, he hadn't wanted a drink. That was huge. *Hugely* huge. His mind was so boggled by the thought, and its implications for his future, that he ran smack into Bruce outside the door to Rosenblum's Deli.

"Someone's looking chipper," his best friend and ScienceBro commented grumpily. Bruce himself looked the opposite of chipper, whatever that was called, and Tony felt a flash of sympathy. Hulking out was hard on Bruce, and always left him like this, sad, and in his own state of post-Hulk hangover.

"Yeah," Tony said, suppressing a sudden urge to grin like a fool. "Yeah, I feel pretty good. Yourself?"

"Like I need coffee."

"Let me buy you breakfast?"

Bruce gave him a sour look. "Yeah. Okay. Sure."

A bell jingled over the door as they stepped inside. The older Mrs. Rosenblum, who Clint always referred to as "Mrs. Poppin' Fresh" (the older Mr. Rosenblum was "Poppin' Fresh," their son "Poppin' Fresh, Jr.") The names suited them, as every member of the family Tony had ever met, including Poppin' Fresh, Jr.'s recent bride, was short even by his standards, as well as plump and unfailingly cheerful--as well they might be, their deli being the best in Manhattan, if not the world.

"Good morning, Mr. Stark, Dr. Banner," Mrs. Poppin' Fresh greeted them, with a warm and grandmotherly smile.

Bruce muttered something vaguely like a return greeting. Tony gave her a beaming smile back. "Best of mornings to you, Mrs. R. Are we too late for breakfast?"

"Not you, Mr. Stark," she answered.

Bruce, still grumpy, ordered whole wheat toast and an egg white omelet, forcing Tony to make a face at him. A *Really, dude? Really?* kind of face. For himself he ordered an everything bagel with lox and cream cheese, for Loki a double order of scrambled eggs with cheese on them, and a slab of coffeecake that looked tempting even to him, and he didn't even like most sweet things for breakfast.

"Want to take a walk around the block with me while it's cooking?" he asked Bruce. "Enjoy the snow for the five seconds it remains white?"

Bruce grunted in a way Tony took as affirmative, so he grinned at Mrs. P. again, and told her, "We'll be back in a couple minutes."

She smiled at him in return, as always, perfectly agreeable.

The bell jingled just as cheerily when they left as when they'd entered. Bruce noticeably winced.

Tony stood a minute on the stoop, his best friend at his side, just breathing in the crisp air, even enjoying the way his cheeks tingled with the cold, appreciating even more the way he could draw in a huge breath without immediately wanting to cough his lungs out. It was the kind of thing that truly drove home how he, personally (while pretending to be fit, active, strong, and all that other good stuff), had seriously fucked up his body over the years.

"I feel *grrr-eat!*" he called out to the sky, hoping to make Bruce smile, but his ScienceBro only glared vaguely in his direction.

"So now you're Tony the Tiger? Fantastic," Bruce sniped.

"But I really do feel good." Tony started off a brisk pace, forcing his friend to do a couple walk-run steps to catch up. "And, Bruce, White Christmas! That's pretty cool don't you think?"

"I'm sure the homeless people I'm feeding today and tomorrow think so too," Bruce answered, clearly light years from cheered.

"So, tell me what you think of this..." Tony slowed down. Bruce, who hadn't been miraculously cured of middle age during the night, was beginning to puff a little. "It's a thing I read about, or Pep told me about, that slipped my mind a little. This thing a guy did, in Boulder or Salt Lake City or somewhere. He bought out this old hotel and renovated it into apartments for the homeless. They could live there, no questions asked, they didn't have to be sober, or clean or anything, as long as they didn't mess with the other tenants or get up to illegal stuff in the hallways, or whatever."

Bruce perked up slightly. "You're talking about Housing First, Tony. It was actually started by a guy right here in New York--a Sam somebody, who was a psychology prof at NYU, and it's spread to other cities, because they found out actually treating people like people, letting them be warm, and physically clean, and have a place to call home made all the difference. It not only worked, it cost less than the old systems."

"So, buddy o' mine, since I'm standing here full of Christmas cheer, what if we did that? Gave people homes. Not just for the holidays, but as long as they wanted them. Medical care, if they wanted it. Job training if they wanted it. Help to get sober, if they wanted that, too--but not forcing people into anything. No catches, no big parental finger shaking down at them or saying, 'naughty, naughty,' just a place to call home. You could be in charge, bro. Start up a new program, under the auspices of Stark Industries, or hook into an existing one, whatever you think will do the most good."

Bruce gave him a long look. "Did your heart grow three sizes overnight or something, Mr. Grinch, or do you need a new tax write-off."

"Oh, I *always* need a new tax write-off." Tony laughed. "It just came to me, after... Okay, you know the thing last night? That was me falling into Loki's head. It's a big, big place and scary as fuck. And there were not exactly memories--he doesn't have any real memories, as such, prior to waking up in the infirmary--but flashes, really vivid flashes, feeling bone-cold, feeling completely and utterly alone in the world with no one who cared if I--if he, I mean--lived or died. Those are not good feelings, bro, and I felt them for myself, through him. So if I can do something, anything--and I definitely can, monetarily--then I should, right? How many other Lokis are out there, feeling just like he did? How many lost kids?"

"Wow," Bruce said. "Just... okay."

"So, will you take point on the project for me? Pepper can help out with the logistics, she's good at that, and I bet Hap would run errands. They love this kind of thing. Get Cap involved, too. Make the whole thing super-popular. Make it patriotic. 'Help your brothers and sisters--it's the *American* thing to do!' Steve could talk about growing up poor, and how people sometimes just need a helping hand to get back up on their feet. How everyone deserves human dignity. It'll be great."

Tony stopped. They'd completed their lap around the block, and were back at the deli door.

Bruce gave him a different look, more sympathetic this time than grouchy. "Tone..."

"I'm sorry about last night," Tony said. "That I freaked you out so bad you Hulked."

"You did scare me," his friend answered, "However, it being Christmas and all, I forgive you."

"Most generous in spirit of you, my good man," Tony answered, and gave Bruce's shoulder a little squeeze, one that said it all, really. They both lacked in words now and then, but that squeeze meant, "*You're my brother, Bruce, and I love you.*"

"Don't get mushy," his best friend answered, with something close to a grin, by which he meant, "*Likewise, you idiot.*"

Heading back home in the elevator, having said goodbye to Bruce at his floor, and with his and Loki's delicious-smelling breakfasts in hand, Tony felt pretty damn good about life in general.

"Food!" Loki exclaimed the moment he walked through the doorway, grabbed the string-handled bag from Tony's hand and begin ferreting through it in search of his chow. In less than a five seconds, he was cross-legged on the couch, scarfing the contents of the paper takeout carton as if his mortal soul depended on wolfing down half-a-dozen eggs before Tony could cross the living room.

"Hey, baby, slow down!" Tony laughed. "I've never seen you like this."

"I'm *starving*," Loki answered, the moment he'd swallowed his current mouthful--he was, of course, far too well-bred to talk with food in his mouth, even under extreme circumstances."

"So it seems. Want coffee?"

"Hot chocolate," Loki answered, after swallowing again. "With whipped cream. Or marshmallows. Extra, please. And orange juice?"

"You're gonna get a fatal sugar rush, babe. Did you see that slab of coffeecake I brought you? It's the size of your lovely head."

He brought Loki his juice, which he gulped down, holding out the tall glass for more. "I like sweet things," he said.

"Is this what JARVIS meant when he told me I'd 'depleted your substance'? Are you eating to replenish?"

"I don't know." Loki shrugged. His shrug had a slightly practiced air, appearing not so much a natural gesture but as if Kurt had given him lessons in Midgardian Body Language.

"Perhaps? Is my behavior not acceptable?"

"Maybe you wouldn't want to eat like that when dining with the queen, but here, in the privacy of our living room, it's certainly no problem. Eat however much, or fast, or whatever you want. I draw the line only at cannibalism. And appetizers made with eyeballs or testicles. I have no other house rules."

"Are there?" Loki asked.

"Are there what, Lok?"

"Appetizers made with eyeballs or testicles? Eyeballs, I imagine, would be salty. Testicles would need to be cooked a long while at slow heat, otherwise they might be overly chewy and unpleasant."

"I can't imagine them being pleasant cooked at any heat, or for whatever time," Tony laughed, unwrapping his bagel. "You think too much, babe."

Loki stole a piece of his lox, then a fingerful of his cream cheese. "This is delicious! May I also have one--or perhaps, *two* of these?"

The egg box was empty, the coffeecake down to crumbs. When Tony returned from the kitchen with his coffee and Loki's hot chocolate, even the crumbs were gone, as if they'd been vacuumed out of the box. He half-wondered if his boyfriend had licked the carton during his brief absence.

"Ordered," JARVIS said from overhead. "The younger Mr. Rosenblum will bring them upstairs, along with a second order of eggs, within the half hour."

"I love you, J.," Loki told him--with utter sincerity, not merely as a figure of speech. "You are always so kind to me."

"I love you too, Loki," JARVIS answered. His voice sounded odd, almost trembly, beneath its normal tone of stiff Britishness.

He's never heard those words before, Tony thought. Not spoken to him. Not from me, not from anyone. Only from Loki.

As Geppettos went, he felt like kind of a failure--he'd clearly underanticipated his Pinocchio's need to be a real boy.

"Hey, me too, J.," he said.

JARVIS sniffed disapprovingly. "You only said it because Loki did."

"Loki is a prince among lowly mortals, and is teaching me proper deportment. It's possible that I can be trained."

"Possible, however doubtful." JARVIS sniffed again, then laughed, and for the first time, ever, his laughter sounded utterly human, utterly propelled by friendship and good humor.

"You love one another," Loki put in, taking his face out of his whipped-cream-piled hot chocolate. "You do. I have been within both your minds. I know."

That one knocked Tony back a step--Loki could read an A.I.'s mind as well as a human's? Now, that was interesting.

"It is all electrical impulse, I suppose," Loki mused, before draining his mug. "That is the correct term, 'electrical impulse?' I have used it as I should? J. teaches me many things, Tony, though I would wish also that you would teach me. As you have said, 'It's possible that I can be trained.'"

"Hey, I've been in that mega-brain of yours," Tony answered. "I *know* you can be trained. I just feel like kind of an asshole for thinking I was such hot shit."

"My mind needs to be taught, and trained, and each moment take in new things. Otherwise it becomes the worm that devours its own tail, and that is never good."

"Snake, Lok. I think you mean snake."

"No," JARVIS interrupted, "He means worm. Or rather, I should say wyrm, with a 'y,' meaning a dragon or monstrous serpent. Hence, *The Wyrms Ouroboros*, the serpent that devours its tail. Meanings change over time, so that the word for the immeasurably vast becomes the word for the infinitesimal."

Then it was Loki's turn to give him a look. *See?* that look said. *I am right about things, sometimes.*

"I will devour my own horns, if not my own tail, if our second breakfast doesn't arrive soon," he added plaintively. "Did you explain, J., to the dear Rosenblums below, that I am *very* hungry?"

Almost the moment he finished speaking, the scion of the Poppin' Freshes arrived at the penthouse door, string-handled bag in hand and just as short, plump and friendly as his mom.

"Hi, Loki," he called through the open doorway. "Mama put a rush on, since J. said you were starving."

"Jeffrey, hello!" Loki bounced over to the door, enfolding the young man's plump little hand in both his long, elegant ones and giving it a shake that was solemn, but with strong undertones of warmth. "I know you don't celebrate this holiday, as I have not before this year, but all my best wishes to you and yours in the days to come, and thank you also for your kindness in welcoming me into your establishment. I felt there not the least fear, or even apprehension, and the innate goodness of your family gave me courage for further ventures beyond these walls."

Loki reached into a side pocket, pulling out two small gold paper boxes tied with green satin ribbons. "Would you present these to your mother and to your sweet wife, with my compliments? They are only something I made with my hands, but are given with greatest regard, nonetheless, and in hopes that they will be found fitting."

"That's really sweet of you," Poppin' Fresh, Jr. said, every bit as solemn-but-friendly as Loki himself, bringing his other hand into the handshake--they way people sometimes did who were on really friendly terms, but not huggers--and grinning as if the two little boxes, sight unseen, were the best gifts anyone in his family had ever been given. "You take care, okay, and keep getting better? I hope your holiday is extra special."

He said, "Thanks a bunch, Mr. Stark, have a good one!" when Tony slipped a good-sized bill into his hand for a tip, but it was strictly delivery-guy-to-customer, ultra-nice Poppin' Fresh version, lacking the personal warmth the kid had shown Loki.

It gave Tony pause. For one thing, he hadn't known his boyfriend had been exploring the outer reaches of their tower home, making friends with people he himself scarcely knew except to say "hello" to. For another... well, he was used to his fellow Avengers, who while supportive, couldn't exactly be called Team Loki. Pepper, Hap and Kurt didn't surprise him much--they were totally people persons, all about making connections, and JARVIS... clearly J. had been starved for affection and attention and it wasn't strange that he'd latch on to the one person in the tower as starved for both as he was, and also thirsty to drink from his nearly limitless fount of knowledge.

But Tony had looked at Loki as *his* Loki, as beautiful but very strange, someone he himself found lovely, but who would invariably be shunned by others. Now it smacked him right in the face--Loki might be his boyfriend, the one he loved, but Loki wasn't his for the keeping just because Tony wanted to keep him.

Others would also think him beautiful. They would find him charismatic, interesting, brilliant, and if Tony didn't more than clean up his act, their time together would be very short indeed.

Loki had expressed to him, the night before, that he felt indebted to Tony--but Loki had healed him, had almost certainly saved his life, and that sense of owing him could quickly

change, until he became nothing but that ass-clown with money who tried to keep Loki in chains.

Without knowing it, he found he'd drifted back to the couch and sunk into his original seat.

"I poured for you fresh coffee," Loki told him. "Black and bitter, as you like it. Why do you not add cream? Kurt adds cream and makes the coffee delicious. You should try it so. The flavor would make you happy."

He started in on his new batch of scrambled eggs, this time a bit more genteelly, clearly still hungry, still enjoying the food every bit as much, but no longer in dire straits. Tony studied him, searching for signs that yesterday, and the following difficult night had done him any harm, but Loki looked good. His horns were shiny, his newly-emerald eyes bright, his hair was drying into lustrous soft curls and his skin... could blue skin have a blush on it? Loki's did. In fact, it almost seemed to glow with health, like the finest blue silk, the lines of his family markings clean and sharp against their darker background.

He also smelled fantastic. Tony really would have to find out what he was using, because Loki always smelled good, but whatever this new product was, it complemented his natural scent to the point that Tony just about wanted to lick him.

Okay, he actually *did* want to lick him, among other things, but whether that happened soon-- or never-- almost certainly depended on the outcome of their delayed conversation.

At last, the final morsel of food politely Hoovered out of his box, Loki leaned back in contentment, gazing up at the tree.

"I like this better than outside," he said, in a slightly dreamy voice. "It is lovely, and peaceful. The quiet agrees with me. I know I must venture outward, now and then, but the fact remains, I do not enjoy it as well. Though the lights were pretty in the Greater World, many of the minds were not, and I understand neither their anger or their hatred. They do not know who I am, and even if they did, and despised me for just reasons, why should they hate my delightful and most-kind friend Kurt, who is ever good, and harms no one? Why do they waste their energies so? Can they find nothing of beauty, or pleasure within their own lives that brings them peace?"

Tony found himself at a loss. The real answer, of course was, "*No.*" People hated their own lives, their own selves, so much, that, pretty ironically, it made them hate anything different than they were.

But how could he explain that to Loki, who'd been nearly mad (if not completely bag-of-cats over the edge, as Bruce claimed) with rage and hatred once, having in turn been treated so hatefully by those who ought to have loved him, especially when the Loki of now simply didn't seem capable of any kind of nastiness whatsoever. Cruelty, hate, unkindness injured him, but didn't seem to make him angry, only more wounded and confused, which left Tony with nothing to do but repeat Happy's words from the previous day, "Haters gonna hate, Lok. It's just the way some people are, baby."

"It's foolish, and it wastes their..." For a full minute, Loki completely zoned out, his eyes glazed, his lips in barely-perceptible motion.

"No. I can't think of the word," he finally concluded.

"All that was to think of a word?" Tony asked. "No, cancel that remark. Having been inside your brain, looking for a single word must be like searching the Library of Congress for one particular book without the use of either a card catalog or computer."

"It was a Greek word," Loki told him, sounding hopeful. "I believe it began with an 'a.'"

"Nope, babe, that doesn't really help me. Not so much the word-guy." Tony reached out to take his boyfriend's hand, and Loki wriggled closer, resting his head on Tony's shoulder. They gazed up at the tree, jeweled all over with Maria's vintage baubles, as Christmassy music played low in the background.

JARVIS, without needing to be asked, switched on the fireplace. It was all so close to what he'd always longed for, so tranquil, such a moment of perfect peace that Tony wished it could last forever. The last thing in the world he wanted to do right then was start up a difficult conversation, even though he knew he had to.

"*Agiótita*," Loki said softly. "Or perhaps I mean *Theiótita*? Their meanings lie very close to one another within my mind, though I think Kurt might be able to explain the difference."

"The first means, 'holiness,'" JARVIS said in Tony's earpiece, "The second, 'divinity,' though I cannot imagine Loki's mind would process those words as they would be processed by one raised in, or even familiar with, Judeo-Christian tradition. I suspect he means something that might be phrased, 'a state of spiritual purity, or the spark of the divine within the individual.'"

Yup, Tony thought, *I'm now by far the least intelligent person in the room. How's that for an ego-quencher?*

Greek is a very interesting language, which provides many roots to your English tongue," Loki said. "I have begun to study it, along with Latin and Hebrew. I find I greatly enjoy the shapes and flavors of words. May I sometimes borrow your spectacles, Tony?"

Tony found himself laughing. "Uh, yeah, sure. Any reason?"

"I saw them upon your nightstand and tried to imagine how you would look, and then how I would look, and so I put them on, then soon found my attention drawn by the large and beautiful book that dear Pepper had given to me as a gift of Christmas, to which I had given only cursory examination. This is the Relaxing Christmas Brunch playlist of the Amazons," Loki informed him. "Do you find it pleasing?"

Squirrel! Tony thought, nearly laughing. Even knowing full well that his boyfriend was fully capable of believing in six (or a hundred!) impossible things before breakfast, Loki's rapid switches of subject matter still frequently caught him off guard. Besides, Playlist of the Amazons! sounded like a cheesy fifties movie. He would never have corrected Loki, though, certainly not at that particular moment.

"I do like it," he answered instead. "It makes a nice background. Ya know, for some reason, Christmas makes me suspend my normal musical taste entirely. Normally it's Classic Hard Rock all the way, but at Christmas I'm up in arms if I can't have my Burl Ives and Bing Crosby."

"Ah, of the Holly Jolly song," Loki agreed. "I enjoy the Holly Jolly song. It gives me feelings of mirth. Is mirth the correct word, Tony?"

"Sure. Maybe a little old fashioned in that it's not one many people understand or use anymore, but perfectly correct."

"Not an offensive term, by being old fashioned?"

"No, not the least bit offensive."

"Good." Loki snuggled deeper into Tony's shoulder. "I do not wish to give accidental offense. Shall I start, or will you?"

Tony felt a little like a kid who'd had the end-of-class bell ring just before he was due to give a badly-prepared report. This conversation-to-come had been in the back of his head the whole day, and he still didn't know what he intended to say. "By all means. Be my guest."

"In that case," Loki told him, "And believe me, please, that not one of these words are spoken with the least animosity--I wish to withdraw my apology for the healing of your body. I can no longer say, exactly, what the span of my own years will be, but I know my body to be that of a young man, whatever my chronological age. It is the body, at most, of a Midgardian in his middle twenties, and unless I have miscalculated, or I meet with unforeseen accident or disease, is likely to last for an extended period, by Earth standards, at least. Your body is not so young as mine, Tony. You rapidly approach the age of fifty, and you had cared for yourself badly over time. If I had not repaired the hurts, the disease, your mortal flesh would not have lasted. You would have died within a short space of time, and in doing so, would have left me. I do not wish you to leave me. I wish you to be with me, and for me to be with you, for great numbers of years. I wish to have you as my companion, and perhaps, someday, if all goes well, as my... significant other? Is this the correct term?"

Tony nodded, slightly stunned.

How could that occur if we were parted by the grave?" Loki shot Tony one of those soul-destroyingly earnest looks that seemed to be his specialty. "My love, I need you to be well. I need you to stay. Please stay."

"Wow," Tony answered. He honestly didn't know what else to say.

"I also will not be held responsible for your mishap within my mind," Loki continued. "But for your drunkenness, it would never have befallen you. My brain is a complex and alien place, and because of this, likely inimical to your human mind. It is not a place where you are safe. In the future, as I heal and gain control, it will become safer, but for now you must practice restraint. I feared deeply for your safety, and had I not been able to capture your consciousness within a heartbeat, and convey it to home to where it belonged, you might well

have been badly injured. I will also not apologize for the presence of magic in the world, for I know now that it has always been a part of Midgard, as shown in your myths and legends, and even within your mortal dreams, though largely untapped in any practical way. Magic exists, also, within my flesh and within a great part of my being, and again this is how it has always been. I will, believe me, be extremely cautious as to its use in the future, and will guard myself against unconscious wieldings, but in the words of your bard, Mr. Shakespeare, *'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.'* You, Tony, are Horatio in this scenario, and science is your philosophy."

"Kinda got that one," Tony murmured.

"I well appreciate the beauty and complexity of your science, which J. slowly begins to teach to me. I ask that you also appreciate the beauty and complexity of my magic which, as I have explained, is an integral part of both my form and my nature. I ask you that you love me, and be kind to me, and forbear to speak without thinking, as you sometimes will do, and that you see me as equal to yourself. Unskilled in the ways of this world, perhaps, and in the life I now enjoy, yet equal, which is to say a being of thought and feeling."

"Not my emotional punching bag."

"Never," Loki agreed, "And never will you be such to me. Only my mentor, my friend, my dearest beloved. My..." Here Loki's eyes caught and held his. Tony couldn't have looked away to save his life, not even if those amazing eyes had begun to turn like pinwheels, hypnotizing him into submission, like Kaa the snake's in *The Jungle Book*, until Loki constricted around him and swallowed him whole.

Only he didn't feel like he was about to be swallowed whole. He felt loved and treasured, and as if he might just have found the one to share his life with, because Pepper was right--Loki loved him and needed his love, cared for him and needed his caring, but Loki also wasn't going to put up with his bullshit for one second more. And Tony needed that just as much. He knew he did.

Loki took his hand between his elegant blue hands, and raising it to his mouth, softly kissed Tony's palm, holding the palm then against his silken cheek.

"Lok, what were you going to say before--you know, before the eye-lock? You mentor, your friend, your dearest beloved, your... what?"

Loki grinned, eyes sparkling, as he leaned in close, then closer, until his warm exhalation caressed Tony's neck, his cheek, his ear. "Why, your lover, of course, foolish man," he breathed. "Have I not mentioned? They were truly *very* interesting films."

Endings and Beginnings

Chapter Summary

Loki may worry about the little things, but it seems he has the big things handled.

Chapter Notes

CrockPot is actually the brand name for the first widely distributed slow-cooker. Like Xerox, Kleenex and Velcro, it's a "genericized trademark," a brand name often used to name the thing itself.

Snow Day=a day off from school because of bad weather, usually leading to sledding, snowman-building and the drinking of hot chocolate.

"Use your inside voice, please" is mom-speak for "Stop screaming! They can hear you in Canada!"

In *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, Indy's faith is tested by having to step out into what appears to be an abyss. There's actually a bridge, but it can't be seen until one takes the "leap of faith."

Loki's first poem is "*I Knew a Woman*" by Theodore Roethke. His second poem is "*To Celia*" by Ben Johnson.

I'm so sorry to be hopelessly behind in answering comments. I love you all for reading, kudoing and most of all for leaving your insightful comments. Finishing this fic ate my brain!

"I'm gonna do a little post-breakfast clean-up, Lok," Tony called toward the kitchen, where Loki, who'd expressed a desire to recreate Kurt's special-recipe mulled cider, sounded like he was rattling his way through every pot and pan Tony owned in a so-far fruitless search for the CrockPot.

"Try the top shelves maybe, babe? Since Kurt was last to use it, right?"

Kurt, who could cling to the ceiling upside-down, and frequently hung from light fixtures by his tail.

"Aha!" Loki exclaimed (Tony couldn't suppress a grin at that one--before Loki, he didn't think he'd ever heard anyone call out, in all seriousness, "Aha!").

"You are clever, my love," his boyfriend added. "Even I couldn't reach so high, not sharing our friend's unique abilities--yet I have floated it down most adeptly. I believe my strength increases."

"By magic," JARVIS clarified drily. "Loki floated the pot down by magic."

"Fine by me." Tony located the spare box of trash bags on the top shelf of the coat closet. Not being either Loki or Kurt, he pulled out the step-stool from behind a half dozen coats and jackets he rarely wore, and climbed up. He left the box on the closet floor, where normal people (namely himself) could actually reach it, and pulled out a bag. It looked like a deli had exploded in his living room.

"I plan to... ahem, catch up on my reading," JARVIS informed them, in his most Britishly proper tones. "Do call, sir--or Loki--if there's anything you require?"

"I'm perfectly content, J.," Loki answered, leaving the kitchen. "Kurt's recipe is absurdly easy, though I dearly hope that is not because I've forgotten an ingredient--or more than one. Everything smells correct, however, so I trust I have not." He sounded more worried about his possible mistake than anyone should ever be worried about anything, including global warning or a rapidly approaching tsunami.

"It's spiced cider," Tony put in quickly, "It's foolproof. Can't go wrong."

"Truly?" Loki still sounded worried, but at least not *as* worried. "At any rate, it will smell delightful, won't it? Even if the taste is unfortunate."

"Which it won't be. Tell him he done good, J."

"Or perhaps, more grammatically, I should inform you that you have remembered Mr. Wagner's recipe perfectly, Loki, and executed his instructions in flawless order. Perhaps you remember the process as difficult because only days before this it seemed so. Take the instance as an example of how quickly your mind heals, dear boy, and do not doubt yourself so strenuously upon the next occasion."

"Yes," Loki said quietly. "Yes, J. I must remember not to become distraught over simple things. I must allow myself time to... what did you tell me?"

"To breathe," JARVIS answered. "To allow yourself time to breathe. But also to allow yourself to make mistakes, now and then, because the lack of a cinnamon stick or two will not end the world."

Funny, Tony thought, If you only knew, J., your human counterpart said almost the exact same thing to me--sans cinnamon sticks, of course.

"No." Loki gave a breathless little laugh. "No, it will not. Do enjoy your reading, J.--and tell me in the morning of what you read? Oh, and also, a very merry Christmas Eve to you, if no

chance presents itself later to wish you well."

He drifted off toward the front of the penthouse, opened a door briefly, then quickly closed it again. "It's very cold out, Tony."

"Stay inside where it's warm, babe."

"I will. I only wished to see the beauty of the snow." Loki paused, the excitement clear on his face, his cider-related worries thrown off entirely.

Tony tried hard to contain his own thoughts just then, because the place Loki'd stopped was the exact spot, pre-remodel, where the Big Green Guy had once Hulkerated the previous sadder, wiser, and infinitely angrier Loki deep into the floorboards. His Loki didn't have a clue about that. Not even an inkling. He just stood on the spot grinning his head off, like a kid who's just found out he's been given a Snow Day.

"It's great, huh?" Tony shoved those memories, and the emotions that went with them, down deep into the dirty laundry hamper of his thoughts, where Loki hopefully wouldn't see them. "Our first Christmas together, and we luck out a white one, how about that?"

"When may we go out in it? Tonight?"

"Maybe tonight, maybe tomorrow. We'll bundle up and enjoy a romantic stroll through the park. How does that sound?"

"Better than going out in much company." Loki shivered slightly, glancing back toward the terrace, where the snow had started to build irregular little battlements all along the rail.

"Tomorrow," he said, sounding contemplative, hopefully not remembering, either, those cold autumn months when the park was the only place he had to call home, or his last, terrible homeless day, when he was so sick, and could find no shelter anywhere. "Tomorrow, yes. Today I prefer to stay warmly inside with you, and only watch through the windows."

"Until later, sir, Loki," JARVIS put in. "Do enjoy your evening."

Tony snapped open his trash bag and started shoving in the numerous empty cartons from Loki's breakfast eggstravaganza. "Uh-huh, you too."

He glanced to see if Loki was still listening, which it seemed he totally wasn't. "So, thanks, buddy. For the discretion thing. Oh, and Merry Christmas." He never said those words to his A.I. friend before, and it felt kind of weird, but also not bad. And J. *was* his friend, proven time and time again, so why not?

"To both of you, also," the A.I. said, trifle formally.

"Terrified, are we, of what lies ahead?" he added, directly into Tony's earpiece.

"No, not that," Tony answered, with a sigh, in his most inside of inside voices.

Loki was drifting along just inside the front wall of the penthouse, touching the glass every now and then with his fingertips--trying, apparently, to get a better look at the snow as it fell. God, there was something about him that made Tony's heart want to explode, in a good kind of way, an uncontrollably crazy-loving way. Just watching how Loki turned his face upward toward the silvery sky, his green eyes wide, filled with wonder by such a simple and ordinary thing as a December snowfall, watching how he carried himself, each step graceful as a dancer's, nearly undid him.

"Not exactly," he added. "He's just so..."

"Godlike and childlike all at once?" JARVIS said, his voice softening. "Innocent. Untainted."

"Yeah, that." Tony sighed. "All that. It hit me that, for all intents and purposes--if we go through with anything, everything, whatever--that this is Loki's first time, which gives me more than slight performance anxiety. I don't think I've ever been anyone's first time. It might actually help to get a little insight into what my boyfriend's been watching, you know?"

"I imagine it might!" JARVIS sounded close to actually snickering at him.

"Thanks a lot for the sympathy, J. Good to know you're on my side." Tony frowned at the blank wall in front of him, trash bag still gripped firmly in one hand. Sometimes he wondered if he should just hang mirrors with hologram images inside them, like the Wicked Queen in *Snow White* when she got into one of her "*Mirror, Mirror, on the wall*" snits. At least that would provide some sort of visual reference, and he wouldn't look like he was deep in conversation with some random piece of the paintwork.

"Always, sir," the A.I.'s voice softened even further, the fatherly tone back again. "Perhaps I've tormented you enough for one day. Loki, you perhaps ought to know, watched nothing you need fear. He began with still images of male human anatomy, and scientific diagrams of the male reproductive system, from both historic and modern sources, to which he compared his own... er, endowments, which appear to differ only slightly from your own."

Okay. Good to know, Tony thought.

"He next viewed a number of educational films on sexuality and sexual expression, but reacted strongly and negatively to any overtly pornographic material, shutting it off within minutes--not so much because of the actual, er... material, I surmise, but because he found the thinness of the plots ludicrous, and that the connections between the, ahem... performers, tenuous and unbelievable. He did, however, conclude his viewing time with two screenings of *Velvet Goldmine*."

"*Velvet Goldmine*?" Tony asked faintly. "That sounds kinda... I dunno..."

"It is a film perhaps best described as a 'surreal glam-rock fantasy,' starring Jonathan Rhys Myers and Ewan McGregor. Their romance, though ultimately doomed to failure for diverse reasons, is portrayed as sensual and erotic, and Loki appeared to find Mr. Rhys Myers, who is dark-haired and of slighter of stature than Mr. McGregor, particularly captivating, which I might venture bodes well for you. sir. Loki also seemed pleased with the soundtrack, and I have taken the liberty of compiling a playlist of similar music, to 'set the mood,' one might

say. On the whole, I believe there's nothing to cause you apprehension--though might I give you a piece of advice?"

"Okay, shoot." Tony found himself close to grinning. "J., forgetting what I said earlier, have I mentioned that you make a hell of a wing-man when you put your mind to it?"

"I shall take that as a compliment, sir," the A.I. answered, at his stuffiest--most likely because he was trying hard to keep himself from laughing again--though what he said next was serious enough that it made Tony feel a little squirmy inside. "My advice to you is this: remember what I told you of the concept of '*argr*,' and what that means. I believe it has been mistranslated by the word 'effeminate,' which to us, quite wrongly in my estimation, carries connotations of the weak or contemptible. Loki is neither. Though he may now live in a state of innocence, the very nature of his perceptions and intellectual powers make him a highly sensitive and complex being. Think of him as one who holds within himself both the strengths of a man and the strengths of a woman, the desires of a man and the desires of a woman. That is a place of great power, one might well say. Remember also that Loki's love for you is a force all its own, unselfish, deep and pure, and he wishes to be loved in the same way. Above all, he wishes for you to be honest with him. Be honest in your speech, Tony. Be honest when you share your body. Do you understand my words?"

"Honest," Tony echoed, remembering all the times he'd wrecked something worthwhile, even wonderful, just so he could be in charge of the moment of the breaking, the way he always expected everything to fall apart sooner or later (usually sooner), because he was, himself, so essentially broken, always anticipating the moment his lover saw beneath the artfully arranged sticky-tape and glue to the shattered thing below.

"God, J.," he found himself muttering, his voice hardly making any sound because of the giant lump now wedged firmly in his throat. "I can't... I mean, I won't..."

"He cares deeply for you, sir. Also, he hears your father's voice as it echoes inside your head. You must know it's all lies, Tony--all those things your father told you. Not one of those things are true in anyone's world but the one he made for himself and forced you and your mother to live in. Howard Stark was, clearly, a cruel, controlling, selfish narcissist. He threw away his own past, decent and loving parents who cared for him, and he threw away, also, what might have been his future, poisoning your future along with his own. It's time to salt his bones, Tony, and burn them, and at last put his malign ghost to rest."

"I can't believe we're having this conversation," Tony said. He realized he was now hugging the trash bag to his chest, and that his eyes were wet. "Also, you called me Tony. Three times. I counted."

"I did," JARVIS agreed. "Why do you think that is?"

Tony glared at the wall as if he could burn two perfect holes right through the wallboard to where the A.I. lived. But then it hit him--he wasn't mad at J. He was scared, scared of his past, and that he'd fallen for his father's crazy, controlling lies all these years, but scared also of taking that single one giant step forward, like Indiana Jones taking that one big step off the cliff, when he couldn't see the sturdy bridge ahead. Being happy, in the here-and-now, with Loki. Allowing himself to be happy.

"Fuck," he breathed, and set the bag over-carefully at his own feet.

"You appear, by your facial expression, to have experienced an epiphany of sorts."

"You could say that, J. Actually, I guess you *did* say that. So now it's up to me to run with it, huh? That's what you're telling me?"

"I would advise, at this juncture, an approach of reckless abandon, sir. At the risk of sounding like one of those inspirational posters you so despise, believe in yourself. Take that leap of faith."

"Just like Indiana Jones."

"Indeed, sir. Much in the manner of Professor Jones."

"In the interest of that, dear buddy o' mine, I'm now taking out my earpiece." Tony put the little electronic bee into one of those weird decorative boxes his designers seemed to love introducing into his home, for reasons previously unknown. Okay, now he knew--they were for putting his shit in when he wanted a little privacy.

"Enjoy your reading, J." He switched off his StarkPhone and added that to the box as well. *In for a penny, in for a pound*, he guessed.

JARVIS laughed again, this time over the speakers. It was a kind laugh, the laugh of an old and understanding friend. "A wise choice indeed. Bon voyage, sir."

"Are you going on a journey?" Loki asked curiously, from over by the fireplace. "Tony, look, I made us a nest!"

And so he had, bless his strange and beautiful alien heart, he had, with all the pillows and the duvets from their beds upstairs.

As Loki smiled, candles came alight around the room, all without a spoken word, or even a gesture. That was his Loki. His wonderful, magical Loki.

"Neat trick," Tony said, meaning the words. It *was* a neat trick. It was one of those 'Ooh! Aah!' moments--the shining tree, the fire, the candles, Loki in his blanket nest.

"I'm just going to drop the trash down the chute, then wash my hands. I won't be a minute."

Loki smiled, tilting his head, watching Tony with his usual curious intensity. When Tony got back (having also taken a moment to brush his teeth, because *lox*) he'd scarcely moved, though he'd pulled off his pj top, leaving his chest bare, the pj pants low around his hips.

He was so beautiful. So fucking dazzlingly beautiful. Though still very thin, he'd filled out a little, and his muscles, though not in any way bulky, were exquisitely cut, that lovely blush, that glow, covering every inch of his skin.

Without the least bit of shyness, or so it seemed, he wriggled out of the pajama bottoms as well, gazing up at Tony every second. God, probably even his skeleton was an unspeakably

lovely thing.

Loki laughed softly.

"*I knew a woman, lovely in her bones,*" he quoted.

*When small birds sighed, she would sigh back at them;
Ah, when she moved, she moved more ways than one:
The shapes a bright container can contain!*

"Only I am not a woman," he said, the candleflames dancing in his emerald eyes, "And my bones are only common bones. One of us seems overdressed, Tony."

Tony laughed too, both in nervousness and relief, laughing again as Loki stood to help him peel off his sweater, and in their haste got him tangled in the sleeves. They did better with the long-sleeved tee beneath, pulling it over his head in one quick movement. Loki's long and elegant fingers traced the lines of his shoulders, his arms, his chest (Tony thanking his stars that he'd made regular visits to the gym). He wasn't a hairy guy, really, but Loki still seemed amused by his small amount of chest hair. His thumb traced the faint dark line that ran down from Tony's navel to disappear beneath the waistband of his jeans.

Loki's own body, of course, appeared completely hairless--he had his brows, his lashes, the curls on his head, and that was it.

Loki unbuckled Tony's belt, a little clumsy with the tongue and loop, then struggled a bit more with the stiff button of Tony's jeans, biting his lips in concentration, a little line appearing between his sleek black brows.

The zipper went more easily, and Tony shoved the jeans down roughly, along with his boxers, kicking both outside the circle of their Loki-built nest.

"You can't hurt me," Loki assured him, in a soft and slightly breathless voice, "And there is no need for lengthy preparation. I possess conscious control of the... the... ah... sphincter."

"Oh, my baby." Tony felt a slight inclination to laugh, but controlled it.

"*Sphincter,*" for god's sake.

"There's no hurry, and this can go no one place, or any place. You're calling the shots, Loki. For now, let's we just cuddle up a little and enjoy the candlelight and the tree. Enjoy each other's company. Then, what happens, happens."

"Yes," Loki said. "Yes. What happens... happens." He stretched out on his side inside the nest, gazing up at Tony with his familiar intensity, the heat of that gaze almost equal to the heat of the fire on his bare back.

"I confess to feeling a slight nervousness."

"Yeah, me too, surprisingly." Tony lay down too, also on his side and facing Loki. He reached out, taking his boyfriend's hand, giving a gentle squeeze. "Look at you. Just look at you."

A slightly deeper flush crept over Loki's cheekbones. "I prefer to look at you."

"Okay, then, we're both happy. I look at you, you look at me. Any more poetry suitable to the occasion?"

"Drink to me only with thine eyes," Loki quoted.

*And I will pledge with mine;
Or leave a kiss but in the cup,
And I'll not look for wine.*

"Point taken," Tony said. "Thanks for the instant detox, by the way."

"You've mistaken my meaning." Loki gave a slight smile. "The truth of which is, to look upon you is, to me, sweeter than wine. Or perhaps even chocolate." His smile grew, letting Tony know he was teasing. "Oh, my love, my dearest and most wonderful love, it is the best of all things to lie here with you." He ran his fingers gently through Tony's hair, then down along the rapidly growing scruff outside his beard. "I like you unkempt."

"Good thing, since it's kinda my default look. It's the kempt I have trouble with."

"I like you with me. I would like you with me, perhaps, for always?" His hand cupped Tony's cheek. "For perhaps I see beauties within you, that even you do not see? Or it may be that it should be said, I see beauties, my love, that, especially, you do not see."

Tony pressed his face to Loki's shoulder, against the warmth of that child-smooth blue skin. He couldn't speak.

Loki held him for a long time, stroking Tony's hair, rubbing his back, his body pressed tight to Tony's body.

"Shall I say for you the things you meant to say, my love?" Loki asked at last. "That you have not always been a good man? That you see within yourself, at times hatred, and pettiness, and cruelty--at times even toward those you held dear? That you have sought death a hundred ways, yet at the same time feared it? That though you loathed your father with a fire equal to a thousand suns, you desperately, always, longed for his approval, and that you allowed him to shape, for good or for ill, nearly everything you have ever been?"

Loki paused, kissed the top of his head, then pulled back a little, looking deep into Tony's eyes, his own eyes full of tenderness, and love, and humor. "What if I say to you, 'How then are we different, you and I? How then are we different?'"

"That was the other Loki," Tony managed to choke out, finally. "That wasn't you, that was the other Loki."

"But, Tony, I *am* White Loki, and also the reverse. I, perhaps--and I have given this some thought--have been given as a blessing that which I first thought a curse: to be what he ought to have been, without a thousand and more years of his--of *my*--father's cruelty. Perhaps, as is

often the way in tales, in attempting to destroy me, the King of Asgard has actually *freed* me."

"But freed you to what? That window was a trap, right? And a threat? What if...?"

Loki pressed two fingers firmly to Tony's lips, shutting in the words. "We shall speak no 'What ifs...' my love. The Allfather set a trap, yes, but what did it do but release my birthright, my natural magic?"

Loki stared awhile into the fire. When he spoke again, his voice was remarkably cool and assured. "I am the god of fire, and the god of mischief, and perhaps Odin ought to fear the mischief I may someday bring home to him. He named me 'god of lies,' but I am not that. I am the god of stories, and I shall write my own story, now and evermore, without reference to him."

Loki cupped Tony's cheek again, with those long and elegant fingers, turning Tony's face up to his, flames dancing in his wide emerald eyes.

"We shall write our own story, from this moment on, as if our frozen-hearted fathers had never been, and we will be complete, both in ourselves, and in one another, and even when life is at its most difficult, yet all will be as it should, for one shall have the strength of the other."

Tony couldn't think what to say to that--maybe there wasn't anything *to* say. Maybe there was only a night that was said to be holy--and/or magical--and the firelight, and Loki loving him, and him loving Loki.

Maybe that wouldn't last forever, the way his soon-to-be-lover said, but maybe Loki was perfectly correct, and it would. All Tony knew was, for the first time in his life he felt as if he might be whole again, like a broken sword made strong and good after having been skillfully reforged.

After all, he *was* Iron Man--if anyone *could* be reforged, it had to be him, right?

Besides which, who was he to doubt the god of stories?

Tony wove his own fingers deep into Loki's hair, into those wild black curls, grinning at him as he gently brought Loki close. Their noses brushed, then their lips, and he was kissing Loki, and Loki was kissing him, long and deeply, sweetly and well.

Tony put everything he had into that kiss, meaning it as a prelude to what lay ahead, but more than that, as a promise, a promise he'd never been able to make to anyone before this day: *you are here for me, and I will be here for you.*

For as long as I draw breath, Loki, Tony thought, half-surprising himself, though he meant every word, more than he'd ever meant anything. *For as long as I draw breath.*

END OF PART ONE

To be continued in Part Two: The God Who Built a World

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