

Your Latest Trick

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Your Latest Trick

by [ChortlesOfDoom](#)

Summary

Following a violent, masterfully feigned death aboard the Statesman, Thor believes Loki's gone for good; more importantly, so does Thanos. Exhausted and hungry for revenge, Loki returns to Earth, but as he bides his strength, anonymously supplying the Avengers with inside knowledge between his own preparations, he begins to see the true cost of holding on.

Notes

Almost six years after first starting this story it still means a lot to me. I wrote it during some of the hardest years of my life, when I was failing high school due to unchecked PTSD and gender dysphoria and saw no future for myself and I wanted out as soon as possible. But I promised I would finish the story first and by the time I did a lot had changed. Today I would have done this story differently, but when I look back I mostly remember how I wrote the last stretch by hand in a notebook while living in a youth shelter for a year: out of school, unemployed, and with no better reason to keep going. The future is still terrifying but experiences like writing my fears into another person have taught me how to anchor myself. Recently I got my first tattoo (a magical dagger) so I never forget the strength it gave me.

This is an alternate retelling of Infinity War in which Loki makes it off the ship and goes after Thanos in the only way he knows: wits, magic, and a bit of brute force. But he doesn't plan to do so and his quest for revenge is hesitant and filled with fear—if it really is revenge he's seeking. In the aftermath he is finally faced with the things he has been hiding for so long. This is not a fix-it. Things will get ugly.

You don't have to love it, but I hope it helps you the way it helped me. That's all you need to know.

Prelude

Chapter Summary

Loki makes a hasty decision and a dangerous escape.



Your Latest Trick

“Cast yourself upon the waters. Trust in your ability to swim.” — Marty Rubin

In the ragged shade of the starship’s rubble, uncomfortably seated behind a mask of invisibility and barely clinging to consciousness, Loki quietly spoke to himself.

Steady, he told himself somehow, watching with cold and tired eyes as his illusory copy stumbled over a sentence and tried not to shatter under the pressure just like its maker. Breathless and dazed. It happened so fast. He didn’t know how he managed it, only that one second he was ready to die and the next he decided to test his luck switching himself out. Only that he would die anyway maintaining this kind of spell after everything. Two, three and he cut the words short, paled the skin with a finger’s wave, broke a few blood vessels with another. Tactile. Believable. He put his all into it because it was too late to back out now. If they caught him pulling this kind of trick after already turning on them he would get worse than a broken neck: death was too easy. The gall. Oh, gods. Thanos looked so big from here: only in this little corner watching himself from the outside could Loki see how small he was. Feet in the air. Tiny hands dwarfed by the fist they clawed at. Other times it felt cunning but this wasn’t it. It felt like it was still him up there. And if he had hesitated a moment more it would have been.

Snap—

—and he jerked his hand and let the illusion go limp. But even that took power and he buckled under another jolt of sickness and skittered deeper into his cover as he felt the invisibility flicker. He must have been far enough: the distance he’d carved himself just by opting for this sort of thing rather than throwing his life to whatever shield he could muster, dimming his vitals, and hoping he could play dead—his usual method in situations like these—was enough to run. If his luck happened to run out here and Thanos caught the trick, he would: run like the wind, he thought, and pray they wouldn’t find him again. But even then he was gloriously fucked. Even then there was a good chance they’d see fit to kill Thor anyway, claiming something about how it was only fair after such a bold move as pulling a knife. What liars: what of their mercy? What of only taking half? And then rage joined the nausea and Loki steadied himself under the wreckage and tried to breathe. Steady.

Steady—and then the massive grip loosened and the illusion slipped away like a rag doll, toppling to the floor with an empty thud. Crackling ashes joining its broken bones that weren’t real. Pale skin pooling with smoke.

Loki didn’t know how to look away. Knowing that this man he had hoped never to see again would have killed him. Knowing the only thing standing between them was a cheap trick. He never did think pulling a knife would be enough; all the parts that hadn’t been impulse had hoped for a quick death instead of roaming the universe for the rest of his life terrified they would catch up to him. But he didn’t have that choice anymore. He had the ash and flames. He had praying he could hold the illusion long enough to fool them. Everything hurt and he wished he hadn’t bothered: at least the pain would end. But he took a smoky breath and kept the spell up.

Thanos took a long time to leave. He spared a few more jeers before disappearing into the only clear passage—something about resurrections and careful words—and then all those allies he claimed as his own children followed him out of the hall. And the burning starship and its two remaining survivors became silent and heavy. Cold and empty silence beneath the flames.

Then there was a bang.

Something heaving itself apart down the other end of the ship—and then something else crackled and collapsed under the fire, and Thor, tumbling to the floor as the scrap metal around him suddenly lost its hold and fell in pieces, snapped out of that same stupor that had gripped them both and crawled, arms shaking, to the still-present mirage. Everything coming apart beneath the sound of snapping flames and sobs. The plan. The plan; there was a plan. They would see each other again but it wasn't today. Loki leaned back against the wall and took a scratchy breath of smoke. The plan? He had no reason other than paranoia to maintain the magic: faith in himself and only himself to keep this secret. Maybe someone would look behind and notice they weren't both dead. Maybe they couldn't run. Tired but afraid, he willed the illusion to stay.

“Leave,” he whispered as he heaved himself up out of the debris. “Please. Don't do this. Don't hurt yourself more than you need to.”

Because that was all it was, wasn't it? Sympathy. Sentiment. He could have made things so much simpler: kill the spell, turn tail, and run. Let someone know he was okay instead of just leaving it on such a note. But if he wasn't dead here then people would be wanting him dead. And after all this maybe it was better if he just disappeared: either he was dead or he had to face what he had brought upon everyone. The scent of burning flesh and blood between the smoke. Evaporated sweat. This time there was no “I had to do this” that he could offer.

The ship lurched and Loki tumbled forward, gripped a chunk of rubble to keep himself upright as everything came down around him. In the other end Thor tried not to get swept away with his face scrunched to the floor and threads of lightning dancing around his fingers. Something somewhere lodged itself from the ship and rattled the walls with its sound. The smoke was pooling. Distant explosions seemed to answer it. Then nothing. Then another eerie pause: Loki braced so hard against the wall that his arms began to cramp. Suddenly there was no longer a next step: they were going down with this ship together. And then there was a flash of violet and an explosion so loud it knocked out his hearing; he felt himself smacked into the wall, felt something shift under him, and then nothing. Ringing ears. The taste of blood. Cold air: that was new. He looked up, barely cognizant under the static dotting his vision, and saw that the room had split clean in half, torn lengthwise from floor to the starry chasm beneath by a storm of ghostly flames. The illusion was gone. Thor was gone. Thanos and everyone was gone. Maybe it had been a dream.

Alone on a burning starship surrounded by blood and bodies, Loki wondered what he had done.

Now that the illusion was gone the magic that had been keeping it up returned to him, but he was a dismal mess of wounds and exhaustion even not maintaining powerful spells. The rift in the floor stared back. It threatened to pull him in if he came too close and he wondered how long before the artificial gravity failed. He stepped away. He swallowed down the sting in his throat and sat in his corner of rubble. Then, unable to do anything else, he grabbed a piece of scrap beside him and chucked it at the nearest wall with an incoherent scream. Not like this—no; what was there now? The escape pods were gone and everyone who could have helped him had either gone with them or perished in the chaos. This ship, no matter how long he stayed or how much he poured into it, would not fly again: even if he regained all strength, something like this was beyond him. He

already knew he would die here when he spent everything getting the others out instead of saving himself, but somehow it hadn't hit. What a waste of effort to delay the inevitable a little longer. He was stuck here. Alone. Afraid. But angry.

There were no further blasts and the fires weren't blazing as tall, but the quakes hadn't ceased and he found it needlessly perilous to creep out from his alcove now. Still, he crept out along the walls, bruised palms back, and tried to find a next course of action. The adrenaline faded; he noticed more and more little nicks and scrapes where his armour didn't reach, the kind that stung every time he moved too sharply or brushed some sweat against them. His ears stopped ringing and the nausea lessened. He could taste ash among the blood. The floor was unsteady but walkable: other than an unnerving sense of vertigo whenever he rounded the black void cutting the room in half, he found no issue tiptoeing around the rubble towards the nearest passage. But that had caved and sealed the opening behind its crumpled ceiling. Not the other one; he had come that way earlier and if he dared another trip past the string of mangled bodies he was certain it would be just as inaccessible as everything else. So he returned to his corner beneath the flickering lights and sat, alone, afraid, and angry.

There was no plan, and, realizing he had just destroyed his only chance at a quick death, he suddenly wanted nothing but to start sobbing and hope he passed out from the smoke before the collapsing ship tore him apart. Why had he ever bothered switching places with an illusion knowing this would be the result?

There was no plan. He would die here, alone, and if he somehow got out alive, Thanos would find him again: what else was left but throwing himself to the void?

There was no plan. Damn it.

The plan, at best, was to survive: everything else was secondary. Revenge would be good. Finding Thanos et al would be good. Earning some justice would have meant the universe, but all that remained was to get out, get far, and hope whatever came next would spare him. And Loki did not think that it would and he did not think he could get *anywhere* in this state. He had always been very proud of his contingencies but this time he had exhausted them all. He had planned for everything but not that he would be stranded here, alive and kicking with not much to show for it. Trembling like a leaf. Convinced he should have let Thanos kill him because it would be easier than coming to terms with himself. Easier than spending the rest of his life wondering when they would catch up to him. Easier than living with what he did. Chances were the stars would just pull him under if the creaking ceiling didn't crush him first: the chasm through the room was bending and breaking wider with every second and he could hear rumbling from other areas. He was never supposed to make it this far.

Loki thought back to Thor, who, as far as he could tell, was the only reason he was alive. And maybe not even alive himself: not after something like this. Asgard: people he grew up with, people who were bloodied, burned, scattered across the ship like beasts to be hunted. Dead. Thanos had no right; after all the favours, after everything that had ever happened, he should have spared them. He lied again. No surprise there. Thor. Tortured—but a fraction of it, a very tolerable piece of hell unlike—

Dead. Thor was probably dead. They were all dead.

Loki had seen enough escapes to know that he wasn't entirely correct. The Valkyrie, for example, had steered dozens of passengers into the emergency crafts, and when he hadn't been busy

guarding their flanks, he had done the same. There *were* survivors—at least half, if the promise was true, but it would not be true. And post-Ragnarök, post- various other incidents, there was almost nothing left to halve. Half. He tried to determine what that meant. What was half of almost nothing?

Once upon a time, he realized as he stood again and cast another numb, distant look at the starry expanse threatening his balance, that had been him out there: glorious purpose, salvation, ends to justify the means. He would have willingly slaughtered another's Asgard and held no regrets for it and all at once the horror of then surpassed the horror of everything else. He had no place speaking against this: he had been exactly the same. Was he meant to survive? Was this a lesson to him in evil?

Heimdall! Even Heimdall. Had he seen everything coming? This too?

Alone and afraid and alive somehow, Loki wondered what was left for him to do. Leave and never look back. If he tried he could still muster the strength to pull himself out; some things took less strength than others and the room was filled with residual energy not only from the Infinity Stones but from the Bifröst's last use. Harnessing it would give him enough of a boost to warp, but his chances of landing somewhere half-decent were questionable at best: teleportation without an anchor was a gamble. Solid ground, he figured; breathable air and no immediate threats. That was the closest he could manage, although, knowing that it would be better than waiting for the ship to tear itself and everything inside to ash and space junk, he found it a fair risk. He could either die here or wherever he happened to land: there was nothing to lose by trying. Eyes on the collapsing void, he stepped back, pressed himself against the wall, and held out both hands. He tried not to think about where he was or why. He tried not to think about how many deaths he had just witnessed. He tried not to think about anything but himself and the sensations around him.

It took a minute, but, with a firm, careful reach, he managed a siphon and began drawing the energy into a spell. Solid ground. Safety; that was it. That was his anchor. Safety. Behind him, a surge of cold air offered a brief respite from the dying inferno, and he savoured it for the few seconds it took to fade. Breathed in, out; slowly calmed himself and the magic. He had gambled on worse odds.

Safety. Safety, he thought as a familiar weightlessness took hold: take me somewhere safe. Then he took a last deep breath and closed his eyes, and the world disappeared.

Deep Water

Chapter Summary

Loki wonders if he's made a mistake but doesn't hesitate in getting his plan off the ground.

Seconds down from the next nearest jump there was solid ground, cold and touchable and easy to tread, and had their trip gone any longer it might have passed through here. Safety. Or as safe as it could get because not many places in the universe were safe; between its heat deaths and wars there never were. Eyes still shut and heart racing Loki was surprised he hadn't died yet. Safety! His head hurt and it felt and tasted like his nose was bleeding but he was alive somehow, probably. If his dumb luck had landed him in the middle of a battlefield or on an island in a pool of lava then there wouldn't be much coming back from that, but it didn't seem to be: the air was comfortable and smelled like food and drink and people were talking over music. Not at all. Not possible.

Unconvinced, he looked up, only to see that, yes, by some very excellent dumb luck, his blind warp had landed him in an alien tavern somewhere. Not a war zone, not an asteroid, not dead space: a tavern. And a pretty nice one. It was a little decrepit, admittedly, and he was sure—oh, he was still invisible—that at least half of the people inside could and would kill him as soon as he caught their eye, but it wasn't like he had a choice: another attempt would knock him clean out miles away from a surface. So after a second to re-examine the crowd and smear the blood away, he lowered the invisibility and finally caught his breath.

It hadn't quite been impossible. He'd tried warps like this before, and given the combined energy of the Bifröst and an Infinity Stone or two it wasn't so unlikely that he could manage such a pristine attempt. In the grand scheme of everything that had ever happened to him, in fact, it was far from the most improbable occurrence. Improbable, but not impossible; wasn't that how he always played? A draw like this was right in line with the rest of his existence.

Actually, no: this was completely fucking ridiculous.

The place was rather quaint on second thought—decrepit, but endearingly so. Evening sunlight filtered into the room through uneven blinds and painted various spacefarers in soft orange and the furniture, although in similar need of repairs, looked welcoming enough, and whatever song was playing, despite being mostly inaudible under the crowd's chatter and a crackle in some speaker somewhere, was catchy. He'd taken worse; this, in all its low-maintenance chaos, was fine. He gave his nose another swipe and then found a seat at the counter.

“Drink?”

Loki glanced up with a dubious frown. Staring back at him was a beady-eyed feathered biped hunched in the next stool over. “It's not that obvious, is it?”

“Well”—the stranger stopped and scooted closer, leaned against the counter with a hand under their maw, and widened their eyes even further—“your face is all busted and you look like you just witnessed a massacre. That or she took the kids. Did she take the kids?”

The former! Thank you for asking. Or, alternatively: none of your business.

“I don’t accept drinks from people I’ve just met,” Loki said, although that wasn’t true and, if perhaps only to ease the scratchy smoke sensation in his throat, he sighed and motioned for the barkeep anyway. Was it a good idea? Not entirely—but most of this wasn’t.

“I’m Kip,” the stranger announced, their feathers ruffling triumphantly.

“Loki.”

“Low-kee. Low-kee?”

“It’s... not a long vowel.”

“The fuck’s a long vowel?”

Thunk; Loki took his drink with a wry, breathy chuckle.

“Wanna talk about it?” Kip asked.

“I do not,” Loki said.

“Are you sure?”

“Very.”

“Oh. Okay. Well”—Kip hopped off their stool—“enjoy your drink.”

Then they were gone, slipping through the crowd like it was nothing. Looking back, Loki saw them claim a table with an equally boisterous group of lizardfolk, and he wondered as he turned again if maybe he should have agreed. It might have helped to talk and the truth was he did want to, but what would he even say? That it was his fault everyone was dead? That he’d probably traumatized his brother? Or that he was a coward? Yes—here he was! The great Loki: sitting in some shitty bar somewhere with shittier liquor, too scared to face his enemies, too scared to track down his allies and apologize, and simply hoping that whatever storm was coming would pass over him. He sounded like an imbecile; no, thank you.

—*thwack!*

He glanced behind him and saw someone sprawled on the floor with what used to be a chair across their back.

“Hey, dipshit!” the barkeep yelled. “Break your own furniture!”

“Up yours, old man!”

The drink suddenly seemed unappetizing, but, in a fit of frustrated desperation, Loki downed it all and tried to calm himself. Did Thanos care to search for him? Was it even worth seeking out revenge? He was one man; he certainly couldn’t go against Thanos on his own and it wasn’t like he could match the pace. Not in this condition. Not like this. And did they care to search for him while he sat here and wondered where to go? Finish what they started? Loki stared down the empty glass. Surely not. Thanos wouldn’t do that. No. As far as anyone knew he was dead; why bother? They wouldn’t come after him.

If he was worried about staying here then not for long as he overheard something much more interesting: Earth, and plans to swing by real quick, grab some supplies, maybe rest awhile, and then head back out—because that wormhole they'd found, combined with an (illegally?) modified warp drive, was just so useful; how could they not make the best of it?

Oh, Earth.

That had been their original destination and Loki thought now that maybe it would be better to test his luck there: at least it was familiar. There were still those who would gladly take advantage of his less-than state and without a starship's worth of people to vouch for him, he knew they would try, but what it came down to again was how hopeless the situation already was—something along the lines of: where and how would you like to die today? Or, more likely, he'd get himself stuck in a sound-proof, magic-proof, escape-proof cell in the middle of nowhere, where he'd die instead of either old age or some captivity-induced madness. Thus: death or capture.

If he had any sense about him, he'd order another drink, order some food, and keep his chances, which were die painfully, die less painfully, encounter such excruciating pain as to want to die, or, least likely of all, carry out a healthy, happy, and long life apart from any past and present enemies—because that was his plan, wasn't it? Stay alive, stay out of anyone's reach, and never look back. Try to make his peace. It sure wasn't a bad plan and it probably wasn't as unfeasible as he was making it, but he knew he could find better odds if he only dared to look.

Rule one of gambling: know when to stop.

Well, maybe. Or maybe not.

Keep playing?

Loki swivelled the stool around for a look. Nothing much: four human-looking, bounty hunter-looking men that would probably stab him in the neck if he said the wrong thing. But when had he ever? Silver tongue, meet smooth negotiations: try not to get killed.

It wasn't like he interrupted; he left his empty glass and stepped off the stool and wandered to their table quite politely and lingered there with that very innocent look of excuse me, I'm so sorry to butt in like this, but may I please ask you all a question? He played it up. He knew what he was doing and whether or not they could tell it was an act it worked.

“Hey stranger,” the largest man said, pulling a cigarette from his mouth with two spindly fingers. “What can we do for you?”

“I just happened to overhear,” Loki said, “and I—may I sit?” He pressed a hand to the last free chair; the man only shrugged, and he slid into it cross-legged. “I heard you're headed for Earth and I was wondering if I could join. One-way. I've just got some business there and no reliable means of transportation at the moment is all.”

“Small ship,” someone else said. “You'd have to sit in the back.”

“Oh. Oh, I don't mind.” Loki shook his head. “Beggars can't be choosers, right?”

“Wise words,” the first man said, taking another drag of his cig. “Well, sure. But”—he raised a finger—“if we get jumped, you're on your own.”

“Fair enough,” Loki said, little short of an amused chuckle bordering the words, and then he uncrossed his legs, leaned back in the chair, and waited for them to finish their drinks. Behind the lizardfolk, he caught Kip frantically gesturing at him and he responded with a bewildered squint and raise of his hand: what do you want?

Kip stumbled out of their seat and trudged over. “What the hell are you doing?” they squawked.

“Socializing?” Loki said.

“Socializing!” Kip exclaimed with a ruffle of feathers. “Do you have any idea who you’re socializing with?”

Loki looked around like it made a difference. “Oh! I picked the most dangerous people in this entire building to strike a conversation with? So? I’m dangerous too. We’re all being civil. What’s the issue?”

“He’s right,” one of them said, setting an empty glass on the table. “Mind your own business.”

Kip’s expression was unreadable. Worry, maybe—some generic kind they must have felt for every random stranger they ran into in strange bars. They stood there with their eyes darting between everyone at the table and then just shrugged and returned to their table. Loki was positive he wouldn’t even remember the name, but it was interesting while it lasted.

There was a fire exit tucked into the room’s corner, off to the side and recognizable only by the fluorescent sign above its door, and that, unsurprisingly, was how they left. It was a little colder outside, but there was nothing hostile about the place—some nondescript city built many miles high and swarming with air traffic. Two suns bathed the horizon in bright orange and he could hear the ghost of an alarm echoing somewhere. He could have stayed here, honestly: it would be less of a gamble than trying for favours from presumed bounty hunters. Figure out where he was and get back on his feet, see what connections he could build. But it felt like the uneasy stopover it was and all its opportunities only reminded him how he had almost died just making it here. How close he must still be to the burning derelict. At least Earth was familiar and at least it had connections to the greater universe. Whether it was a good option, it was the best option.

The ship was a low, sleek thing at the end of the lot. It was like a shadow with its dark body and darker windows, and the evening sunlight outlined what looked like several different cloakers laid flat against the underside. Turning back, Loki saw extra parts attached to the wings.

“Mind your head, kid,” the last person into the ship tartly advised. Loki bit back the urge to tell them he was in his thousands and ducked.

It wasn’t too small, but there were only four seats. There were stacks upon stacks of boxes in all sizes crammed around the ship and the footlockers were so full they had been left open, overflowing with assorted items of every kind. Loki considered searching one but decided not to test his luck. They were staring at him as he pattered around trying to figure out where to sit. He stared back. Either they were making sure he didn’t steal anything or sizing him up to rob him and then throw the body overboard. Too bad he was doing the same.

“Did you refuel?” someone barked.

“Of course I refuelled!”

There was a bang and Loki turned just in time to see the two pull apart, deciding, apparently, that mauling each other wasn't worth it. He didn't even flinch: wasn't it always his luck that he wound up between such folks? Birds of a feather or something like that; he stifled a laugh and then, none too rattled, he swung himself onto a large window-adjacent crate, which had another stack piled behind it and sufficed as a kind of fifth seat. Honestly, he was still trying to process the sheer improbability of it all.

The trip was efficient if nothing else. All the jumps and shortcuts around the universe were easy to traverse in the right vessel and they took several: a few minutes of trying to leave the planet through the mass of air traffic and then they were accelerating into FTL, cutting into folds one after the other in snaps of blurred rainbows and starlight. It was expensive technology that the Statesman didn't have; they'd had to take the long way between jumps. Not many more minutes later they were perched right outside Earth, with its blue expanse filling the front viewport's entirety.

No one said a word.

Their descent was a bit less hectic, smooth and slow through a relatively uncrowded stretch of air in—what, Canada?—to a decrepit ranch surrounded by pale, tattered grass. Strips of burnt land marked where the ship had been before, and as they skidded to a halt, it became apparent that there was no life here; nothing, in fact.

The engines clicked off and the hatch opened.

“If you stole anything,” someone called as Loki hopped out of his seat and calmly exited the ship with nothing in his pockets, “I'll break your legs.”

“Noted,” Loki said, not looking back. He circled around the ship and saw a line of smouldering weeds behind the thrusters, as expected, and then he turned to give the place a wide once-over. Blue sky, dead wilderness. Nothing, just as he'd thought. He had already assumed it was a façade and by the looks of it, he was right—or else the steel and flickering lights nearly invisible between the barn's splintering planks were just for show. Either way, he'd found his safety. The question was: where to next?

“How far from civilization?” he asked.

“On foot?”

“No, I was thinking I'd swim, actually. Yes, on foot.”

There was a contemplative whistle. “Two hours that way”—Loki glanced to see where the man was pointing: a wide dirt road curving somewhere out of sight—“or you could risk getting lost and hit town in about ten minutes if you go down the side.”

“The side” was a relatively unimposing incline feathered with wildflowers and trees, not quite as clear-cut as the road but more or less just as traversable. Looking at it, there still seemed to be a path between the trees, and there wasn't much of a rush anyway: he was here, he was safe, and anything more than that would probably be akin to looking a gift horse in the mouth, so why bother?

“Well, thank you,” he said, and then he turned and made for the quicker route. No one acknowledged his departure.

Everyone was dead, he thought as he waded through a patch of flowers.

It was all him: him thinking the Space Stone was better off in his hands, him thinking Thanos would pause, him not doing more. Not quite everyone, surely—but close enough, he thought, and as the background noise faded and the trees opened to a cloudless sky, he found himself sinking into a cold and unfamiliar kind of loneliness. He felt what he had felt on the Statesman: this couldn't be happening. He thought he was overreacting, but he had seen the worst of it. Friends. Family. Everyone and everything he had ever been close to was gone. After his miraculous string of luck, well—this was fitting, wasn't it?

The universe's cruelty was only somewhat overdue.

It was a little longer than ten minutes, but the trees eventually broke and Loki found himself coming into a bright, bustling community that looked just shy of city criteria. He didn't fancy explaining the armour and he imagined he was covered in enough ash and dried blood to raise suspicion regardless, so he slipped once more into invisibility before anyone could spot him—easy, though still somewhat awkward—and continued along a sidewalk, stepping neatly between everyone that couldn't see him. There wasn't much for him here, but he felt safer among people and he could afford to rest knowing not many on this planet could kill him. Charm his way into a good hotel, maybe, never mind the blood, and sit down with a hot meal and laugh at his chances (die comfortably, die so very, very unexpectedly and inexactly and threateningly soon, or luck out again, live out the storm, and come out feeling just as lost) for gods help those who dared stand before Thanos; didn't he know this better than anyone? This town, he knew, might just as well be his grave. But what a nice one.

He swung into the first grocery store he passed, grabbed a premade salad, and then swung back out and kept walking he hadn't just casually robbed the place.

It would have been like him to neglect himself and continue through stubbornness alone, but there wasn't much he could do even if he wanted to. So, carrying his rather dishonourably acquired goods under one arm, he found a calm enough spot—a small yard between several loosely connected buildings—and sat there on the curb, which gave him a few metres from the sidewalk: no one would accidentally bump into him. Tried to make sense of his situation while he ate. He should disappear; there was nothing left for him to do and he didn't want to cause more trouble for himself. But it was selfish and it wasn't like him to sit and cower while everyone else died fighting and he knew there were two Infinity Stones on Earth. Trouble wouldn't wait on him. Maybe that was why he was here, afraid but willing; there must still be some tricks up his sleeve. So he ate his salad, the only thing he could stomach in this sorry state, and kept looking.

He didn't really know many people personally but he had a few lists of contacts and they had talked it over quite a bit in those months. And not that anyone would listen but if he was dying anyway then it didn't matter. So he went down the list of all the friends of friends of everyone who had been there with him and tried to draw together what he knew. There were two Infinity Stones and Bruce would be down here already raising alarms, but they could only be in one place at once and any help counted. What other alarms could be raised? Was there information about Thanos and his army that only someone on the inside knew? Sure. And all the years spent studying these things as a royal and perfecting the art of strategy meant Loki knew exactly what kind of information was useful and to whom—weapons and weak spots and who was coming and how many and where and more. It was the least he could do to get back. And he told everyone who would listen.

The First Letter

Chapter Summary

An anonymous tip is received.

Chapter Notes

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

Tony Stark had greeted the morning with unparalleled certainty that absolutely nothing extraordinary would spoil his day—double-, triple-, and quadruple-verified, thank you. He knew for a fact that the chances of someone or something bothering him after all this time, though non-zero, were negligible, and, confident that his semi-somewhat-more-or-less official leave from the world’s absurdity was still in place, he had been quite sure that this would be a perfectly average and unremarkable café breakfast/brunch. No terrorists, no alien invasions, no board meetings, no kidnappings, and definitely one-hundred-percent not any handwritten letters materializing out of thin air, floating down to the table, and settling face-up beside his coffee.

Hell no.

He was a little surprised, but nothing more. After a long, contemplative sip from the mug, he sighed, took the letter with his other hand, and gave it a closer look. It was rather nice, honestly: the words curled together in an ornate, almost regal script and the margins might as well have been measured with a ruler. He thought, jokingly or otherwise, that whoever had written him must be either royalty or a lawyer, and then, if only out of curiosity, he made to read.

“Tony.”

He glanced over the paper. “What?”

Pepper gave him an unimpressed look.

“I’m just saying,” Tony argued, matching the look with a resolute hand-wave, “that I would really like to know what the mysterious letter that just magically appeared out of nowhere says. When was the last time someone magically sent you a letter?”

“Never?” Pepper said, raising an eyebrow.

“Never!” Tony exclaimed. “You’re telling me you don’t want to know what this says?”

“Something about saving the world, maybe?”

“Well—I mean. Uh.” Tony leaned back in his seat. Uh, yeah, probably: there were few other reasons he could find for something like this. “You don’t know that.”

She said nothing, which somehow seemed no less judgmental than if she’d crossed her arms and said yes, actually, I do, and so do you. Well, yes. Whatever, though, right? With no good

expectations, Tony finished his coffee and silently read through the text. It went like this:

Stark:

You are reading this because you are competent. I trust you to make good use of the following information.

Assuming nothing has changed, Earth is home to two Infinity Stones. You know what these are and what they are capable of. There is someone looking for them as part of a plan to destroy half of all life in the universe and you likely have anywhere from hours to minutes to prepare. Odds are he will have his most trusted work in his place; expect four and prepare for an army. I've already tipped off who I can but I know you have more connections than I do and I hope you can pass this along to the right people. Evacuate the city of New York if you can—they will find the Time Stone there and they will not be taking a gentle approach. Work quickly and efficiently, and no matter what happens, do not underestimate them. They will stop at nothing. You will probably hear about this, but I doubt it will be soon enough. You will probably also underestimate them regardless of what I just said; we cocky types tend not to heed warnings.

I spent a long time with these people against my will. All you need to know about me is that I will do everything in my power to make them pay for what they have done and keep it from ever happening again.

I wish you all the best of luck.

Regards,

A friend

Tony thought for a moment as he gave the letter another quick run-through that he liked this particular breed of sarcasm, whatever it was—genuine concern wrapped in dry, almost amusingly blunt honesty. Then he thought what he always did: he should probably deal with this. Beneath the closing was something of a postscript: a string of numbers Tony recognized as coordinates and beside them, in that same half-joking, no-nonsense candour, “Time Stone. Irritating but useful. Make sure he doesn’t do anything stupid.” And there was also quite a bit more. Ranks, numbers, likely strategies, who did what and what to be looking out for. Even a few things catered to him, information most wouldn’t think of. It looked like they meant it: not many people would know this much and not many would bother if it wasn’t absolutely dire. He stared at the coordinates.

“I thought we were on a date?” Pepper reminded.

“No, I know!” Tony whined. “I know. But—”

“But?”

“But I’d feel really bad if I just looked at this”—Tony shook the letter—“and went oh, hey, some guy and his army coming for the Infinity Stones or something is totally not something that I should be concerned about because I’m in a café with my beloved and can’t be assed to help out; better luck next time! I can’t just do that.”

“You don’t even know who sent this,” Pepper said.

“Yes,” Tony calmly confirmed, “and I’d rather ignore it and split another croissant, but, uh”—he set the letter beside his mug—“it seems kind of legit and I’m a little worried.”

“Oh. So you’re…”

“I don’t know. I hope not! See, I’m gonna get more coffee first, I think, because something tells me I’ll need it, and then”—Tony took the letter again and his phone—“I’m gonna see where these lead and then I’ll tell someone else to deal with it and I’ll probably be done in like five minutes tops.”

He was not done in five minutes tops.

The coordinates were close enough to bother, a stone’s throw away in the Iron Man, but that was less of a concern than who he should tell. Everyone he still considered an ally might have been anywhere in the world and everyone else who bought the story would just roll their eyes and say, “Deal with it yourself.” And it was quite a story to buy. But people had come for the Infinity Stones before and very rarely did anything in this world prove to be a false alarm; he figured that out the first several thousand times something ridiculous threatened existence itself. If it were a false alarm he would be happy to apologize. He wished it would be. It didn’t feel like one, though, and he started pulling up contacts knowing he would rather be an alive idiot than a dead idiot. On the off chance everyone ignored him he had two options: fly over and do something heroic or stay here, have another croissant, and try not to let the guilty conscience set in.

Pepper pushed a freshly filled mug in front of him. “What do you think?”

“I think I should check this out,” Tony said, taking the letter and folding it, “just in case. Might be a false alarm. Might not be. It’s good to be cautious.”

“It gets tiring being cautious all the time.”

“You would know.”

Very true: they both liked to worry but only one of them was sensible about it. And it was not the one currently messaging several hundred different friends of high rank across the world instead of having another croissant. He really hoped it was nothing but felt his heart sink as people started getting back to him. Signals were cropping up on frequencies that no one ever used or checked, which he had asked about too. Energy outputs from rare mechanisms on a massive scale. Something big was coming and it looked like there wasn’t much anyone could do but prepare for a fight and soon.

“So… speaking of cautious,” Tony said, testing the coffee, “I think it might be a good idea to not be in the area shortly.”

They stared at each other.

“Hey, I’m not happy about it!” Tony said. “I hate that this keeps happening. I hate that it happens when you least expect it. I’m tired.” He threw back the rest of the coffee. “Tell you what,” he said as he set the mug on the table. “I’ll make it up to you. Maybe a fancy dinner somewhere. We haven’t done that in a while, I think. No more surprises. I promise.”

“You promise.”

“Mhm.”

She managed a tired smile.

Tony stood and circled around to her side of the table, and then, softly, sweetly, and yet a little too quickly, he bent to kiss her. “Yeah,” he said, evening his posture. “I’m gonna head out. Don’t do anything crazy.”

“Bye, Tony.”

In that brief time he accomplished quite a bit. It was always a hassle to evacuate cities but they had a good heads-up on it and others could help hold the perimeter. Elsewhere they were keeping watch over the Mind Stone. He kind of wondered if he’d been tasked with this specifically because he was so neurotic about it but chose to take it as a compliment. Zipping around checking his list at a thousand miles per second he almost began to suspect he was forgetting something, so he checked it again.

By the time he got to investigating the coordinates it sounded like they had already been planning on getting in touch. It was a massive building, like a mansion or an old church combined with an antique shop, which was to say it didn’t look like it had anything to do with an Infinity Stone or its keeper. They stopped him at the massive old church doors.

“You know anything about a guy and his army?” Tony asked as the Iron Man melted off.

A concerned wizard stared back at him.

“Tony?” Bruce called from inside the foyer. There was a Hulk-sized hole in the roof and he was wearing someone else’s clothes, like he had been recently naked.

“Holy shit!” Tony exclaimed. “Where have you been?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“What have you heard?” the concerned wizard asked.

“Sorry, who are you?” Tony asked.

“Dr. Stephen Strange. Sorcerer Supreme.”

“Wow, say that five times fast. Listen—”

“Thanos,” Bruce said.

Tony glanced at him. “That’s his name?”

“What have you heard,” Strange asked, “and how?”

“Someone sent me a magic letter with a suspicious amount of detail”—Tony pulled the letter from his pocket and held it up—“and I just walked out on brunch with my fiancée to be here and I am thoroughly pissed the fuck off so do not test me, Dr. Seuss, and let me know what I need to do so I can get back to that as soon as possible.”

At least one eyebrow raised. “A magic letter?”

“Hey, I’m just as confused as you are”—Tony put the letter back—“but I checked it and everything’s been legit so far so here I am.”

“It’s true,” Bruce managed, taking a shaky breath. “Thanos—he won’t stop at anything. We’re dead. We’re all dead.”

“I mean, that sounds kind of—”

“I was *there!* I saw him—I fought him, and that didn’t work, and—he killed everyone. I was stepping over corpses, Tony. I shouldn’t be alive. No one else is.

“Look, I don’t care who he is or what he wants but he isn’t getting a thing out of us. City’s on high alert and everyone’s either leaving or getting somewhere safe. I talked to a bunch of people and if we die then we’re dying with a fight. Yeah?”

“... Tony.”

“Okay, cool talk. Come on.” Tony headed back out. “Hey, wizard! I’m supposed to keep you from doing anything stupid.”

Begrudgingly they followed him as he continued down the empty street. He did see something coming: a distant ring-shaped starship descending upon the city, far enough to stop and catch their breath but close enough to pick out details. Guess it was happening after all—Tony kept his sights on the sky and formed the armour again just in case.

Bruce caught up to him with wide eyes. “The Avengers—”

“No,” Tony bleakly interrupted. “No Avengers.”

“What do you mean no Avengers?”

“Uh, we broke up.”

“Broke up? Like a band?”

“Yep. I’ll fill you in later.”

So there they were, standing out in the middle of the street staring up at an approaching starship with not much other help. But Tony knew he had done much more than anyone could have without an early warning and he hoped they could spare the usual chaos: the dead bodies, the burning buildings, all the destruction for destruction’s sake. Here they were. Come and get it.

Chapter End Notes

gonna say it right now, I have NO IDEA at this point where the letter thing is gonna go. are tony and loki gonna date???? who knows lmao find out more at 6 on What The Hell's Happening In This Story?

Changes

Chapter Summary

Light armour doesn't instill much confidence in Loki when he considers his future enemy. The city he's found might hold a solution.

Chapter Notes

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

It would have sufficed to find a good hotel or similar and shelter there until further notice, as had been whatever existed of a plan to this point, but by the time he had begun giving second consideration to the matter, Loki found himself drawn elsewhere: he needed to prepare for battle. He had to keep moving and it was just as stupid as it was selfish to sit and wait. Here he had a second chance for something—he was alive! Why not make use of it? Why not at least *keep* himself alive? And that made him think that he wasn't ready to fight if it came to that. Of course he wasn't; he couldn't keep himself steady in a strong gust of wind right now let alone defend himself against the likes of them. Did he mean to go after them? Their plan wasn't something that could be defended against. All he could really do was count his weapons, count how long he could maintain a spell before fatigue started chewing at its essence, and wait. But he felt, even knowing how helpless he was from this side of disaster, that there was very much something more he could do. And maybe he was right.

Still, he had low hopes.

Had he been at peak strength, he was quite sure that he could have reduced even Thanos to little more than ash. He had never been much for the kind of extravagant show of power such a feat would necessitate and he was confident that, assuming the best, he would feel its effects for weeks afterwards, but it was nonetheless well within his abilities—and, given the circumstances, he would have happily accepted something so minor in comparison as magical exhaustion. He could try, certainly; that was always an option and he would be lying if he said that he didn't still believe, on some level somewhere, that he might once again find himself under some cosmically absurd wave of fortune and manage an earth-splitting attack in spite of everything. After all that had happened, though, after seeing with what surreal ease Thanos and his allies had managed nothing short of a genocide—well, maybe he was just a little bit cynical.

To that extent, Loki found no reason to entertain any course of action other than “make like someone who just escaped a massacre by the skin of his teeth and cower,” but it was all he could do to stop and wonder as he walked past a blacksmith's shop.

He didn't believe in fate but he believed in coincidences and there was a lot he could do to a good piece of metal to make it work. If he was dying anyway, he might as well humour the moment, not because he thought he could do anything or that it would be enough but because he didn't want to do nothing: there was nothing worse than waiting to be hurt without so much as trying to find a way out. And because there was something cosmic about running into a place like this on a planet like this in this day and age and it would be wasteful to ignore it. Remembering he still looked like

he had just survived a massacre and might raise an alarm, he dealt with that first: as he climbed up the entrance he shifted from straight invisibility to clean black shirt and slacks and unbloodied skin. Normal—or at least normal enough; no one would question him. A bell above the doors signalled him coming in.

There was a reception at the front—signs listing prices and the like—and behind that, a large studio filled with tools and machinery. Pieces of every size and shape covered the wooden walls and some old, obscure folk melody drifted through the room at half-volume, interrupted only by the repeated slam of steel against steel: klunk, klunk, klunk. It was rather homey in a strange way. The distant scent of some baked good lingered in the air and the music, as completely foreign as it was to Loki, seemed familiar. It felt... safe.

A burly, middle-aged man peered out from behind one of the machines, his wrinkled forehead bunching even deeper, and then set aside whatever he was hammering, brushed some dirt and grease onto his jeans, and hobbled over. “Afternoon,” he said, resting his arms on the counter. “How can I help you?”

Well, that was the question, wasn’t it? As far as Loki could tell, he had come here entirely on a whim. He glanced at the maze of equipment. “I’m... not sure yet,” he admitted, looking back at the man. “Just browsing, I suppose. By the way, do you have a sink I could use?”

“There’s one over there,” the man said, pointing to where there was a large, industrial-looking metal basin to the side. “Or you could take the bathroom.”

The metal basin was closer, but trying to wash the dirt and blood off him while shrouded in a fairly low-quality glamour—as in, visible or not, there was still leather down to the back of his hands—would be... annoying. All that blood.

“You good?” the man asked.

Absolutely not. He had never been less good in his life.

“I’m fine,” Loki muttered, padding to the metal basin. “I’ve just had a long morning.”

“Anything I can do to help?”

“Not really. But thank you; I appreciate it.”

The man pulled out a notebook and scribbled something in while Loki turned on the sink. There was no soap, but the dried blood and ash fell easily when the water touched it, pouring off in a grimy brown liquid. It was cold water—icy; something about the hot tap didn’t work no matter what kind of ratio he tried.

“Lunchtime, isn’t it?” he said, not looking up from the half-visible flicker of a superimposed illusion. “Or have you already eaten?”

“Not yet,” the man said. “Need to wrap up an order first.”

“I see.” Loki reached for his face and tried to feel if it was any cleaner, only to feel something else in addition to the flaking blood and ash: a split right above his eyebrow. It didn’t hurt much, but he winced nonetheless. “What kind of order was it?” he said, running a wet thumb across the cut.

“A horned helmet,” the man answered. “Guy was a Viking buff. Wanted something neat to put up on his wall.”

“Must have been interesting to make,” Loki said, managing a numb, distant smile as he reached to wash his face. “First time?”

“Hardly. I’ve been in the business for nearly forty years; people have come in asking for all sorts of things.”

“Wow.”

“And you? Still just browsing, or?”

Loki stared down at the basin. For a moment, his hands didn’t feel like his own. The water seemed too loud. “I don’t know,” he said.

“Style or function?”

“Both?”

“You’re not from here, are you?”

“I thought that was obvious.”

“Ah. Maybe. I know folks with accents who were born here.”

Loki shut the water off.

“You sure you’re good?” the man asked.

“Long morning,” Loki muttered again, trudging back to the counter. “Very long. I’m just tired.”

“What time’d you get up?”

Early. Too early. He remembered waking in the cold, quiet hours of the night when the timed lamps in his room were still inactive and the only light came from the swirling nebulae outside the window; he had thought, as he struggled upright and cast a vague and dreamy look at the door, that this was not his palace bedroom. Ah, no: this was that starship he’d been calling home for so long now. He had not been sure then why he’d woken so randomly, nor why he hadn’t been able to fall back asleep afterwards, but he thought now that maybe he’d felt something would happen. He had known; it wouldn’t have been the first time it ever happened.

“I don’t know,” he eventually said. There was a gently smiling brass frog at one end of the counter, and in its hands, a matching nameplate: MC ANDERSON. NO RELATION TO MC HAMMER.

Anderson hummed; maybe he’d had his own share of sleepless nights. “Take it easy, huh?” he said. “Why don’t I show you around?”

“I’ll pass. Thank you.”

“You sure?”

No. When had he ever been sure of anything?

The frog stared sagely back at him.

“I think I’d like a sword,” he said. “And... armour.”

“Anything in mind?”

Strong. Durable. More than that, he didn’t know; he was here on a solitary whim and had already made it clear to himself that Earth’s items, no matter how carefully and finely made, were mediocre at best when compared to the rest of the universe.

“One-handed,” he ventured.

Anderson smiled like he didn’t know whether to laugh or sigh. “You ever held a sword?”

“Does it matter?”

Evidently not; Anderson pulled out another notebook from under the counter and flipped it open.

“Chestplate and greaves?”

“Chestplate and greaves?” Anderson repeated, glancing questioningly up at him.

Something banged somewhere.

“No, wait, let me rephrase that,” Loki said. “Is there any way I can have a sword, chestplate, and greaves by the end of the day? Earlier, maybe?”

“That’s a little steep, isn’t it?”

“Is it?”

Anderson scratched his head with the pen’s butt end. “Well, there’s a lot of stuff lying around in the back—old projects and everything I never finished. If I take something from there... but then that wouldn’t work for something like armour.”

“But you could modify it,” Loki said, “couldn’t you?”

“To an extent. Why do you need a sword and armour so urgently?”

Paranoia? He felt wholly uneasy with just leather and his knives and nothing else and maybe this would help—or maybe he would walk out with a sword and some extra layers and be exactly as uneasy as before; knowing the situation, maybe he’d be right. Or maybe it was something else.

Again, he said, “Does it matter? I’ll pay.”

“I charge hourly,” Anderson countered.

“Then what of an inordinately large lump sum payment instead?”

“Cash or check?”

“Gold?”

“Gold.”

“Mhm.”

“Listen, I don’t know if I can—”

A heaping pile of gold coins blinked onto the counter with a metallic rustle and a flash of green.

“... turn down that offer,” Anderson finished, gawking at the pile. “Uh.”

“This should be enough,” Loki said, thoughtfully, almost to himself, and then he looked back up and asked, “What’s the rate here? It’s been so long since I did something like this.”

“No, that’s enough,” Anderson assured with a shake of his head. “That’s way more than enough! Look, you don’t need—”

“No. But why not?”

Anderson looked like he wanted to argue, but he only sighed and started writing. They probably met enough freaks in this place. “So,” he muttered, “you know your measurements?”

Vaguely; Loki thought back to the last time he’d had to remember them and then, remembering as well that he’d memorized them in a system that wasn’t known here, he paused to convert everything to something sufficiently Earthly and then carefully recited the resulting string of numbers to him.

“Any way of contacting you?”

“Carrier pigeon.”

Anderson stopped writing.

“I’m joking,” Loki said. “No. I’ll come by sometime later.”

“Oh. Alright, then.”

“And—you know, on second thought, I do have one other request: make everything as cold-resistant as possible, could you? If possible.”

“I’ll... see what I can do.”

“Thank you.”

Anderson finished scribbling something and then snapped the book shut, tucked it under his arm, and trudged off to another room, mumbling, “But I’m eating lunch first. And I still need to wrap up that helmet.”

Well, in his own wise words: alright, then. Loki turned and left, and then, almost as soon as the door closed behind him, he thought... this was pointless. This was all pointless. Clearly he had ideas, but did he actually intend on fighting? Or was he just trying to distract himself? Maybe the latter. He looked back at the door. The latter.

There was a café on the same block, near enough that he could see it from here, and there was no sense sticking around outside, so, slowly, he left the entryway and headed in that direction. He

simply had nowhere better to be: why not? He tried not to think about everything. He tried very, very hard not to think about everything.

This, of course, went exactly as well as expected: it didn't. It was a noble effort, though.

It wasn't as busy as that tavern, but Loki still felt a few glances upon him when he walked in and he wondered—nerves, instincts, something—if his glamour was holding as well as it should have, and then he thought that no, maybe he just looked too out-there regardless: all-black plus his general height and build had never worked for blending in. He thought that maybe he was being too optimistic by prancing around some random backwater town that probably wouldn't recognize him out of armour; cover, who? Because, to be quite clear, someone somehow recognizing him and panicking and then most likely panicking everyone else and alerting whoever generally dealt with matters of “oh, shit, it's that guy who ransacked New York with his alien army that one time forever ago” while he committed the unforgivable crime of sitting down for a breather over some hot drink or two would have been the last nail in the this-is-the-worst-day-I-have-ever-had-in-my-entire-life coffin before he completely lost it. There was nothing, though.

He got a black coffee, mainly because he was exhausted and couldn't be bothered at this point to decide if he wanted something else. Sugar? Cream? Dunno. Ask again later. Mostly to spite his paranoia, he looked the cashier in the eye, gave her a sly smile, and then placed a single gold coin on the counter. She looked at the coin, at him, back at the coin, squinted hard enough to pull a facial muscle, and then palmed it and went to fill a cup. He tried not to laugh. Maybe he was just trying to compensate for the fact that he never paid for his drink at that tavern earlier—not that it *deserved* a payment, honestly, because it had neither tasted good nor gotten him drunk, but “this drink was absolute dogshit so I should have it for free” probably wasn't a policy. It didn't hurt; he'd stashed most of the gold by reflex, insisting, as he hurried through their treasury for separate reasons, that it would prove invaluable at some point, and, as with everything else he'd reflexively stashed, there had been no such scenario and there likely wouldn't be. He could afford to be so ludicrously generous because he knew that, between his chronic habit of weaseling out of payments and the fact that at least half of the universe was so far past gold as a currency that they wouldn't even bother converting it, he'd simply find no other use for it all. Also, the reactions were priceless.

He took his coffee and went to one of the window seats.

“They're idiots,” someone in the next table was saying; he glanced over his shoulder. “Everyone acts like they're these big heroes, and I get it, kind of—I mean, okay, the whole superhero thing—but I was down in the States a while back and met a few and they're all idiots. Like Thor—”

Oh, for crying out loud.

“That guy's clueless,” the man went on, just as Loki popped the lid and set it aside for faster cooling. “People are like give the guy some credit, he's from another planet, but—”

“Dude, that's kind of racist,” his tablemate said. “Even for you.”

“What? No. Look, the point is—”

“Hey,” Loki said, twisting to lean over his seat, “can you not?”

The men—young, somewhat scraggly—stopped and stared back at him. Loki matched their gaze and took a calm, restrained sip.

“Free country, kid,” the first one said; the other, clearly unwilling to join in, pressed his mouth shut to a thin line. “I say whatever the hell I want.”

Loki inched both eyebrows up, lips still on the cup’s rim. He lowered the cup and allowed a faint smile to grace him. “Oh,” he said, “is that so?”

“What do you care what I think about that guy?” the man snapped. “Who the fuck is he to you, your boyfriend?”

“Brother, actually.”

“Brother? He doesn’t have a—”

“Oh, harsh.” Loki set the cup down and then turned his chair to face them properly. “He doesn’t? Are you sure?”

Positive, and fuck you, by the way; he could almost hear it. But there was nothing. The man went dead silent, looked him up and down—looked at that smug, I’ve-got-you-now smile that just couldn’t be resisted—and then said... nothing. He froze, eyes wide and face pale.

Goodbye, cover: this was absolutely worth it.

“So just to be clear,” Loki said, “you can either stop talking now or I can tear off your leg and shove it so far down your throat your feet touch. Either way, you stop talking.”

The man got up and bolted out of the building.

“Or that,” Loki said, taking his coffee. “Cheers.”

The other man forced an awkward smile and chuckle and then grabbed their drinks and ran similarly.

He waited a moment, watched them over a furtive sip of coffee, and then, as he lowered the cup, he began to laugh, and he kept laughing until his face went hot and he couldn’t breathe and he thought he probably looked like an idiot—and then he began to cry. One, two seconds, maybe less; he dried his eyes with a knuckle and went back to sipping before it could hit him any harder. My, though, did it linger. The weight of it all. The implications of what he just did: wasn’t that how he defended those who were dead? Would he have bothered if he believed anything but?

There, he felt that old loneliness again, and this time, it stayed.

Chapter End Notes

credit to my friend for coming up with that glorious threat

Intermission #1: Cutting Losses

Chapter Summary

Tony receives a word of grim caution.

It was all so sudden that Peter still could not say exactly what happened. There had been a ship, there had been some brief and contained chaos, and then he had wound up on the ship with Tony Stark and a wizard who refused to share his real name.

He was not supposed to be here and he was, admittedly, a little nervous. He was also not supposed to read the letter that drifted between them with a green glitter, but he was the only one who noticed and the only one who caught it. He was sure, even before skimming the name at the beginning, that it was meant for Tony, but Tony was too busy alternately staring down the freshly sealed hole in the ship's far wall and arguing with the wizard to be bothered; it wouldn't hurt, would it?

He had already skimmed the rest by the time he decided:

Checking in—all is well down here and the emergency measures are lifting. It sounds like heavy reinforcements have been assembled to protect the other Infinity Stone. Are you still on the ship? I heard what happened. Can you see if a course has been charted for the planet Titan? If so, please be careful. Thanos and his close allies were supposed to regroup there and it may be useful to intercept him, but even alone he is not to be taken lightly and you NEED all the help you can get. See if you can figure something out. I will watch for developments.

Stay safe out there. Tread carefully. Act wisely. They will try to break you; keep your mind on the horizon and endure. If you are ever faced with the choice, remember that the Infinity Stones come first. All pain will pass and nothing is worth allowing their victory.

I have faith in you.

Regards,

A friend

P.S. If you see Strange, tell him he's a moron.

Then the letter was snatched out of his hands.

“Who's the friend?” Peter asked as Tony walked away.

“Dunno,” Tony answered. “Don't care. Why are you snooping?”

“Sorry.”

“Come on, kid. You're better than that.”

Peter wanted to dispute the matter but did not. Tony turned and resumed his squabbling match, during which there was a good chance he would in fact call Strange a moron. Peter hoisted himself up onto a ledge at the base of the ship wall and ignored the bickering. Who was the friend? They must have had some personal connection to Tony to write like that and they must have had some connection to Thanos as well. Surely that narrowed it down; how many such people existed? Did Tony honestly not know or was he hiding something? Did Doctor Strange? Peter frowned: was he the only one who was genuinely curious? He closed his eyes and listened to the engine's hum.

He didn't know much about the Infinity Stones, but he knew they were powerful, he knew Thanos was looking for them, and he knew Strange had one. He thought there was something odd about the warning—that it was too specific; what had the author done? Had they been forced into a choice like they wrote about? Had they chosen wrong?

Peter looked up. Blurred starlight filled the ship's towering view.

... Did he maybe know the author after all? Or were the two of them equally unfamiliar with each other? Would they ever meet? If so, was this person friendly? Did they have the same likes? Dislikes?

The ship's low rumbling was the only answer he received.

Fate Wills It So

Chapter Summary

Old wounds are reopened. Loki meets an unexpected stranger and decides to pursue Thanos after all.

Chapter Notes

I just want to say I read every comment and I love you all immensely

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

There was no telling how it happened or when or why, only that for an instant, there wasn't here; only someone thinking breathe and keep breathing breathe and keep breathing breathe and keep breathing as someone else turned a knife. Then there was nothing, and then he stopped—and he looked away—and he saw himself floating somewhere in the back of his mind and thought

this isn't real, this isn't real, the pain isn't real, none of this is real, I am safe because this isn't real, I'm not here they're not hurting me everything is fine everything will be fine if I just breathe

—and pulled himself out of it for just a moment long enough to catch the cool air and whatever it was that had brought him back, too loud or too quick or something he hadn't heard or felt or seen in years. Long enough to feel himself suddenly sobbing with terror and curled up against the side of the building unable to shake the image. Long enough to think he didn't remember this and everything was wrong and he shouldn't be there and he wasn't there and why was he there and damn it what was he just doing and he was forgetting to breathe and

White knuckles. Blood. Someone was screaming. Something burning; static and the taste of iron. The breaths caught in his throat and his wrists tore as he pulled back too hard. Or maybe he was just hungry. He should apologize. Wrong—wrong again—and falling apart—and—

He closed his eyes and let himself sink into nothing.

Like then—like those nights tucked away in a dark and dusty room with only his thoughts to keep him company, where the day's dreamlike haze shrouded him as he counted injuries. Three, four, five dozen, but they were never real: he would awake one morning and learn he dreamt it all, that there had been no such rotten luck and misspoken words and they weren't real they weren't real they weren't real they weren't real they weren't real they weren't real they weren't

!!!!!!! Oh! Where had he—no.

No no no no no. Of course not. Breathe. Breathe. In. Out. Focus. Cool breeze. The sound of traffic. Hands, feet, chest. Back to the wall; plants crept from the alley gate to halfway up the bricks in a

vibrant, snaking mass behind him. Someone was playing music somewhere. People were talking. Just breathe. Don't think. This wasn't there. No terror. No pain. Nothing. Nothing at all.

Bloody hell—Loki pressed a thumb to the bridge of his nose. This couldn't be happening. Not again. Not now. Not after everything. No.

Thanos did this. All of it. There was that rage again—that blinding fury he had held for stability as he walked the ship's ruined halls. Old rage. Familiar rage. He remembered standing there before Thanos and thinking, somewhere between the calm terror of existing in the same room as this waste of good atoms and the whole *everyone is dead!* that still refused to quiet down, that he wanted to kill him. That it didn't matter that no one could kill him. That it didn't matter that everyone who tried was a fleeting grain of dust to this man who got away with everything. And yet there was nothing that Loki had wanted more and yet he hadn't found the courage to try, not because he knew it would be in vain but because he couldn't process the concept in his mind: this man who got away with everything was untouchable. It was too late to go back and brave the idea. Hadn't he already made his peace with running?

No. Never. Loki still wanted to kill Thanos and he hated that he had dared anything but. And even then he was still afraid more than ever. If they somehow crossed paths again this and everything he had felt then would be too much: all he'd do was freeze himself stiff like a blinded animal and then die. Maybe panic first for good measure. Run again. Run but get caught trying. He thought he would very much like to go back to stalling until the end of the world, as he had been doing for approximately the last several hours. He wanted to keep staring at the ivy. Damn it. He wandered back around to the front of the building, where there was a lone bench, and sat. Cool breeze. Traffic. Hands, feet, chest. No fear. Nothing.

There was a small child staring at him.

Loki lifted his head slightly. Light skin, blond hair, maybe seven or eight; nothing particularly remarkable. "Can I help you?"

"I thought you were dead," the small child stammered, eyes wide.

"Um. No, not yet. Unfortunately." Then he stopped and bunched his brows and asked, "Why would I be dead?"

The look he got was tragic.

"Oh," he said, sitting up abruptly, "oh my—I'm so sorry. I thought I was alone. I thought—you couldn't have made it here so soon. Those were cheap crafts. They weren't equipped. They—oh my goodness. What's your name? Are you hurt?"

"Svala Syrkkisdóttir," she said with a shy bow, and then she shook her head. "No, I'm not hurt."

"Please tell me you're not here by yourself."

Svala shook her head again. "My mother sent me. Where's Thor?"

Dead. Worse, maybe.

"I... don't know," Loki answered. "Not here. But I'm sure he's fine."

Svala sat beside him. “That must hurt.”

“A little. I’m staying positive.”

“You’re bleeding.”

“Pardon?”

She pointed to her left eyebrow. “Right here,” she said, tapping it twice just in case. “There’s blood. That must hurt.”

Loki felt the split with a finger: it was wet. Somewhere between everything, the scab had not only reopened but surfaced above the glamour—too hard a squint, too much panic to maintain such fine details, he didn’t know. Didn’t believe it; had it really been so bad? “No,” he assured, tidying the spell with a brief gesture. “It looks worse than it is. Don’t worry about me.”

“Okay.”

What were the odds of this? Sitting here together by complete chance—was this town just good for interstellar landings or was the universe toying with him again?

“You know you saved me,” Svala softly added. “Back there on the ship. You carried me. Thank you.”

Loki didn’t even remember. He looked out at the street. “How’s your mother?”

“She’s alright,” Svala said, leaning on a hand. “She was tired, so she stayed behind for a bit. She told me to go explore so I don’t have to think about the ship.”

Loki nodded. He had been doing that himself, wandered for the past while and filled his mind with meaningless objectives to forget what he had seen. The blood. Singed skin and clothes. Someone was cooking something when it happened; between the dead and dying war scenes, he remembered a faint and uncanny citrus bite—once, for some two or three seconds as he scurried down the hall, and then not again, its echo falling to the smoke.

This had not been his first such experience and he feared it would not be his last. It did not get easier.

“I like this town,” Svala said, and he looked at her: she seemed wistful.

He wasn’t really sure how to respond but did not want to leave her in silence, so he said, “It’s a good town.”

“Do you know what it’s called?”

“I do not.”

“Must be a nice name for such a nice place.”

Loki nodded again. “Must be.”

Svala smelled like old smoke; the sour curl of burnt fabric and chemicals rose from her tiny body every time she moved. Something in her eyes looked dead. “Are you sure that doesn’t hurt?” she

asked, gazing up at him with a wood-coloured squint.

“I think I’m tired as well,” Loki said. He felt she was doing a much better job hiding everything, even if she could not mask her wounded stare.

“I stayed up all night last night and I’m not tired,” she said, triumphantly, as if to best him. He acted offended.

“You should go find your mother,” he said. “You’ll get lost wandering in a town you’ve never visited.”

“You’re wandering too and you’re not lost.”

“I’ve been wandering for much longer than you have. I know how to wander without getting lost.”

“Okay.”

Svala did not move like someone who had been awake since the previous morning: she sprang from the bench, stepped swiftly, lightly, and he thought that her name—“swallow” in one of their sister languages, no, not the action, the bird—was quite fitting.

“Can you come with me, Loki?” she asked, turning back towards him.

Her tone was unreadable.

“Of course,” he said, and then he stood and followed, matching her hasty patter as best as he could.

Svala said nothing further; by the looks of it, she wasn’t very talkative to begin with and had exhausted what little conversation she’d stockpiled for the day. Their walk—rather, him bouncing back and forth between a semi-jog and a slow run because their gaits were comically incompatible—was silent. They stopped in a wide and woodsy nook near a park. There was a woman there, seated on a short set of ancient stairs and inspecting something under the vegetation’s uneven shade. She seemed distracted—worn, maybe, the way Svala seemed: the shock had gone through and past her and left nothing for thought. The smile she gave them seemed forced.

Loki knew that look.

“Hello,” she said as Svala joined her on the steps. They looked identical from this angle: same bouncy curls, same brown eyes, same sloped, gentle-looking brows. “You’re back early.”

“Loki said I’ll get lost if I keep wandering.”

He never saw the next part; he blanked conveniently, sinking against a spike of fearful familiarity—that he must have helped both of them at some point and that it was his fault, then, when the moment passed and he looked again to find the woman crumpling under an invisible injury. He thought they were exactly alike in the worst way: how many times had this happened only for her to ignore it?

Then, startled, he hurried to her side. Broken bone? Sprain? Worse, probably.

“Move,” he told Svala. “I need space. Please.”

Svala ran back a few metres but didn’t look away. “You can help,” she stammered, “right?”

“Maybe,” Loki said. Only maybe. He was a mediocre healer at the best of times and he needed to save his strength; he couldn’t promise anything but an attempt. He couldn’t promise he wasn’t undershooting how much it would take.

His fingertips flickered at the surge of raw energy.

“Show me where,” he said.

The woman dragged a hand to her right: down from the edge of her ribs, slowly, to somewhere above her hips. She didn’t speak; she barely kept her gaze on him.

He closed his eyes and pressed where she’d shown. It felt like a blow from some large and jagged object—rough outside, rougher inside; if he concentrated, he could nearly discern how far the internal bleeding had spread. The crusting tear was tame in comparison. Something was broken after all. He ignored the nausea creeping through him and cleared the blood, two, three seconds, and then mended the fractures; emerald light shone between her dress’s weave. Breathed in—out—and ignored the nausea. Headache. This kind of focus was too much. Somewhere, the two sensations crossed: he was trying not to vomit as someone cut him open.

He sealed the rest of the wound and then immediately toppled back against the step.

Svala threw herself into her mother’s arms. “Thank you,” she said, the words muffled under the embrace.

Loki managed a nod. It stung less than what had been on the ship, but he felt its weight for all those handful of seconds his body took to compensate. His throat burned; he felt like he’d stood too quickly. He wanted to go find that stupid little bench by that stupid alley and stop thinking.

Picking himself off the stairs, he could not face either of them.

Svala’s mother—still nameless, although he couldn’t bother to ask—eventually spoke: “You haven’t seen your brother,” she said, “have you?”

She was clearly saving her words; he didn’t find the lack of a thank you too odd and her eyes conveyed enough, anyway. But the sudden question, nonetheless, was jarring.

“I’m sure he’s fine,” Loki said, the words just as empty as the first time. “Did anyone else make it here?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “It was a rough warp; everyone who tried it was separated.”

“Same continent?”

“I can’t promise.”

There was something strangely comforting in the lack of lucky coincidences.

“You should go after him,” Svala said.

Loki didn’t respond. I can’t, he nearly said. I don’t want to—except he did. He saw himself standing before Thanos and imagined two ends. One: he let the fear consume him again. Two: he let his anger burn brighter than the fear. He took a running leap. He didn’t look back. Maybe Thanos died. Maybe they both died. Maybe it didn’t matter.

Without thinking, he said, “I will.”

“I believe in you,” Svala said, smiling.

This was a terrible idea. This was a terrible idea. This was a terrible idea.

“Be careful,” said her mother beside her. “Return to us in one piece.”

“I will,” Loki said again. I will try, he almost added. Pray for me; I have not a single fucking clue what I am doing and I am certain I shall die. But he didn’t. “Don’t overexert yourself. I’m not sure how well I healed your wound.” Then, smiling back—softly, painfully—he turned towards the streets and started walking.

Between the abruptness of everything and how flat their conversation’s end had fallen—well, what could anyone ever say after something like this?—he could swear this hadn’t even happened and he was still brooding in a plant-filled alley.

What the hell was he doing?

He couldn’t fight Thanos. He couldn’t even heal someone without feeling like he’d been smacked in the face; how was he going to fight Thanos of all people? How was he even going to make it there? He made it to the bench and still did not know.

What he thought might have helped was a certain combination of some very precise and very powerful runic blessings, the kind that took little to cast but offered exponential returns. He could pull more magic, ease the cost, and probably get away with more than he ought to in this state, although it was just as likely he was underestimating how much he needed and would get himself killed. It was just as likely he had no choice but to stay here and cower after all. Or... maybe not.

He sat.

This was the worst idea. No amount of travel runes could overcome plain exhaustion; no combat runes could kill Thanos. All the luck in the universe wasn’t enough to prop him up and this would probably be an entertainingly stupid move resulting in no one’s death but his own: at best, someone would laugh. But this still, after everything, gave him better odds than simply sitting and waiting for oblivion. And, of course, he was always the kind to go out with a bang: better he die trying than not at all.

Not knowing what else to do, he stood and continued to Anderson’s shop.

Anderson was hunched at one of the far worktables with some several different hand tools, chipping away to the music’s beat. He glanced up as the doors opened and then back down and said only, “Bit early.”

“I know,” Loki said. “I’m sorry. I just—”

“Well, no, I’ve got good news,” Anderson said, looking up again. “I found a nice sword that just needed some finishing. Pieced together some armour. It’s not perfect, but it’ll work.”

“Oh?”

“Come here, kid.”

Curious, he walked over. On one of the steel surfaces was a pair of silvery greaves, and beside them, a similarly fashioned chestpiece. They were well-shaped and smoothly polished and tied with fine black leather straps, and as he caught his reflection in the metal, he smiled: appearance couldn't have and hadn't been prioritized but Anderson had tried regardless.

"Still can't understand why you needed everything so soon," Anderson said as he leaned to scrutinize the sword on the other worktable. "Not everyday someone walks in with a pile of gold and demands armour and a weapon before evening."

"I wasn't demanding," Loki argued. "And it's... complicated."

"You trying to save the world or something?"

"Would you laugh if I said yes?"

"In this day and age? No. But y'know—why don't you just leave it to the Avengers? I'm sure they'd get a kick out of it."

"Honestly? I don't trust them to survive whatever's coming."

"Mm. Sounds like you got a history with the enemy; that complicated too?"

"It is."

Anderson sighed and looked up at him. "It's not just saving the world, though," he said, "is it?"

For want of an answer, Loki returned a small and tired smile.

"Revenge won't solve everything."

"I know."

"Do you?"

Loki took one of the greaves in his hands. It wasn't quite a true greave, for it only protected the shin from the front and sides, but it worked well enough and he couldn't complain under the circumstances. "What material is this?" he asked.

Anderson gave him a dissatisfied look. "Titanium alloy," he said, and then he returned to whatever he was inspecting. "Same thing Tony Stark uses, I think. Dunno if it's the same in those new suits of his."

"May I?"

"Go for it."

Loki bent and buckled first the piece he was holding, mindful of the glamour he still had on, and then the other. He tightened them and then stood and wiggled a leg: they fit surprisingly well.

It was as he made to lift the chestplate that he realized he couldn't get an accurate gauge of everything without disrupting the magic—that, even shallow as it was, there was still a level of physical dissonance between what he was wearing and what he appeared to be wearing. Nothing

much, certainly, and he could have just as easily ignored it, but as he stole another glance at Anderson, he wondered.

“Hey, I have a question,” he said.

“Ask.”

“Do you think people can change?”

“Sure. People change all the time.”

“Even bad people?”

“Yeah, of course. Something you did in the past shouldn’t define you for the rest of your life.”

“Alright, so let’s say you found yourself in a room with someone who once did something terrible and, you know, those were completely different circumstances and they’re not remotely the same person they were at the time; would you panic?”

Anderson stopped. “Okay, that’s a little overly specific.”

“I do have a reputation for overly specific questions.”

“Well... jeez, kid.” He set down his tools and took a proper look at him. “I mean, let’s say, hypothetically, I did, but first of all—well, the fact that they’re asking that in the first place says a lot about them, doesn’t it? Says they’re trying to be better. So... I think I’d give them a chance.”

And the truth, Loki knew, was that even though most people found him sort of vaguely forgettable and he could pass as an average civilian just by changing his clothes, this guy wasn’t stupid: he had probably guessed sometime around when a pile of foreign currency magically appeared on the front desk. “But are you—”

“Yeah, I’m sure,” Anderson said. “Yes. Look, kid, I already know who you are. I don’t care.”

“Oh. So if I were to—”

“Yes. Maybe. Sorry, why are you asking?”

“I was thinking of shifting back to what I’m actually wearing instead of this normal human outfit so I could get a better feel for how everything fits but I had *assumed* that you somehow hadn’t recognized me and if I did that you would and then immediately take a flying leap off the handle and, alright, I guess that isn’t the case and I—see, why are we still having this discussion? You clearly don’t care.”

“Yep.”

There was a pause.

Then, with a brief sparkle of gold, the cotton façade dissolved into nothing, leaving only the dusty black-and-green leather underneath. “You... still don’t care,” Loki said, questioning.

Anderson held back a chuckle. “Try that on,” he said, motioning to the chestplate. “I want to see how it looks on you.”

Like the greaves, the chestplate only covered the front, which seemed a reasonable price for salvaging half-finished armour built to different measurements. As Loki slipped it on and pulled everything tight, he found that it fit just as well—and, because he was always a stickler for vanity and felt like wasting his magic on something stupid for sanity’s sake, he then coloured the metal gold with a permanent glamour; a shower of phosphorescent sparks fell like rain as the magic came and went.

“Now that looks much better, doesn’t it?” he said, looking up with a smile.

Anderson matched the smile. “I think you’re right. But... it needs something more.”

“Wait,” Loki said, and then he paused to leaf through his storage, waved a hand; a green cape glittered into being and settled loosely against the curve of his spine. “Something like that?”

“Exactly like that. Also, hold on, do you just keep capes lying around?”

“Maybe. How’s that sword?”

Anderson turned. “Done,” he said, lifting it. “Just checking for scuffs. Gimme a minute.”

Loki watched him waddle off to another worktable and then took a deep breath.

He really needed to stop improvising all the time.

He had engraved every sort of item that could be engraved and he had done so hundreds of times, both traditionally and with magic, but those were better days. It was just as likely that he would attempt whatever enchantment might have helped him only to discover that even for its most basic runic equivalent, he simply didn’t have the energy—which, to say the least, would be embarrassing. But he had managed everything else; why shouldn’t some runes be possible?

Anderson returned just as he claimed a nearby bench.

“So what’d you need all this for, anyway?” Anderson said, resting the sword atop the table and pulling out a cloth rag. “You look well-equipped.”

Considering that he hadn’t planned this outcome in the slightest—Svala and Thanos and throwing some runes last-minute on his equally unplanned and unneeded extra armour—that was a fantastic question and the answer, shockingly, was he didn’t have a single clue.

“It’s complicated,” he said.

“Yeah?”

“Well, the short answer is I needed something to disfigure with magical script to help me impulsively travel halfway across the universe and this was the best option.”

“Long answer?”

“Honestly, you don’t want to hear the long answer.”

“Hmm.” Anderson raised the sword to examine its blade, squinted, and then set it back down and began rubbing at an edge with the rag. “Okay. Have fun disfiguring.”

There wasn't much that could be done, in any case. Travel and strength; executed properly, that would hopefully be enough to cover everything. Loki pressed a hand to the chestplate.

This was an absolutely terrible idea.

It was by no means a complex sigil and, after a moment to gather himself, it formed well enough, fizzling into the armour's edges with a lingering glow. Though its effect wasn't much, it relieved him to feel some tiny burst of vigour as the magic faded: at least it was working. He laid a hand on each greave and did the same.

"Y'know I could have done that for you if you told me earlier?"

"Yes, I do realize."

"Ah, well—" Anderson tucked the rag in his pocket. "You know what you're doing," he said just as Loki stood to join him. "Right?"

"Not in the slightest," Loki said, and then, because he knew he could use every little bit of help, he let the same runes as the chestplate's burn through the blade's flat. "But where's the fun in knowing?"

"You're going to die," Anderson said.

"I'm going to die!" Loki excitedly confirmed.

Anderson looked like he wanted to scold him but wasn't sure how. He looked at the fresh marks on the blade, which were still sparking indistinctly, and then he sighed, shook his head, and said, "No."

"No?"

"I've seen what you can do. I know you've got what it takes. Keep your head above the water, kid; you'll be just fine."

Loki smiled. "I appreciate it," he said, and then he took the sword.

Chapter End Notes

merged jan 2021; it was bothering me for a while and I finally got around to it early in quarantine. as always, here are the comments that were deleted in the process: [formerly chapter 6, the bitterness of memory](#) and [formerly chapter 9, good karma](#)

Intermission #2: Final Warnings

Chapter Summary

Tony receives another letter and makes a split-second decision following its contents.

This, Tony thought, was a bad idea.

He should have stayed with Pepper. He should have made his calls right there in that café over another croissant and hoped for the best—should have still been on Earth instead of making himself panic aboard an alien starship whose captain they'd unceremoniously ejected into space. He should have remembered to check on the Mind Stone; how were they faring down there? They must have been handling themselves okay without him. Someone must be. Right?

The messy seal at the ship's one end didn't seem real. Tony crept out of his seat and went to wander in the other direction.

Tony did not like space. Although it might have helped to remember that he was in a grand and incredibly well-built starship with curiously breathable air and a comfortable amount of simulated gravity, he couldn't shake the naked terror picking at his mind's edge: this is wrong, everything is wrong, you shouldn't be here, you will die alone trillions of light-years away from anything and anyone you have ever known and some tentacled quadruped will snatch your dead body out of the void and desecrate every last atom while you wonder why—*why!*—you didn't stay for that fucking croissant and simply forward the letter to someone more willing instead of... this.

He hated this.

Peter did not seem the least bit perturbed by everything. A little surprised, maybe, and probably composing a string of excuses and explanations for when—if; Tony hoped it wasn't an if—he returned to Earth, but nothing else. Strange just looked profoundly annoyed: how dare they drag themselves into his mess? Of course they had helped get him out of it but never mind that. The wizard knew everything, after all, and was never wrong. Tony wondered how it was possible that someone was even more insufferable than himself. He also wondered what came next.

They would die here.

He believed it. He didn't want to, and he thought that, given his knack for close calls and near-death experiences, there was a decent chance he would prove himself wrong and come out of it all just fine, but his reassurance felt empty: he couldn't stop thinking about how quickly the ship had been torn open, how easy it was to get lost out there. Could that be him? Was he lucky just to have made it this far?

A shine of green to his left pulled him from his trance. He turned and saw another letter float down before his feet. Was he lucky? He bent to take the paper.

The Mind Stone is safe!

Now that I have your attention, bear with me; I'll keep it brief. Updates are tentative but all sources confirm the Mind Stone has been safely contained and the enemy neutralized with very few casualties. It sounds like the advance notice helped—if that was you, you did well. If you weren't en route to Titan before now would be a good time. Titan is a desert and a fight there is better than somewhere populated. I know for certain Thanos has two Infinity Stones but he may have more. Even one is a lethal force in anyone's hands and he is already powerful, but he is not immortal. You have taken worse. Yes, I am telling you to ambush him. Don't act so surprised. And be careful how you land that ship so you don't impale yourselves on the ruins.

Good luck. I'll be watching.

Regards,

A friend

Tony looked back out the front of the ship, at the stars blurring past them, and, smiling wryly to himself, thought that, well, at least one person believed in him. Better than nothing, right? He wished they'd brought more people. They hadn't. But they could try all the same.

He folded and tucked the letter away and returned to his seat.

Mother Earth's Delicate Tightrope

Chapter Summary

Loki finally closes in on his revenge.

Chapter Notes

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

The universe looked infinite from here.

Loki breathed in, felt the cool air settle to his bones as he stared up at the ocean of galaxies, and gently crept to his feet. Beneath him, stardust swam, clouding around his ankles in a glittering mist. He tested its hold with a calm footstep. Thump—nearly silent, nearly solid, not quite either; if he closed his eyes he could almost imagine he wasn't moving. Behind him, he could still see a tiny, blue planet under the watchful eye of a single moon. Standing parallel to existence like this, he didn't see all that ever was and all that ever would be but rather an abstract of shapes and ideas: that too was just paint on a flat backdrop, a portrait of a reality that he had peeled away to reveal its dressing room. The stardust road stretched so far it faded over the horizon, branching endlessly like veins in a body, and when he looked a certain way one sight seemed to phase into thousands superimposed upon themselves. All of everything near and far at once. He was safe here. He was always safe here.

He took another long and cold breath of air.

“So we meet again,” he said to no one.

Long-distance travel was a fickle thing and there was no one way to go about it. Himself, he had tried everything. Ordinary teleportation was fast and familiar but not always efficient; a good starship was timelessly reliable even if antiquated in concept. The Bifröst had been useful before it was destroyed, taking advantage of all those places like the Nine Realms where the branches grew strong and movement between them was so natural it could happen by accident. Wormholes, cruder but the same in theory. And sometimes one would cut out the medium and face the universe whole, as he did now. Once, he had called this his own. Once, falling backwards into the universe's underside and climbing the world tree with such impudent grace, he had found a way to cheat existence. Spacetime was his. The stars were his. There was no distance too great if he only dared the risk: a brief misstep, a wrong turn somewhere, and he would lose himself in the gap between its limbs. And oh, how he had lost.

He had not stood here since that fateful day. He had come close, certainly—slipped through the cracks on some stray occasion, dipped his toes in and out for something more efficient than the blind leaps he usually took into Yggdrasil's creases—but he had never stood: he had never let himself stay a moment more than necessary. Gazing at the universe from upon the strings that tied it together was an old wonder that he'd cast aside with no remorse, and as he thought back to his destination, to the doomsday he hoped to outrace, he felt its weight.



He didn't want to be here. Not again. Never again.

He had never been to Titan, but he knew more or less in what corner of the universe it resided and if he didn't, no matter: intentions alone were all he needed to find it. And time here did not pass like it did there so he could take as long as necessary, but he didn't want to be here even a moment. It wasn't somewhere he was supposed to have access to and everything seemed to be pulling him back onstage. The vast and empty roar of space was broken by passing interference from this and other worlds, some familiar sounds or voices and some screeching warnings in languages even he couldn't understand. Sensations his body didn't know how to feel and sensations he didn't want to. Physical and astral crossing over to create something else entirely. If he was calm and clear of mind then not much of the sort would befall him, but that was easier said than done. There was a reason he didn't do this anymore and not just that the last time he did he spent

hours or maybe years or only seconds or all of eternity floating face-down in the void—he forgot what he had done or why; he wasn't ever really in pure space nor ginnungagap, a third place instead. waiting to land somewhere / waiting for someone to snatch him out / waiting to die in a place where there was no time. he was supposed to die but had never tested the theory. that straying from the tried paths would incinerate him. that falling wrong on a branch of the world tree would spear his very soul to shreds. and for hours and years and seconds and all of eternity he tried to aim his weightless free-fall.

Please die already. Please die already. Please die already.

(he did not die.)

Loki stared down the path and wondered how much this meant to him. That much. All of the things they had done. All of the things they still wanted to do. Pain masked as mercy. Cowardice and betrayal. At the end of everything, Thanos. It wasn't fair.

He looked out at the stars before him and started walking.

Once, as a young boy for whom magic was still something strange and wondrous, he had discovered astral projection. He remembered knowing then that this was his, that, like shapeshifting and every other marvel he had mastered better than breathing, this would define him, and the years proved him right. There were those who could step into the inner workings of existence, those who could wander to their heart's desire, but he had never quite heard of anyone managing what he managed here and he realized eventually how precious his discovery was—what an unthinkable feat it was to pass so easily between the stitches. Where astral projection only opened the curtains for a preview, this let him make full use of backstage travel: no silver strings struggling to return him to his body because his body was right here. Nothing surpassed this.

There was a cost, of course. One misstep. Just one.

And with all of him backstage, there was nothing onstage to return to. It could be the very end of the universe before he righted himself and by then he might have lost himself as well. Nothing but a timeless shape of thoughts driven mad by the void. Sometimes he wished he had never been found; others he wondered how much worse it would have been here. He hadn't considered it when he tried. He saw himself again, teary eyes, sweaty hands, thinking no no no no no as the bridge's shattered remains fell so far from visibility that he could only look away—look at the stars and imagine he was anywhere else—and then he stopped

and his foot slipped

and

and

and—

He curled tight against the branch and shut his eyes. Stardust brushed his cheek. He felt the energy swirling beneath him, softly, vaguely—felt his fingers floating on hazy tendrils. Shadows; if he shifted a little, he could still see cracks of light from behind the awkward position he'd dug himself into. His heart racing in the nothingness. His body trying to understand was he was touching. After-

sketches of galaxy blueprints and the breath of every newborn star remembering that he too was them, that they were him, that all of everything was only dust dreaming itself alive. And he understood everything in a way that only someone on the outside of all existence could understand and for a second in timeless time came as close to divinity as anyone ever could. He was the universe and the universe was him and the rest was trivial and that was okay. Yet remembering that he was the universe experiencing itself and that nothing mattered did not change how deeply the universe felt and how strongly it could hurt and he—Loki!—experiencing himself, the universe, began to cry. If nothing mattered then everything mattered. And in this moment everything hurt badly. The stars around him began to feel like something else and his closed eyes gave every thought a form and he remembered why even the briefest trips in a place where dreams and reality were the same needed to be done with a clear mind, but he couldn't pull himself away. There was a dark room and the taste of blood. Spell-warding cuffs. Panic and something else. Something wrong. His eyes were scratchy and his throat felt like he'd screamed it raw and—he couldn't breathe—he couldn't—and—

He wanted to go home.

“Please,” he whispered into the stardust.

All of this. Ragnarök. Thanos. The Tesseract. The void. The pain. The fear. The loss. He wanted to go home, go to sleep, and dream it all away. He wasn't supposed to be here. Didn't matter how many times he'd done this, how good he was at it, how careful, how practiced, how everything and more: he would fall again. He would. And there was no one to catch him this time. Afraid of tumbling down the edge, he crawled a long distance before he found the guts to push himself back to his feet. It was difficult to pick apart what was real and what wasn't when neither meant much; whether he was only imagining the blood in his mouth the taste didn't go away. Bruises out of the corner of his eye vanished when he looked them head on. Chains knocking against each other only to turn into the stardust he was walking on. They were old and heavy and their markings were foreign, but all sigils were the same: they spoke in function, not meaning. Magical dampening. Bound and waiting. It made his skin crawl.

Clear as the luminescent path before him, as a branch came to an end like a crumbling bridge, he felt suicide's call. Had he dared to jump, he wouldn't have gone far: another branch would catch him and he would be no worse for wear, if a little shaken. But if he pulled himself back onstage as he was now in the middle of nowhere, then...

The other path forked and he stopped, tried to swallow the metallic bite out of his mouth, and stared it down.

“Loki Odinson,” someone had once said to him. “What do you desire?”

His answer had been brief: “Death,” he said, his voice a watery monotone, and then, for it was everything that had brought him here, he added, “but I am no child of Odin.”

Titan, he thought as the two branches, neither significantly different from the other, shimmered back at him. Nowhere more and nowhere less; only Titan. He picked one at random, drifting all at once from one section of the universe to another as the backdrop lagged behind, and kept walking.

The floors were cold, and for the first time in his life he began to wonder what the concept of cold meant to him. He knew what cold was and he knew what warm was; cold was the absence of warmth, a neutral state, and he could tell when something was warm just as he could tell when something was cold. Yet he didn't know what it was to *feel* cold, only that it was supposed to feel

bad. That if something was too cold it even began to hurt, just like when something was too hot. That it affected important functions in the body and that excessively low temperatures froze and damaged tissues just like they froze anything—of course that made sense; what was a body but an assortment of elements, each with a different freezing point? But it had never happened to him. He avoided cold mechanically, not out of discomfort but because it could be dangerous and that was part of caring for himself. He dressed warm and heeded the weather and assumed he must be doing a very good job of it to never feel cold: if someone felt cold it was because they hadn't put on enough layers. And in a way he longed to understand it for himself, just to know what he was missing. To know what people meant when they described such icy cold that it caused them pain. All he could do was draw comparisons from now until the end of his life.

He had heard much through the walls: that he was too strong, that he was too capable, that it would be a waste. That he had no sense petitioning death when he could be all this and more. He had thought, bleakly—brightly, no, for his humour wouldn't leave him so soon—that their all this was a steaming load of bullshit, and then he laughed and kept laughing.

He laughed to numb the bruises. He laughed to numb the fires under his skin. He laughed to numb the terror. The guilt. The grief. The shame. The regret. The hopelessness. The loneliness. The smallness. The anger. The apathy.

Once, Loki had seen Thanos smile, and he laughed to hide that he didn't know why. If it was love then it didn't matter and if it was hate then it didn't matter because it still hurt.

He dried his eyes and looked up. Stars, distant planets, a rainbow of gasses—everything he found most beautiful; after all these years the sight never ceased to amaze him. Behind Yggdrasil's glittering lattice, it seemed no less ethereal. It broke his heart that it could be ruined for him like this. Titan was close: he saw the planet where it curled behind the stardust branches, the places where he could pull himself back onstage and come to nearby. He looked at the shining tangle shrouding the horizon and wondered how far it went. How long he had been here. Not long; to anyone else it was a blink. To him it was too long. He hoped this was worth it.

He closed his eyes, calmed his breathing, and stepped into the universe.

Chapter End Notes

also @ the impatient frostirons: tony and loki meet in the next chapter (or the one after that depending on if I split anything lmao) and have a Close Moment together :^)

A Dish Served Cold

Chapter Summary

Loki has Thanos at his mercy. There is none to give.

Chapter Notes

hi

—the author editing this in 2021

hi 2

—the author editing this again in 2023

Past the valley's barren remains, an ancient city blocked the sky in crumbling shards. The air was still and smelled like dust and the silence dragged heavily enough for ringing ears. The stray sunlight through the clouds was dim and sand-coloured. Something whispered doom: no living soul would dare set foot here. Not Thanos. Not anyone. But maybe it was intentional, Loki decided as he turned back to check he had arrived in one piece: such a meeting shouldn't be interrupted and such a lonely and unassuming place would stave off foreign attention. Or that was the idea, anyway, since he certainly hadn't been invited and could not care less about the where and why of it all or what his attention was considered. To hell with them; they should have thought before discussing their plans so casually.

He didn't feel as alone as he should have. Someone else was already here. Looking around revealed nothing, but he knew this feeling well and he knew better than to ignore it. He cloaked himself without a second thought and then, slowly and uneasily, he continued through the clearing. He looked up as he walked. He tried to calm himself. Nothing.

He feared for a moment that he'd made a mistake, that he was in the wrong place and he shouldn't bother, and as he turned to look at the ruins again, he thought maybe he was right. Maybe he'd be here for hours. Days. Weeks. Maybe they'd all die anyway. He thought maybe he should run again, and then, just as soon as he considered it, he saw an approaching starship between the clouds.

He stopped walking.

Titan's wreckage made a poor landing for the best of pilots and he expected nothing else as they veered too far around the hillside and tore through a tower. There was a splitting boom and a flurry of dust and then the valley shook; he winced, stooped to keep his balance, watched with half-shut eyes as the ship spiralled out of control and slammed into the clearing's edge. Then a pause. Dead silence: he stood straight and peered over the rubble. He felt his heartbeat in his ears.

Smoke and flames began pouring from the ship's seams; he took a steady breath and sprinted up to higher ground. The irony of making it here only to botch the landing struck him as so darkly hilarious when he turned again that he laughed. He kept laughing. He held the smile for too long, thinking something along the lines of oh, you blithering idiots: look what you've done now. He held the humour because the alternative was worse. They *were* all going to die.

Someone darted through the rubble. Two. Three. Loki saw them disappear into what remained of the ship and then—more silence. Shouting. A metallic screech. Then silence again. Minutes passed. The flames continued to grow. The distant taste of smoke settled on his tongue; he sat and pulled the end of his cape over his mouth. He couldn't quite catch it from here, but by the time the dust settled and the ship emptied, it looked to have been an awkward misunderstanding: someone thought the other was working for Thanos and attacked first. No real apologies. No real trust. Business only. Maybe they should team up.

Loki counted six people. Seven with him. Then they were gone.

He figured he should join the ambush but didn't trust himself to go. He was sure he'd join them quickly—wait for an opening, wait for when it was necessary—but this wasn't that moment: loath as he was to admit it, he was still saving his strength and he didn't want to rush. They were early. They might have killed him if he tried: how did they know he was on their side? So up there he kept a lookout alone in case something went wrong. He felt Thanos before he saw him; the Space Stone's rift vanished and Thanos stepped into the clearing with a frown. Embedded in the gauntlet were four gems total and as he looked around they shone briefly. Glittered in warning.

From the other end of the city's rubble, seated atop an old stairway, Loki swore he saw Strange glance at him. It felt like they were both on lookout but maybe for different reasons. Strange with the Time Stone; maybe he wasn't just seeing through the invisibility but knew how this would end. Both of them crossing fingers and guarding each other's blind spots. The conversation was hard to hear but Loki heard enough: Titan's destruction, Thanos's spurned plan to prevent it and to prevent the same fate from befalling other worlds, the manic quest shrouded in lies. "Genocide?" he heard Strange say once and he felt a glimmer of relief: so he wasn't the only one.

Then, just as suddenly, Strange and the others were upon him.

Loki scampered down from his hill, carefully skirting the debris, and found a vantage at the back of the crowd just in time to see a thin, blue-skinned woman join. Thanos was strong, but between all the attacks and all the everything getting thrown around, the numbers overwhelmed him—too much to get a hit in or think long enough to use the gems at his reach. Strange and two others managed to pin his arms and another scrambled up his back, clamping her hands around his head and sedating him with what seemed like mind alone, and then Tony and the others were pulling the gauntlet off. Just like that.

But then there was someone else.

Then someone was yelling, "Where is she?" and then—

Then the realization. Then the Soul Stone's cost—and Loki saw it on the blue woman's face and he felt the rage flash through him just as soon as someone mentioned mourning, as soon as Thanos wheezed something that nearly sounded like, "I had to." Someone's lover. Friend. Family. They knew the victim well.

"Liar," Loki whispered, glaring up at Thanos.

“Quill,” Tony said, “listen to me—”

(as the man stepped closer, tight fists, teary eyes)

“You didn’t have to,” he choked out. “You didn’t. No.”

“Quill, you need to cool it right now. Don’t engage—don’t engage! We almost got this off!”

This type of rage didn’t go: this, Loki knew. And so in one split second—bang!—he dropped his invisibility and rammed the man into the dirt. The gauntlet flew off and landed somewhere with a clang. Loki pushed the man away and sat up, eyes wide, and watched as the force threw Thanos and the woman on his shoulders to the ground. Tony removed his faceplate and shot him a startled look.

“Take it and go,” Loki said. “Now! Don’t let him—”

Thanos tore himself free with a roar. “You!” he snarled, shoving the group apart just as Tony zipped away with the gauntlet. “You little—”

Loki scrambled to his feet.

“I killed you!”

“Clearly not,” Loki stammered with a hollow laugh.

“I broke your neck,” Thanos growled through his teeth. “I felt your spine come undone. I felt you squirming.”

“You must have misremembered,” Loki said, trying to remember himself how to move. He was so small from here. Thanos was running. Giant fists up.

“You—”

Loki teleported without looking.

“Cockroach!” Thanos screamed, turning. Loki caught his breath at the other end of the clearing, in the other end of the crowd. The moment became a thousand. Tony, also struggling to regain his composure, shared a far glance with him. Strange looked like he knew something. They should move. Now was the time. But they did not spring on Thanos the way they should have nor back away while they could; the desolate plaza became a silent field of options as everyone stared the other down. A tidal wave waiting to dive. Weapons clicked. Rubble shifted under regained footing. Oh, gods. What was he without his bargaining chip? Outmanned and outgunned? They could swarm him if they wanted; he wasn’t any less mortal than any of them beneath his bare hands. Not even a weapon. But looks were deceiving. He was a liar too.

Loki felt himself struggling to breathe. “Look at me,” he growled, a scream behind the words, as he lowered another spell and stood. “You coward.”

“You’re the one who ran,” Thanos said, already inching towards him for a second go.

“You took everything from me,” Loki said.

“I saved your miserable life,” Thanos growled. “I snatched you out of the void and gave you purpose.”

“You killed everyone before my eyes and you won’t even apologize!” Loki yelled. “You said you’d spare them. You didn’t even try. You won’t even take the time to admit you lied, oh, no—what’s the use? They weren’t your family. Just ordinary, innocent people to slaughter in the pursuit of salvation.”

Thanos was nearing. Loki began to backtrace into the crowd.

“You tell me that now,” Thanos said, “after you begged for the tools to destroy them. They were no family of yours.”

“Family is earned,” Loki said. “I lived a lifetime on that ship and you stole it from me. Everywhere I look it’s you! It’s always you. Out with your filthy claws in everyone’s fates. You are not their god. They are not yours to rule.”

“You’re no more god than I am,” Thanos said, rearing to run. Out of patience. “And you will die just like your brother.”

The arcs above them boomed. Metal creaked in the distance. Stones and century-debris crashed into the dirt from so high up they left craters. Everything heaved with a dying quake. Loki tasted blood coming down his upper lip. He saw the others backing away, eyes towards the trembling structures. He saw himself conjure the enchanted sword. He saw the runes begin to glow as he held their magic for support.

“Say that again,” he growled, twisting a spell in his other hand: it was blue with ice fog and creeping frost. “I dare you.”

“You can’t kill me with that.”

“Oh, this? I didn’t plan on it.” Loki lifted the sword to reveal its glowing flat. “You see, I’m not much of a wand person. This seemed more useful.”

“You are nothing compared to me,” Thanos said.

“What makes you say that?”

“You couldn’t kill me when you had the chance.”

“You caught me at a bad time.”

“You’re weak.”

Loki stood the sword before him, one hand on the pommel. “Weak?” he softly said; his other hand was a raging blizzard waiting to be released. “What do you consider weakness? Was I weak to spend unbroken hours pulling lives out of the fires that you caused? Sheltering survivors as they ran for the escape crafts? Or was it the children I carried in my arms? You think it weak,” he continued, his words a low growl, “that I could not find the strength to kill you after everything I gave on that ship?”

“Your emotions blind you!” Thanos yelled. “You fail to see what we could have if you only—”

A beam of solid ice swung clean through his shoulder. He fell back with a gasp.

“You,” Loki growled, forming another crackling spear. “Look what you did to me! You tried to make me like you. You tore me apart in your name. And for what?”

That was fear in his eyes. He wasn't so strong all of a sudden—just another man who could die like any one of them. The ice was cold enough to burn and cold enough to crack his armour at the seams. And it meant he could be wounded. No one else had scratched him; they all stared in shock. “I made you better,” Thanos hissed, climbing to his feet above the frozen, splintering gash. Even the blood was crystallizing.

“You made me a monster!” Loki yelled.

“You were always a monster!”

The ice shot through a different part of him. Kinetic magic swirled green through its facets, enough to shred through what the rest of them couldn't pierce. Maybe that was the only reason it worked. Loki suspected this would kill them both but somehow no longer cared; he wiped the blood from his nose and conjured more ice. “You call that salvation?” he hissed, choking back a sob.

“All great things require sacrifices,” Thanos said, a shallow grunt in his throat, as the steaming-cold ice frosted the metal on his chest to shattering. “How was your kingdom ruled, Loki? Were there no wars? The gold that paved your roads didn't appear from nowhere.”

Loki stopped walking not realizing he had started. “You killed children,” he said.

Young children. Old children. Not all of them; only the ones left behind. The ones who made a wrong turn into someone's waiting weapon. Sometimes they died quick. Sometimes it took longer. If he got to them while they were still alive he couldn't do anything but try to comfort them because he was too exhausted for healing and their wounds were too deep, just like everyone else who didn't make it to the exits. But not him. He was cursed to survive.

“There was a babe in there,” he hissed, hands shaking, as he turned and sculpted another spear of ice. He was losing the glamour; he caught his fuzzy reflection in the sword and saw blue flickers staring back at him. Red eyes and a nosebleed that couldn't decide what colour it was. “That was salvation?”

Thanos coughed and stumbled to his feet again.

“It couldn't even speak!” Loki yelled. “It must have been a month old. Do you think it knew what salvation meant?”

“You don't understand—”

“I do,” Loki said, coming towards him with the ice. “I watched you crush its skull. Not your minions. You. And you didn't even pause. One second it was screaming for its mother who you killed and the next it just... stopped. I don't care if you bring peace to the entire universe. I don't care if no one ever suffers again for all of time. There's no redemption after that.”

“It would have suffered,” Thanos said. “I gave it mercy!”

“Mercy? That was no mercy. You spared it of pain you caused yourself.”

“And is it mercy to starve instead? To wither over months and years?”

“How dare you? You killed a babe in cold blood”—the sword’s sigils flared again as Loki filled the ice with kinetic energy—“and you’re arguing? You dare defend any of this?”

Thanos staggered back with another grunt: his skin was turning black in places. “You did,” he growled. “I remember you. You didn’t even blink. You’re just like me.”

The ice stabbed through Thanos’s arm.

“I am nothing like you,” Loki snarled, forming another spear as Thanos stumbled and tried to stifle a scream between the ice lodged in the muscle, bones, tendons. “Nothing. Don’t you think for a moment”—he ripped through the other shoulder—“that we were ever alike!”

“That rage was yours,” Thanos wheezed. “It didn’t come from nowhere. I know you, Loki.”

“You don’t know me. You knew a shadow. You knew an echo of the pain you caused me. One year! One fucking year.” Loki rammed another blade of ice through Thanos’s chest and the scream finally broke: a deep, ragged howl of pain. “Do you know how many times I tried to kill myself? Too many to count!”

“You should be grateful,” Thanos said over another grunt. “I gave you—a *purpose!*”

“You destroyed me,” Loki hissed, marching towards him. “You took me at my lowest and tore me apart. You acted like it was love.”

“I—”

“You listened to my screams and did nothing! You watched me die every day”—Loki gripped him with an icy death hand—“and you smiled. There was no purpose. There was never a purpose. You only wanted an excuse to—”

Thanos grabbed him by the neck and hurled him across the clearing. He skidded. He left a trail of dust in his wake. Someone made to strike back. Someone else stopped them. He struggled onto his side.

“You useless rat,” Thanos growled, leering at him in the dirt with a curled lip. “I should have let you burn.”

“Pick one,” Loki managed, his voice shaky, breathless. “Rat”—he coughed—“or cockroach?”

“You were a waste,” Thanos coldly continued. “They should have killed you.”

“Wait!” Loki sat up with a grunt. “Wait, I’ve got it: a cockrat. It’s just like a normal rat but with a large—”

“You thankless—”

Loki coughed again.

“—worthless—”

“Useless?” Loki suggested.

“You claim anything else?”

He smiled. Then, like a distant mirage, the image shimmered away, and Thanos turned just in time for him to drive a charged pillar through his gut.

“On your knees,” Loki said, looking down at him through narrowed eyes, and then he forced another dozen shards through the metal’s frozen remains and made him do just that: Thanos collapsed forward and screamed.

The silence that followed was deafening.

“I’m not the waste,” Loki said, turning to pace, slowly, calmly, as Thanos clawed at the still-glowing ice. “You are a plague to existence. Everywhere you go in the universe your name invokes suffering, not salvation: your great plan means nothing.”

“The plan—” Thanos wheezed, only to cut himself off with another plaintive moan.

“The plan was a lie,” Loki said, looking at his blue hands.

“I wanted to—”

“No. You didn’t.”

Thanos staggered to his feet.

“You wanted a reason to kill,” Loki said, looking at him again. “You wanted power.”

“Stop interrupting me,” Thanos said with an indistinct glare.

“Kindly, you’re the one bleeding out in a heap. I will speak as I please. On that note, I suggest you go fuck yourself in all of your new orifices before you try telling me what to do again. With respect.”

“You—”

“You wanted to end poverty, wasn’t it? And so you set out”—Loki began to pace again, sword at his side—“and you somehow decided that the death of trillions was the solution. Tell me: what did you ever hope to accomplish by wiping Asgard from the face of the universe?”

Thanos said nothing.

“Answer me,” Loki growled, nearing. “Asgard and every other society that ever lived. What did you think would happen when you slaughtered them as you did?”

“No,” Thanos muttered, “I didn’t. I left survivors. I—”

“What survivors?” Loki snapped. “What survivors were there? Half? It wasn’t half. It was never half. Not once. They all perished at your hands. Answer me, Thanos: what did you hope to accomplish?”

He still said nothing.

The next chunk of ice sent a creeping sensation up Loki's neck, but he didn't react: he stood tall, one hand on the sword, white-knuckled through the pale blue skin, and the other clenched tight around air. Watching. Waiting. It was the only thing no one expected; no matter what this magic was to him, it was as faithful as it was lethal. And so there he went. They must have been staring. Who was he? Coming out of nowhere to tear this man down in seconds where no one else could, silver tongue ripping into him beneath bloodshed—the colour of his skin was the last thing anyone would notice. He had better worries than what he was beneath his glammers. Thanos, Thanos, Thanos. Coming here was a mistake.

But Thanos still did not answer, and, out of patience, Loki shot the ice somewhere through his hip and knocked him to his knees once more with a thud.

“I never said you could stand,” Loki said.

Thanos didn't even try. He coughed hard, spluttering on his own blood, and looked up with a wet and broken scowl.

“You miserable sack of shit,” Loki hissed. “You're not worth my time. If you were—oh, the things I would do to you. I'd make you wish you'd never been born. You think you know pain?” A sudden laugh wracked him, unwitting and uncaring of his rage, as he spoke those timeworn words. “I'd show you pain. I'd make you long for something as sweet as pain. Remember that?”

The others were watching everything: clearly he was in charge here. But no one could see how terrified he was beneath the rage. He was unravelling. Thanos. Oh, gods, Thanos. Stop. Turn back. Go home.

“I should have more to say to you after what you've done,” Loki growled, turning with a massive pole as tall as he was. “Thanos! You bastard. You didn't know when to stop. Well, there you have it. I hope you spend the rest of eternity rotting inside whatever hole you crawled out of. I pray it never ends. May death itself reject you. May all the pain you caused haunt you to the ends of time. May you never see even a semblance of relief, you. Selfish. Fuck.”

And then he pierced clean through Thanos's skull.

The ice pinned him in his knelt position with a gush of blood-soaked bone and tissue and almost exploded upon impact, crackling and sparking full of power, and for all the rage Loki struggled to look without gagging. But he held his gaze. Let the sword vanish, swallowed hard, and locked eyes with the mound of melting ice and blood until every proof that life had ever existed in them was gone. Thanos was dead. Thanos was dead. Thanos was dead. Thanos, Thanos, Thanos.



The last veins of frost around his fingers quietly melted away over the next few seconds and with them, the blue tint. He laid a hand on his face, searching for heritage lines or some other sign that the rest of him hadn't followed, but save for a half-congealed splatter of foreign blood across his cheek there was nothing unusual to the texture. No grooves. No raised marks. No Jötunn traits. Nothing. It should have taken longer; he didn't understand how it had happened so quickly. This man who did everything wasn't much after all. It was... underwhelming.

Loki sighed and started walking back into the crowd. "Show's over, folks," he muttered, wiping more blood from under his nose. "Go home. At least you still have one."

"Hey, hold on a minute!" Tony called, running to meet him. "Where are you going?"

"Somewhere far away from here."

"Hey."

Loki tiredly faced him. "We're not friends, Stark. What do you expect? Am I supposed to stay?"

“Christ, you haven’t even caught your breath. Sit down somewhere, check your injuries, see what’s next. I want to know what the hell just happened while we’re at it.”

“Figure it out. I’m leav

oh

oh fuck; he coughed and spat the blood and dirt out of his mouth and tried to stand but only collapsed again. Everything was white and he couldn’t hear. Overlapping hands and voices pulled him up to sit. There was smoke and glitter where he’d failed to open the rift between worlds, hoping for a return trip on its branches. No such luck. He sat down somewhere to catch his breath after all.

“Anyone dead?”

“Aside from Thanos? No.”

Loki leaned into his hands and tried to stop the blood. Someone passed him a rag: he took it without thinking twice.

“I want to know who this guy is,” said the man he’d headbutted.

“You first, jackass,” Tony shouted back. “Loki, you good?”

He raised a thumbs-up.

“That was supposed to be me!”

“It wasn’t supposed to be anyone,” Strange said above the gauntlet. “Be glad he’s dead.”

Many clouds of dust seemed to settle and Loki managed to stand, bloody rag tucked between his thumb, and keep his balance.

“He did all that?”

Loki looked up. Perched atop a pile of rubble was the scant, red-clad boy from earlier, a little dirty and battered but alive nonetheless and frowning down at him and the rag. “You’re... too young to be here,” he said; a few positive mutters rang through the crowd.

The boy blushed.

“All that and more,” said the patchwork woman watching the icy corpse. Beside her, the jackass was pacing and trying not to cry.

“So he’s dead?”

“Looks dead.”

“Looks dead and is dead isn’t the same.”

“Dude just had three tons of magic ice shoved into his vital organs,” Tony said, turning back from where he must have been checking vitals for clarity’s sake, “which, by the way, graphic as fuck, but yeah, I really don’t know what to tell you.”

“So not dead.”

“Well, I got zero brain activity there, but you’re talking to me so I guess anything’s possible.”

Strange was visibly regretting his existence.

“You still haven’t explained what the hell just happened!” Tony shouted as Loki limped across the clearing again. “I thought you were dead.”

“Wasn’t that guy saying—”

“Hey.”

“What *guy*? Peter, get down from there! I don’t want this place coming down on everyone.”

A chunk of the building followed him; Peter pretended it had not happened.

“Okay, sound off if you’re alive,” someone else yelled.

“Dear fucking lord.”

“Freaking out here,” Peter said, raising an arm.

“Kid, I love you but you’re not making it any better. We all are.”

“I mean, it’s not really bad but—”

“Would everyone stop?” Loki snapped; they turned to look at him. “Right, sorry if I got a little sadistic! Is that the issue? My goodness. What would you have done? Stark?”

“Good question,” he muttered. “Frankly, I’m with you. What is this, like a... it’s catharsis. No, that guy had it coming for a long time. Full support.”

“Yes, exactly! Thank you.”

“I never should’ve gone to Nepal,” Strange sighed.

“Didn’t ask, don’t care,” Tony loudly sighed back with a look like he wanted to kill everyone and then himself. “More important concerns—”

But Loki did not hear the more important concerns, didn’t even realize there were any as he coughed out the last of the blood he’d breathed in and realized how badly he was sweating: there was no longer anyone here but him and his mess. Magical shivers and a tremble in his leg; he sat against some rubble. Why did it feel so empty? It was a relief to be done but there was no satisfaction; he felt small and alone, trapped on an alien planet with people he only trusted to kill him. He felt like he was dying. He shouldn’t have left that ship: he should have given up when he had the chance, as he had meant to and as he was going to, because he’d never planned this far

ahead. And it was far. Thanos's eyes were blank and wide-open to the dusty sky while he knelt there, head drawn back against a pole of ice steaming with crystallized insides. It felt like an ill-made prop—too much blood, too much everything; this couldn't be real. Bodies weren't supposed to do that. There was so much blood.

“What are you smiling for?” the man asked, flicking his cheek with a blade.



WAIT NO STOP

“Remember your purpose.”

Something shattered.

He fell—body soaking wet, mouth dry, his bones and guts and everything burning. Couldn't move. Couldn't speak. The glamour was failing again. The room was spinning. He knew the water wasn't that hot: it would have been steaming. It would have blistered. Couldn't have been that bad because it didn't wasn't but it felt like it. The old prayer crossed his mind again: take me back. Back to a soft bed away from every bruise and broken bone, every slash and stab, every drop of blood. This was a mistake; could he have another go? Cast everything aside like the bad dream it was and leave? No tricks. No suicide. Nothing else. But pain was a small price for truth. Once (chained to a ceiling) and he counted the seconds between blows, counted out a comfortable rhythm while they screamed down at him. He was wrong. He needed to be more. He needed—

Revenge?

“Glorious purpose,” someone said as he lay sobbing on the floor, blood in his mouth, blood in his lungs, and he had told himself between strangled breaths of course: they're helping me become more, they're helping me see my potential, the pain is worth it, the pain is worth it, the pain is worth it, the pain is worth it, the the the the the the the the the

“Remember, boy.”

A knife ripped into him and he bit back a scream. It twisted slowly. It dug under him. It carved out a layer of skin and his hands twitched and tightened around the chains as stinging sweat leaked into the wound. Thick blood ran down his chest. His vision cut. His mind turned to static. He thought he would faint again but never did. They knew how to keep him alive. This made more sense, he whispered into the concrete beneath his face—pain, but at least they explained it. Remember. Remember. Remember. They dragged him back kicking through the halls and the floor's jagged surface ripped the scabs from his bare skin and the scent of old blood and mildew was suffocating but it made sense to him; he shut his eyes and tried to keep breathing. Remember. He saw it all clear now. That

Thanos was dead!

He couldn't breathe. His ribs were cracking. This didn't happen; he was overreacting. Making things up again. That never happened. It sounded like someone was calling his name but his ears were ringing and he couldn't breathe. Blood and vomit coming up his throat. Static vision and magical shivers. He must be dying. He

“Loki!”

It hit him all at once and he nearly fell over scrambling out of reach. He didn't know where he'd gone or what had happened, only that now that he was back he was going to die. His body didn't want to be awake; his senses were somewhere else. Something was wrong and his only way to make sense of it was to panic.

"Loki."

"Don't touch me!" he shrieked, trying to pull away.

"Hey, you almost passed out again. Stop and take a deep breath."

"Get—"

"Loki."

"Get off!"

"Okay, can you keep yourself up? You don't look like you have any balance right now and I don't want you to hurt yourself. Deep breaths, bud. Look at me."

"No! No—leave me alone! Leave me—"

"Hey. Stop. I won't hurt you. Look at me. Look at me, Loki."

He didn't attempt either. There was still that static—still a knife's edge ghosting at his skin, like an itch that needed to be scratched—and—he tried to kick himself free.

"Stop," the man said again, pulling him into a full-body embrace. "Look at me. I don't want to hurt you. Look: you're not there anymore. Breathe. You're safe."

"Let me go!"

"Hey. Look at me. You're hyperventilating. Look at me, Loki. Deep breaths."

He wasn't stupid! He knew that: the air just wasn't coming. Ground, sky, hair in his face, clothes on his skin, cool breeze, but it wasn't working. His half-conscious body was passing through the Bifröst and a flourishing city brought to rubble at his hands and a lifeless planet filled with his enemies all at once. He needed to run. He needed to run now, what was he thinking coming here—how could he breathe like that?!—he was not safe here that was a lie, that was a *lie*—

"Hey. I'll count if you need it, alright? Doesn't need to be long. It can be three seconds. One, two, three. Inhale, hold, exhale. I can do longer if you want. Please?"

Loki swallowed and took a slow, shuddery breath. It was only three, but it felt like an hour. Tuning in to the quiet counting by his ears was easy as the ringing subsided: one, two, three. One, two, three. One, two, three. Inhale. Hold. Exhale. Inhale. Hold. Exhale. Inhale. Hold. Exhale. Many minutes passed by what began to be an outcrop of dusty bricks and boulders against which they were resting together. He didn't look at the body. He didn't look at anyone else. This little corner, for a brief moment in an unforgiving time, became a haven.

"You?" he said, tears in his voice, as it occurred to him that he was sitting with Tony.

Tony looked like he was fighting to keep the eye contact. There must have been so much he was trying not to remember too; they weren't friends after all. "I—I just—I just saw," he quietly said, "got kind of worried you would hit your head or something but I guess you never—are you alright?"

"Thanos is dead?"

"Thanos is dead."

They stared at the disfigured body together to confirm.

"Get your hands off me," Loki growled.

Tony jerked away with a look like he was about to cry. "Okay," he stammered; really and honestly, with his wide and terrified eyes, he must have been one more wrong word away from an instantaneous nervous breakdown. Why did he even bother, knowing what the two of them meant to each other? Was he insane or just stupid?

"I am... grateful," Loki finally said as they continued staring at the corpse. "I can't imagine that was easy for you."

"Nah. Noticed your vitals were freaking out and didn't think much about it."

"Please. You look like you're trying not to piss yourself."

Tony wheezed.

"Am I stuck here?" Loki asked.

"We're probably heading out in a bit," Tony said.

But not together, were they? They'd just as probably all kill each other on the way. Loki considered finding somewhere to rest for the night and then leaving in the morning. That could have been with everyone here but... he just wanted to hide among the ruins. Maybe it was safer. Maybe he didn't have to wonder. He got up.

"Wait, where are you—"

"Out of this crowd before someone kills me," Loki said, brushing the loose dirt from his cape with equally dusty hands. "I'll find my way."

"You mean pass out again and strand yourself in the middle of nowhere?" Tony shouted, climbing after him in a hurry. "Can you stop for a fucking second and stop trying to do everything alone? No one here is going to kill you, no one wants to kill you after what you just did. You just saved half the universe and—and, okay, maybe I'm still looking at you and thinking oh shit, that guy!—but look, if you need to sit somewhere and rest for a minute then you can do that. Take more than a minute. No one's coming after you. Every single person here owes you and I don't plan on leaving anyone. I'm not going anywhere until you understand that."

I don't need rest, Loki was about to say, but no sooner than he thought it did he feel another jolt of fizzling magic shiver through him as his body tried to restore the exhausted balance. In a fit of frustration, he shot Tony a toxic look and said, "Fine. Find me a chair and I'll wait."

“For the love of—how does Thor put up with you?”

“Thor is dead!” Loki screamed, almost killing Tony himself. “Don’t you speak his—”

“Loki?”

It took the words right out of his mouth. He froze. He stepped away from Tony and looked up.

At some point Strange had gone back, holding a giant portal open at the end of the clearing: inside, the scenery looked Earthly. Nothing awful. It was remarkably untouched for what must have been close to battle, and, perhaps blessed by some early warnings, they had managed to collect enough reinforcements. And from it, worn but very much alive beside the small handful of others just walking out, was Thor. There was an unfamiliar weapon with him and he fastened it to his back before closing the distance between them. Tony, after a long many seconds coming to terms with his own aliveness, stepped away.

“Brother,” Loki said, slackening a little. “Hello. This is... not what I expected. I thought you perished with the ship.”

“I thought the same.”

He’d had a plan. He knew what he was doing and it involved faking his death and keeping it a secret from even Thor so no one got in his way and it had worked. This was all according to plan—or that was what he would tell him, anyway, because he still knew in the depths of his lying heart that there had never been a *plan*. He had meant to die there. He did it because he had been afraid the wrong person would realize he’d made it out and track him down; was that a plan? Gods, no. It was stupid and selfish and impulsive just like all of his plans. None of it made sense. He panicked and hid. He gambled on his age-old fail-safe of fleeing when things got too dangerous and won. And what a miserable win this was.

“I’m glad a familiar face got out,” he finally managed to say. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. That was cruel of me to do.”

“I forgive you,” Thor said.

“But I promised! I said I’d be back. I told you—”

“I know. I never stopped believing.” Thor forced a smile. “Not entirely.”

If only they had each other then Loki thought he could convince himself it wasn’t so bad, that everything would go back to normal and they would all forget it had ever happened, but it seemed idealistic at best. He tried to smile too knowing how rare it was that they were both standing here together. He tried not to think about why. Then, just as he felt fresh blood above his lip, he stumbled. An arm steadied him.

“You need rest,” Thor said, pulling him up with the other arm.

“I do not,” Loki snapped despite the blood pouring from his nose and the fact that his vision was an ocean of stars and swirls.

“Loki.”

“Where do I rest?! Here? Don’t be stupid. They’ll lock me away and that’ll be the end of it.”

“They can’t. Not after this.”

“Truce!” Tony shouted above whatever he was doing at the other end of the crowd. A few people immediately protested, but most stayed silent; better they avoid more conflict.

Good thing they did, in any case, because no sooner than Loki tried to pull away and stand on his own did he burn through the last of what was keeping him awake and drop unconscious in Thor’s arms. Like a light. And he did not come to after a few seconds this time.

Tony, understandably, was a little startled. “Is he…”

“He’ll be alright,” Thor said, hoisting Loki up bridal-style, and then, with rare, no-nonsense acidity, he added, “You will not hurt him. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Tony quickly answered: he wouldn’t wait on the rest of them.

“Good,” Thor said, and, sparing no other conversation, he trudged back towards the still-standing portal and its vibrant fields. Then they were gone.

Thanos was still tethered to the ground and watching the clouds with hazy eyes. The frost was creeping to cover his skin and the ice’s entry points were blackening in wide, mottled swathes. By the time it began to melt, half of him would already be rotted. There was something poetic about leaving him here like this: Thanos would decay here, alone, on his home planet, and even if it wasn’t torture, even if it wasn’t what Loki ought to have done, it was still a worthy enough demise. The universe punished those who went against it. These kinds of people never lasted long.

“What happened back there?” Peter asked.

Tony stared at the strange and frozen corpse. “Looked like a flashback,” he said.

“He didn’t want you to touch him.”

“... Yeah.”

“I hope he’s okay.”

Tony didn’t respond. “Come on, kid,” he said, and then he turned and made for the portal.

Peter looked at Thanos, and then, slowly, he walked after him, followed next by those who had fought on Earth and, reluctantly, by the mistaken ambushers, who probably had better places to be and better people to trust but who were in need of rest and joined them anyway. And so then Strange, alone on the dusty and beaten wasteland as all the stirring walls and pillars settled and the smoke dissipated, went around gathering what had been lost and sending it where it belonged: the gauntlet in safe storage, others along for the ride back home. And he never did pause for the man whose skin didn’t know if it was freezing or burning and he never needed to because it no longer mattered: for some the most just death was to be forgotten. He left with everyone and their things and the portal collapsed and no one ever looked back.

Regrets

Chapter Summary

Loki's crimes are mentioned. Discomfort ensues.

Loki snapped awake to a white ceiling. His mouth was dry, his head was throbbing, and he couldn't quite get the static from under his skin, and as he stared up at the paint, bruised and dazed with what he would miserably remember to be the magical equivalent of a hangover, he realized he didn't know where he was. The last place he'd slept was the ship, and then—

White ceiling.

He jolted upright but... there was nothing. It was just an ordinary, medium-sized bed in an ordinary, medium-sized bedroom. And a relatively nice one at that. No bars or blockades or anything of the like nor any wards; he searched himself, too, expecting spell-binding cuffs at the very least, but he found just as little. Even his armour was still there, dust-caked boots and all: he'd simply been lain there atop the covers and left to sleep. Nothing on him. Nothing around the room. Nothing. He double-checked, saw no apparent danger, and then forced himself to relax, choking down the fear like it was a bad aftertaste. No danger; Thor had promised.

(Well, he lied sometimes. Never mind that.)

It was the sort of bedroom Loki might have found in a high-end inn, not quite home-like but comfortable enough for an extended stay. To his right was a bathroom, a dresser, and a kitchenette with a small dining table and two chairs; to his left was the door to leave, as well as a couch and side table nestled in the far corner. The wall opposite him was mostly window and kept shooting beams of sunlight into his eyes: he looked away with a squint. There was also a nightstand on either side of the bed, and, on the one closer to the door, in large, angular letters, there was a handwritten note: *Breakfast down the hall! I didn't know if I should wake you. TS*—Tony Stark, Loki managed to deduce over the headache.

He couldn't face Tony again. Not after Titan.

He couldn't face anyone; what was he doing here of all places? Working together once wouldn't have made him a favourite among the Avengers and a truce certainly didn't change anything. They were still enemies in one way or another and though his lack of a plan had carried him this far—it had landed him revenge against Thanos, hadn't it?—it had, unsurprisingly, involved setting aside the consequences for his later self. To that extent, he was exactly as upset as he'd anticipated, but that didn't solve the new and wonderful dilemma of figuring out how not to survive a suicide mission only to then get killed by some lunatics in tights. Thank you, past self: what an absolute bastard.

He crawled off the bed, warped the cape and runed plates into storage, and hauled himself into the bathroom to check the damage.

It could have been worse: the hair he'd slept on creased at an odd angle and a freshly scabbed cut made its home above his eyebrow, but other than that, there wasn't much. Looked like someone had wiped away the nosebleed; there was some dry blood smudged around the area, as well as flecks on his cheek—those, not from him. The shade was... different. Perhaps out of laziness or perhaps for no reason at all, he didn't bother with the sink: he simply picked the blood off with a fingernail. His hair might have gone easier if he dampened it, but he didn't bother with that, either: he formed a comb and drew the locks back with only a little more effort than usual, taking an extra minute or so to make sure the dirt and tangles were gone before tucking everything behind his ears, and then set the comb down and continued glaring at his reflection.

This was a terrible idea.

He thought he should stay here, take a few minutes to gauge his strength, and then teleport someplace safer without so much as a goodbye; he thought, no matter what any of them claimed, that it was best, and if Tony's barely hidden panic in every glance he'd caught meant anything, he was probably right. They, no matter what any of them claimed, wouldn't spare him: they would attack at the first opportunity and that would be the last of it. Breakfast be damned. He would die out there.

But he left anyway, cautious at most, and tried not to think about it. It was a nice place: it looked new and expensive, the kind of high-tech, spotlessly modern look he could have expected. The hallway was well-lit by a mix of fluorescent lights and scattered windows and opened to a sprawling area with several tables and a few dozen chairs where almost everyone he'd seen on Titan had found a seat; they were too busy chatting over various food and drink to pay any mind to him. Barely anyone even noticed him walk in aside from Tony, who was talking with Thor on one of the two couches bordering the kitchen.

Well, so far, so good. The stairs were pretty close, though, and Loki very quickly changed his mind and decided to go right ahead with vanishing without a trace.

"Where are you off to?" Thor called.

Ah, damn it.

It definitely wasn't a subtle moment, and, maybe just feeling a little bad for him after everything, Loki removed himself from the stairs, tried and failed to somehow make peace with his fate in record time, and went over. "... Good morning."

"Good morning! How are you feeling?"

"Better. May I sit?"

"Of course."

Loki was still certain something would go wrong as these somethings tended to do, but, given the circumstances, it would be wise to accept whatever diplomacy they were willing to give him, so he shelved booking it for later and sat beside Thor. In the kitchen, Steve Rogers looked like he was trying not to scream while sorting through variously cooked and uncooked foods. There were no screams, though.

Tony took his coffee and downed the rest in one breath.

“There’s still a truce,” Loki quietly asked Thor, “right?”

“There is.”

He couldn’t bring himself to believe it, but he held his tongue. “What are we having?” he asked.

“Food,” Tony said; Loki chuckled.

“I would hope so. Is it edible?”

“Probably.”

“Ah. Very reassuring. Any more details?”

“Yeah, uh.” Tony sat up. “We’ve got eggs, sausages, waffles, no coffee because I drank it all, whatever’s in the fridge, and”—he cleared his throat—“there’s fruit, too, if you want it. The waffles are pretty great, though. Highly recommended.”

“I can’t have wheat,” Loki sadly informed. “But thank you.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Tony said, trying to look like he was trying not to look like he was secretly thrilled to have extra waffles for himself: he even smiled a little. “More for me, then.”

It was an awkward exchange, the over-staged kind where it was obvious they were struggling to establish peace but attempting it nonetheless for the other’s sake; Tony looked like he was holding back panic and like he had just barely managed to not stumble on every sentence. Hoping to appear less threatening, Loki got up, went to the kitchen, and acted as harmless as he could while he retrieved a plate and cutlery from the counter, where they had been stacked for convenience. Behind him, Steve said nothing as he piled on some food, briefly wondered if maybe he could stomach a waffle or two after all, and then returned to the couch, set his plate on the coffee table, and got to slicing what needed to be sliced. Still no screams, but the overwhelming air of imminent conflict didn’t go: Loki suspected he wasn’t the only one bracing himself.

None of them said anything further. Tony still looked like he was trying not to break down crying on the floor and Thor had apparently exhausted their conversation topics and Loki, for all his skill with words, could not find a way to break the silence himself, so he ignored it and stuck to eating.

This carried on for nearly six minutes.

“So you’re good now?” Tony blurted.

Excellent icebreaker! Please refrain in the future.

“That’s a very broad question,” Loki said, not looking up. “Honestly, I don’t think I’m informed enough to answer. What does good mean for you?”

“I think you know what he’s asking,” Steve said from the kitchen.

Thor sank farther into the backrest and continued picking at his food.

“Well, I’m not raining mass destruction on worlds anymore,” Loki said. “I figure I’m as good as everyone else in this room—that is, I’m not the best I could be, but I wouldn’t call myself a villain. So yes: I’m good now.”

“But you’ve... killed people,” Tony said.

“Not as many as your weapons have.”

“Oh snap!” someone called from elsewhere; Tony blushed and looked down at his plate.

By now they were picking up some attention from the relevant part of the room and while even this was unreasonably diplomatic given the circumstances, it would have been nice to maintain the peace. So Loki went back to eating and pretended he wasn’t there, which did not go well. Steve was glaring a hole through him. Tony... looked like he wanted to remove his ears and lie face-down on the floor with another coffee.

“That is a fair point,” Thor finally said with a nod. “Either way, Loki’s done more than enough to prove himself. He deserves to be here.”

“Do you trust him?” Steve asked.

“There’s a truce,” Tony said, although he sounded unsure.

“Do you trust him to honour a truce?”

“I’m right here,” Loki kindly reminded.

“Can we not have this discussion now?” Tony said. “We just talked about this. Leave it. By the way, the truce applies to you too. If you didn’t realize.”

“You can’t tell me you’re okay with this.”

“He is allowed to have breakfast.”

“And then what?”

“I might have seconds,” Loki confessed, beholding the nearly empty plate.

“And then you stop,” Tony said, “and *you* honour the truce like everyone else is currently doing because we literally almost died out there and I don’t have the energy for this. What do you want, papers? Should we all sign under oath?”

“You think that’s enough?”

“I don’t know! Is it?”

“So you’re clueless.”

“You’re just as clueless as I am, sweetheart. Why don’t you get a lawyer in here so we can get something done?”

Steve set the ingredients down and walked out without a word. Tony exhaled slowly.

“Did I miss something?” Loki asked.

“Nothing,” Tony said. “Ha. Rest in peace, waffle mix. This morning to this morning.”

“Oh. Yes, what a tragedy.”

Neither of them laughed, though.

The other conversations carried on and Tony somehow managed to calm down enough to return to his little bubble of existence and Thor was trying hard to ignore them both, but the heavy air of unease didn't go: this was what it would be like the entire time and it would only get worse as the now-huge crowd thinned to just Avengers and Avengers-adjacent. Again, Loki wasn't surprised; he mostly only cared about kicking Thanos off the board and had better places to be if it came to that, so whether or not everyone still hated him was inconvenient at best. But he did deserve some ceasefire while he went back to forgetting the last few days. And he did kind of want to see how far he could take this if for no other reason than he didn't need more enemies.

Hoping to shed some good light on himself, he asked, "Is everyone else recovering well?"

"Pretty well," Tony said, shifting to look over the couch like he needed to check regardless. "I don't remember seeing a lot of injuries."

"How is Peter?"

Tony paused. Was that genuine concern or was it just a strategy? Was all of it? There was no way of knowing. "Not a single scratch," he eventually answered, turning again, "but he's really shaken up. I think... the gore got to him."

Fair enough; Loki had barely stomached it himself once the anger left. He couldn't imagine. So, perhaps at the risk of sabotaging whatever strength he'd regained and because he was honestly sort of worried about the kid, he said, "Could I speak with him? I might be able to help."

"You would have helped by not going completely unhinged out there," Tony snapped, "and I know you could have! What the hell can you do for him now? Apologize? Because you should."

For a moment Loki wasn't sure what to say and it looked like Tony was already regretting being so point-blank: he quieted down and took a few long breaths. Thor seemed to be bracing for escalation from the awkward middle cushion between them. But Tony was right, and Loki gently said, "I will. It wasn't fair to involve him."

Tony still seemed skeptical, but a little less so.

"Trust me?" Loki ventured.

Whoa! Too far. "Definitely not," Tony said, looking like he was debating whether he should feel horrified, offended, or both, and, in turn, how he should hide this, which, suffice to say, was not going very well for him.

At this point, Loki realized there was a good chance Tony had such a terrible impression of him that he seemed willing to maul someone who hadn't even finished school nor ever met him before in his life just to spite the Avengers, and... he had to process that. So far the power he knew he held here had still offered a slight thrill—comfort, even; there was eternal solace in being the biggest person in the room and it was nice to lean on while he healed. Now it felt rather like an ill-fitting shirt.

"Um." Tony looked at the empty mug on the table, at Thor, and then back at the mug. "Yeah, I don't know," he muttered. "Just... be careful, I guess. Don't do anything stupid."

At least they didn't completely botch this interaction.

"Third door on the left," Tony said as Loki got up. "Also, I'm serious. If you try anything—"

"You'll kill me?" Loki suggested. "I know."

Tony didn't respond.

Of course the urge to leave forever hadn't gone, but, as Loki made his way back down where he'd come from earlier, he found it a little less urgent than before. He was admittedly worried about his options; he was in no fighting state and trusted this crowd with a truce even less than he trusted himself. Still, he had nowhere else to go and might have stood a better chance rebuilding their impression of him than throwing himself to luck again. And this could be a nice place to start—right?

Ah. No. He did not have a good feeling about this at all.

He knocked and waited. There was no answer, so he knocked again. "Peter?" he asked, leaning into the door. "May I come in?"

A few more seconds passed before he heard a muffled affirmative. He slowly pushed the door open and entered.

Peter was curled face-down in bed with the sheets crumpled around his legs and a ratty pair of headphones over one ear. "Hi," he said, looking up as the door eased shut. "Loki, right?"

"Right." Loki sat beside him. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine."

"Fine?"

Peter considered it. "Yeah, pretty fine. Why?"

"Stark was telling me otherwise."

"What? No." Peter sat up and tugged his headphones off. "He's just worrying," he said. "I am fine. Really."

Somehow this made Loki smile—maybe he was desperate to look a little less threatening or maybe Peter just reminded him very much of himself in this moment. "Well," he gently said, "I'm not an easy person to lie to. I've been practising for longer than you can imagine and I know what to look for. So... I am still worried."

"Oh," Peter said, and then they were both silent.

It was a while before Loki spoke. "I didn't mean to involve you in this," he said. "There's not always the chance to be considerate or careful in a fight. Sometimes it's too dangerous to try; no one's stopping to let you plan ahead, so you go with whatever comes to mind first. And sometimes your emotions get the better of you."

"It's okay," Peter said, although he did not sound like it was okay. "I've seen pretty messed up stuff before. Especially since I started doing all of this."

“But that was too much,” Loki said.

“... Yeah.”

They were both silent again.

“You do have a right to feel overwhelmed,” Loki said. “It doesn’t make you any weaker and it certainly doesn’t bother me. Building the resilience to walk away unfazed is a long and difficult process and it’s not one that should be rushed. That’s what I’m apologizing for. I’m very sorry.”

Peter unplugged the headphones and wrapped the wire around and then tucked them neatly beside him in the sheets. “I kinda figured everyone would just tell me to suck it up and quit the superhero thing if I’m that freaked out after this,” he said. “But I think you get it. It’s not that I can’t handle this kind of thing, because I’ve definitely handled this kind of thing a lot of other times. It was just a lot at once and I wasn’t prepared enough for it.”

Loki, again, was not in a good state and knew he should just get out of here and recuperate somewhere alone instead of continuing to stall for nothing, but he felt pretty horrible about this entire situation and thought he should probably take a minute and see if there was more he could do. Not that he really had anything; if he did, he would have been busy doing it on himself. He’d had free time to review all sorts of things in those last few months, though, and so he figured he could come up with at least something.

“I wish I didn’t look back,” Peter simply said, leaning on a hand.

“Sometimes that’s all we wish,” Loki said, knowing how very many terrible memories he would have avoided if he did, and he thought about it for a long time: he could just destroy the worst of what Peter remembered given the permission—and he certainly wanted permission. But was that fair? Or was he only further stunting that so-called resilience?

There was no right answer; there never would be. This wasn’t an easy one.

Still, he did ask. “I think if you let me,” he said, “I might be able to clear a few memories while they’re recent, but I’d have to see them with you and it’s a bit of a fickle spell. I don’t expect you trust me that much.”

No, not at all. What was he thinking? He was definitely out for everyone’s blood, Peter included, and his lying tongue could not be trusted even for a glass of water—poisoned, to be sure; he might as well leave before he proved himself right.

Peter shrugged, though. “It’s probably worth a shot.”

“Someday you’ll still have to face these sorts of things,” Loki said, just in case.

“Yeah. I get what you’re saying. I just... can’t do this right now.”

Where did one draw the line between necessary experience and pointless grief?

Loki scooted closer and pressed a hand to Peter’s forehead. “Lean into it,” he instructed, closing his eyes. “Whatever’s bothering you most.”

It was a weird little moment and maybe not the best thing either of them could have done, but it would ease the worst of it and help settle everything overall: the sensations that kept twisting

wrong and the words that kept replaying and the gory snapshot that kept bouncing back up no matter how far it got pushed down. The longer they sat with something, the fuzzier the details became—thinned and blurred in such a precise way as to not be simply well-forgotten but rather never-existed-in-the-first-place. Of course the bulk of it was still there: there was still a battle and it was still frantic and painful and exhausting, but the splinters smoothed. The blood wasn't the most important part and it didn't need to stay.

In the middle of this Loki wondered how obvious his losing it on Titan had been and if Peter had seen that too, but it never came up. Perhaps more afraid of knowing, although he suspected it didn't matter much to Peter who had been an incoherent sobbing mess or why, he pulled away. "Do you need anything else from me?" he quietly asked.

"I don't think so," Peter said.

And then they still had everyone else to deal with! Everything was a horrible, terrible, ridiculous mess and it would only get worse. Loki couldn't believe he was here or that he was even bothering with any of it. "You should come down," he said, trying to distract himself from how much he wanted to go back to sleep. "There might still be food if you hurry."

"Okay," Peter said, and then he got up and followed him out.

It was hard to tell if the surprise on Tony's face was because Peter had somehow been successfully fetched for breakfast or because he was alive at all, but, perhaps hopeful, Loki pretended it was only the former.

"So what's the secret?" Tony asked, coming to meet him from one of the tables just as Peter sprinted into the kitchen.

"Oh... I told him there was food," Loki said.

"Really? I told him there was food too. I was surprised he didn't come running."

Peter shovelled a whole sausage into his mouth with his hands directly within their line of sight.

"And I erased his memory of what Thanos looked like after I was done with him," Loki said while they were both staring.

"Oh, okay." Tony snapped his gaze back to Loki. "Wait, what?"

"It seemed like the nice thing to do!" Loki said, defensive, although Tony sounded less upset and more just caught off guard. "And he agreed to it. Did you want him to permanently have nightmares over that?"

"I mean—no, of course not. I just didn't know that was something you could do."

"A bit. It's not reliable. I can't work with anything old or complex, but it usually does the trick for a few stubborn sights from the day before. Before they've settled, if that makes sense. I think I owed him as much."

Tony looked like he had been considering exactly the same thing Loki had been considering as he said this: what about everything Thanos did to you? But those were far, far too much older and more complicated than a single image or two and they had left far too many traces. Nothing short

of wiping his entire mind to a blank slate would have gotten all of it. It was a shame the obvious answers didn't work sometimes; memory was just too precise to handle and he didn't have the time or energy to bother refining it. Better to stick to the often-used and useful spells than to waste time studying long and convoluted rituals that were more effort than they were worth. (This one's for you, Stephen Strange: there was nothing that made him roll his eyes more.)

It was nice that remembering their brief experiment in bonding on Titan settled the otherwise unbearable subsurface vitriol, but it was miserable and embarrassing to think about. Hoping to lighten the mood, Loki said, "Why don't you go rescue that waffle mix?"

Tony hesitated, but then he went and joined Peter with no issue.

Loki, definitely too out of place standing in the middle of the room like this, sat back down on the couch and pretended he wasn't alive.

"You look worried," Thor said over what looked like a fourth serving of sausages.

"Considering I'm currently sitting in a room full of people who want to kill me, yes, a little."

"All of them?"

"Ah, maybe not the child. But most of them."

"What makes you think that?"

What didn't? The tension every time he walked into the room. The way Tony reacted every time he so much as breathed. Steve; it didn't get plainer than that. At one of the far tables, unrecognizable behind an icy bob, he could swear Natasha, the Black Widow, was sizing him up. They had gone over this a good several hundred times on the ship and the answer had always been the same: we'll see when we get there. But now he didn't know.

"I just know," he said.

They watched Peter and Tony puzzle over ingredient ratios in the kitchen.

"What will you do now?" Thor asked.

Nothing at all. Maybe he would go calculate precisely how cost-efficient it would be to glamour his injuries and exhaustion out of sight and whether it would do anything for his morale and/or undying fixation on vanity—or maybe just head out and try sifting through this place for something of his own away from everything and everyone else. He liked the busy parts and would fit well into Earth's manic obsession with around-the-clock spectacles and stimulation, even if in a mostly ironic "I still hate it here" sort of way. There *were* options; he could manage this, couldn't he? It didn't *need* to come down to death-or-capture-or-worse. And sleight of tongue never failed if it got to that.

He stared at the running tap as Peter washed his hands. "Have you seen anyone since the..."

Thor gave him a questioning look.

"Anyone else who... made it out?" Loki softly said, short on words all of a sudden; his mind was lagging behind him. "Besides us?"

Thor seemed to think about it. “Have you?”

The sink turned off.

“I did,” Loki said. “A girl and her mother. One of the groups found a warp and we ran into each other by chance. They don’t know who else made it to Earth or if they survived the landing, but…”

“What? That’s incredible news; why didn’t you say anything?”

“But the likelihood of something that unstable remaining steady long enough to get everyone to the same place and alive—”

“But there is a chance. And you already know two people are alive.”

Loki stared at the dripping tap.

“This is good,” Thor said. “Once everyone is rested and organized we can start looking and see what can be done. I’m sure they would appreciate your help. Maybe we’ll even add you to the Avengers. I’ve missed fighting by your side.”

It took a few seconds to process; the tap continued dripping and Tony glanced at them both from behind a box of baking powder before going back to measuring. “That must be the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard in my life,” Loki said, finally looking away from the sink, “and believe me, I have heard many, many stupid things in my life.”

“Do you really think that?” Thor said, a bit hurt.

“Do you really think it’s that simple? Oh”—Loki waved a hand—“we’ve got a common goal, let’s set aside our differences and not kill each other, easy, done, and here is all of Asgard safe and sound as if nothing ever happened and by the way everyone is friends now. What is wrong with you?”

Maybe they were both just coping. Thor, at last accepting that the blissful optimism was falling on deaf ears, said nothing.

“I suppose you’ll figure it out,” Loki said. “Don’t think I don’t want you to try. I’m glad you still have such faith. But… don’t get your hopes up so high.”

“Thank you for the wisdom,” Thor said, smiling to hide that he obviously knew this and didn’t need a lecture on loss and disappointment.

Loki tried to smile as well but struggled. He did understand: of course he wanted nothing more than for everyone to find each other and build a new home somewhere safe. Wasn’t that the dream? But that was all it felt like, and, drained from the horrors he’d seen in the flames and increasingly doubtful anyone here would be able to put up with each other long enough to search, he couldn’t imagine it going anywhere. He didn’t even care. Either he was the pessimistic one or he was seeing it for what it was.

“We have time,” Thor said, quite wise himself, as he tidied everything on the table: he stacked the empty plates and the mugs atop them. “Nothing needs to happen today. And I am sure whatever does, we’ll make the best of it.”

Loki wished that were true. He got up slowly, still a little wary, and made for the stairs. No one stopped him this time.

Growing Pains

Chapter Summary

The past is discussed.

Chapter Notes

hello all you wonderful dorks I love you have some flashbacks and a nice civilized frostiron conversation

The problem with the Avengers was that they tended towards grudges—that, as far as Loki could tell, they were much more concerned with what had once happened and who he had once been than everything he had done in the last twenty-four hours. They did not care that it was more practical to move on and busy themselves with more pressing matters such as repairs on Earth or what in the world to do with everyone who remained of Asgard, although clearly those were important too. Just... not as important as whether or not he could be trusted in the meantime. And fair enough, honestly: were he in their position, he wouldn't trust himself either. He would have struck a proactive blow or several and then, knowing there was no such thing as too much caution, he would have axed the throat.

This was, understandably, a somewhat alarming scenario to consider, and of course at this point he was panicking: here he was and here they were and he had never actually stopped to come up with something to get them off his back if worse came to worst. This certainly wouldn't be a problem if he had the resources to vanish to another galaxy within the next hour, but that was not the case and he did still have the miserable sensation of too-spent energy under his skin to remind him; if yesterday somehow hadn't killed him, this just might. It was a terrible, horrible, huge problem and he didn't have a clue where to start. He could start with his injuries: the fact was he'd sustained much more than magical exhaustion and was sore and scratched up from toe to his stupid eyebrow, all of which would be healing on their own because he couldn't afford to pool any energy into speeding the process. He didn't have a home and he was positive he would get himself killed if he searched. He felt like some fundamental mechanism in his body had broken during the ambush—like a snapped lever—and he was now stuck in combat mode, unable to turn it off. His mind kept playing everything back and he wanted to just take what was being offered, lie down, and cry every single tear he'd been fighting in the name of pride. He needed to stop running.

So after a good while of stewing around the streets near the Avengers compound trying to get his head together, he found a quiet place and did what seemed funny: he summoned a sheet of paper and a magically refilling black quill pen and tried to write. He thought he and Tony could both laugh at how ridiculous and overpowered of a spell he'd rediscovered in the late hours aboard the ship—fast, easy, and utterly charming amidst all the misery. This time, though, he didn't. The paper stared him down. The city seemed to vanish. It occurred to him that he was insane and stupid.

He left the pen and paper floating beside him and pressed his hands to his face.

Insane, stupid, and a poor planner to boot. He should have died in the flames. He should have let Thanos kill him. He should have known when to stop. He—

Turn.

felt his skin unravelling all of a sudden and took a hard and fast breath. Blue sky. Cars and a cool breeze. Flat stone roof at his feet. Rails around the edges. Something baking. New York looked rather nice from here; nothing too high up, nothing too loud or busy—just a short, aging apartment block crammed halfway between the outskirts, where the Avengers compound was, and the rest of the city. Looking back, he could spot the ocean behind some skyscrapers.

Alright, anyway—he snatched the paper closer, still mid-air, and tried to write. He was confident no one would bother disturbing the truce, but he wasn't certain: someone would try and he needed contingencies. Actually, what he really needed was a way back to that tavern at the edge of space. Find a second or third person, hitch another ride somewhere, no Earth, no Avengers, no panicking over looming disasters. Nothing. If he—if—

The clang of a knife on concrete rang behind him.

He shut his eyes and tried to steady his breathing. If he went now, he could—if he—

Blood? Blood on the floor: fresh pools that hadn't yet drained into the stone. Salted iron and vomit. Burning lungs. Burning skin. Someone sobbing. Someone———“You're right,” he heard himself whisper through a suffocating cough. “Let me rest. Please.” But the tearing heat in his chest throat head (like a million claws at once) didn't waver and he didn't — why — why wasn't it stopping was he — no —— no —— no no no no no no no

He slammed a fist into the stone. Heavy breaths shaking. A far-off siren was lulling out of reach and the birds sharing the roof were not pleased. The quill pen waited beside him.

Ow.

He rubbed his eyes and then took everything and started pacing the roof. He didn't know what he would say or why. He didn't know if it mattered: what did anyone care how many apologies and excuses he threw at them? Still, slowly, he began to write.

Stark:

Awful! That was not how to start a letter. Loki wondered why he was continuing to run himself in circles instead of having a face-to-face conversation like a functioning adult. He stopped pacing and pulled the pen away. He stared the name down. His brows scrunched into a tight knot at the bridge of his nose and his lips started hurting from how hard he was pressing them together. He couldn't write like this, he thinly realized, and he lowered the pen and looked over the roof at the street. He tried to feel powerful standing above everything like this but felt only small and foolish. His mind ached.

“I want an army,” he had once said. Calm. Cool. Asking but not demanding. Under his film of cold sweat, the dried blood and dirt on the cuffs melted into a thick, grimy sludge.

Thanos smiled. He was wary; how long had they been here? How many times bent beneath a knife while pleading to the old gods for something better? Better—like those empty promises: you are better, you are better, you are better.

I apologize for leaving so suddenly. I needed to

“What are you planning, Silvertongue?”

I needed a moment to some time alone to evaluate determine consider my next course of action

“Revenge,” Loki said, turning to muse with hand over hand. The word fell like an unrehearsed melody, catching on his teeth as it left, and he reminded himself of all the ancient folk songs he used to keen in the shower. Beautifully violent. Dangerously gentle.

He paced with a slight limp.

He breathed with a whistle.

“Revenge,” he said again, gazing indistinctly at his scarred wrists.

so I and I because you know the situation because you and I both know that and what this will mean for me us.

The pain was necessary. The benefit was mutual. This was for both of them.

I know what you think of me and I know that what I did was I shouldn't have

Liar, he thought, and then, with a flick of a finger, he burned the paper.

As his hands curled around the sceptre, he thought that this was a mistake. There was no such purpose; who could single him out like this for something so grand? What had he ever been but a disappointment in god's clothes? Was it wrong—as he fell upon the bridge once more, whispering you bastards, you liars, how dare you, how dare you, how dare you—that he felt no such confidence as they had claimed?

Glorious purpose, he told himself, and he made himself believe it because he knew it was true: it had to be. There was no power without pain. There was no pain without reason.

“They hurt you,” the man said to him, nodding wisely, as they parted ways; his nameless face was awash with concern. “It's only right.”

But you hurt me as well, Loki had wanted to answer; you will hurt me again if I fail my end of the bargain. He bit his tongue hard enough to draw blood. He smiled insincerely. Beneath the frayed glamour, he felt cold.

I don't know anymore.

The quill's vanes were unravelling under the chokehold grip. He burned this one too—bright flames despite that he shouldn't; evidently it wasn't his biggest concern anymore. Then he sat and started from scratch.

I apologize for leaving so suddenly. I needed some time alone to consider my next course of action. I am not comfortable among the Avengers. I know this feeling is mutual. However, I have not fully

recovered from yesterday's events and it would be impractical to search for other shelter now. I know there is a truce, but I need to be sure.

I hope you will believe me when I say that I never wanted what happened here. There are no words that can express how sorry I am for everything.

No—damn it! That wasn't right. He stopped, suddenly holding back a flood of tears.

The chaos was therapeutic; the deaths came naturally. Every fearful bow and bent knee called a smile to his face: what part of this hadn't he wanted? Wasn't it he who first asked for revenge? Hadn't he laughed? Of course he hadn't wanted it, but all at once he realized that was a very stupid thing to swear because while he *was* sorry and did regret his actions at least a little now that some time had passed, he had never felt better than steeped in destruction farther than the eye could see. Here was power. Here was vengeance. How good it was to be feared—worshipped relentlessly in awe of who he was and what he could do; he didn't get that often. He never did. He was starved for it. He leapt at the chance. So for a while as he tried to figure out what he could say to convince them otherwise, his mind began sinking into the crushing sensation that he was lying again: how much of it had been him? Was any of it Thanos or had he always craved this? What did want even mean?

Normally he never cared for dishonesty, but this time even the possibility was painful. Not knowing for sure felt like he was proving them right. Everything he was told between screams was true: they hadn't made him anything that wasn't already in him. And he felt awful insisting that wasn't the case, and, by now twiddling the quill with enough force to even further tear the old vanes, he felt that all of this was pointless and he should just up and leave. He hated everyone here: why bother? He'd have better luck bleeding out in the streets than begging these bastards for mercy. But he still sort of liked Tony in a weirdly ironic way and suspected that at least they could get along if they tried. Fate permitting, friendship with the right people would keep him safe.

As long as it wasn't obvious he was starting to question his truth; he wrote on, his fingers so tight around the quill's remains they were red.

I would like to meet if possible.

The obvious solution was to stop toying with silly communication methods and, say, speak this aloud with his mouth, because this was getting absurd and he probably sounded like a bumbling little kid struggling to profess his love to someone writing a magic letter of all things, but that was already pointless. And... really. Maybe it *was* funny. Humour was powerful.

Thank you for hearing me out. Write back anywhere below; it will find its way to me.

Kind regards,

Loki

He added the proper enchantment, waved the paper away, and then re-evaluated his entire life.

It wasn't the tallest building, but the view as he skirted around the railing to the stairs was ~~tempting~~ dizzying. He turned, vanishing the pen elsewhere, and padded down the metal steps back into the city, where he found an empty bench along the curb and sat. And waited. And then waited some more. He did quite a bit of waiting. The sidewalk was busy; mostly out of habit, he glanced over his shoulder often. Someone's dog barked itself into a fit as it trotted past him (which was

interesting, considering he had been invisible this entire time and still was because he didn't really want to deal with anyone) and a towering woman with fantastically bright and well-coordinated clothes made him reconsider his fashion sense. His thoughts stayed mostly at bay.

Sometime later the letter reappeared with a green shimmer and drifted into his lap. He took it in one hand and read.

Loki,

I don't trust you. Even after what you did for us, I don't think I'll be able to trust you again for a long time. That said, you seem alright. Come by HQ and we'll talk.

TS

As Loki picked himself off the bench, he felt otherwise: this was a trap. Then, remembering how easy it would have been to kill him while he was unconscious—how if Tony (or anyone else, for that matter) wanted him dead, he most certainly wouldn't have ever left Titan in the first place—he forced the fear back down. This was a peaceful meeting. Nothing more, nothing less. They were only here to talk. No attacks, no tricks. Just a talk.

He sighed and started walking.

‡

Not entirely to Loki's surprise, the main doors were locked when he arrived. He slid out of invisibility and tapped the buzzer. After what seemed like an eternity, the intercom switched on.

"Thought you'd left for good," came Steve's voice, and Loki rolled his eyes. "What do you want?"

"Let me in?"

"Why?"

"Stark wanted to see me."

"Uh-huh."

"Please?"

Silence.

"Pretty please," Loki said with a most horribly demure smile.

On the other end of the intercom, it sounded like Steve was debating retiring forever.

"You know I can teleport, right?" Loki said. "I could just let myself in. I'm choosing not to because it's rude."

"I commend your manners," Steve said, still sounding like he was debating retiring forever and probably also sticking his face inside a shoebox. "He wanted to see you? Really?"

"This is his handwriting," Loki summoned the letter and held it up to the camera. "Or you could ask him if you don't believe me."

The intercom shut off.

Loki considered entering now but decided to hold out a little longer, thinking that Steve might have gone to confirm the claim. He also wasn't sure how good breaking in would look and didn't want to sabotage his trustworthiness, so he just vanished the letter, stepped away from the doors, and waited politely.

Almost exactly a minute later, the faint click of a lock echoed from the doors.

Tony was just coming down the stairs when Loki entered. He looked frantic: "I am so sorry," he said, tucking a phone in his pocket, "but you know how he is and—hi. Uh, do you want to... head back upstairs or something? It's just me there."

"That works."

"Awesome."

Then, just as quickly as he'd shown, Tony disappeared back up the stairs. Loki followed.

There was a mess of papers on the main table and something projected over them, although, like the papers, the holograms were a bit too cluttered to be deciphered. They flickered in and out of various graphs and charts as Tony returned to a brewing pot of coffee in the kitchen.

"So where is everyone?" Loki asked, pausing at the table to read everything.

"Around," Tony said. It looked to be a three-, four-person serving he was guarding; the pot was just shy of quarter-full when the drip stopped. "A few people are helping with cleanup. Someone—I can't remember who?—went to look into all the legal parts. Thor and Natasha are trying to get started on a plan for Asgard. Fun times. Dunno about the rest."

Loki flipped through one of the charts. "And you?"

"Oh, I get to figure out how much everyone owes in repairs! Exciting stuff. Hey, do you want any?"

Loki glanced over. "The coffee? Yes, please."

Tony pulled two mugs from the cupboard. "And you're just resting, I guess," he said, setting them on the counter, "right?"

"Hopefully."

"Yeah, yesterday must have been rough. I got most of the story from Thor—the ship and the attack and all that. Apparently you also faked your death?"

"I did. It wasn't the first time, but it was... one of the more graphic cases. I fear he's still not quite over that part." Loki closed the diagram and pulled up another. "It took a lot out of me; I'm surprised I lasted as long as I did."

"Could have been adrenaline," Tony said, carefully lifting the pot; a few extra drops sizzled out beneath it. "Looked like a hell of a crash back there after you—uh."

Loki tried not to cringe watching him stumble over himself.

“Yeah, the fight. Battle? Like”—Tony swallowed noticeably, as if he was choking, and reached to fill their mugs—“you were already exhausted and then it was just the rush that carried you through everything. And then you... crashed. Yeah.” He docked the pot. “Yeah, that would explain it, right? Right. God, I wish I could have left this morning too. I woke up at like five absolutely wired on stress and I’ve been dealing with all of this for *hours*. Hey, how do you take your coffee?”

It was obvious to Loki that Tony wasn’t sure how the incident was sitting in his mind and was deciding to play it safe. Out of courtesy, he pretended he hadn’t heard the frantic backtracking and answered, “It varies. Today I’d say... cream, lots of it, but I really shouldn’t be having dairy. If you have any substitutes, though, feel free to water it down until it can barely still be considered coffee.”

Tony managed a hesitant chuckle. “Alright, so no dairy,” he said, opening the fridge, “and no wheat.” He grabbed a carton of soy milk and elbowed the door closed. “That doesn’t sound fun. Where did that come from, you think?”

An imperfect glamour betraying his biology, probably: that was the best explanation Loki had these days, and given all he knew, it made sense. “My... ancestors? Never really ate either,” he said, hoping not to fumble with the entire saga but not wanting to leave the question unanswered, “so I suppose we just didn’t develop the tolerance.”

“That seems about right,” Tony said with a nod. He inspected the carton. “Soy is okay, right?”

“Go ahead.”

Tony poured a largish measure into one of the mugs. “So is it just wheat? Or grains in general?”

“Technically it’s all grains, but...”

Tony stuck the milk back in the fridge and kned it shut. “But?”

“I haven’t really been paying much attention to it. I’m only telling you at all because everyone was making such a commotion over it when we were living on the ship that—”

“You’ve just been ignoring the fact that you can’t have grains?”

“Well, I *can!*” Loki defended, looking up from the holograms just in time to see the deadpan but quite serious look of alarm on Tony’s face. “It’s not like some kind of life-threatening allergy or anything. I just... get a little sick sometimes if I have too many. It’s not that bad.”

“Dude. Stop eating grains. Are you sure soy is okay?”

“Positive, thank you.”

Tony visibly resisted arguing and instead sighed loudly, grabbed a spoon from one of the drawers, and stirred the paler coffee. “I do believe you that it’s not severe because I’m sure if it was it would have been a much bigger deal, but, honestly, I’m happy to accommodate if you need me to. I was bouncing around a bunch of different diets for a while so I’ve got a lot of tricks. Do you think it’s just the gluten that’s the problem? I want to know if things like rice are okay.”

“I don’t know,” Loki said, leaving the holograms to come sit at the couch. “Rice hasn’t been any issue so far, though.”

Tony paused to wipe a splash on the counter that he hadn't noticed with a dishcloth. "I guess we can find out," he said as he threw the dishcloth back in the sink. "Jeez, how long have you known about all of this?"

"I don't remember. I didn't even realize for years."

"What, no one told you?"

"No. I never brought it up. Why would I?"

"Oh, man. My heart goes out to you and your childhood meals. What even happened for you to find out? You mentioned it once and then everyone looked at you like you were crazy?"

"Something like that."

Tony stopped to rinse the spoon and then stuck it back in the drawer. Loki looked away.

"They did understand," he said, crossing his legs. "It was only odd for about... ten seconds."

"Ah. That's good."

Tony went and handed Loki his coffee, sat about a cushion's space away, and placed his own on the table to cool.

"Didn't you have coffee at breakfast?" Loki asked.

"What? No. No way. Definitely not. Nope."

"But—"

Tony coughed loudly and hissed something resembling "caffeine addiction."

"I must have imagined it, then," Loki said, nodding, though he could tell he wasn't the only one hiding a smile.

Tony did not answer immediately: he paused to rub a temple, moved to sit with his arms crossed on his lap, and then paused again. He looked like he didn't know what to say and that this was a new and frightening experience for him. "I think," he said, and then he stopped. "I think that... um... sorry, I didn't really sleep last night."

"Take your time."

What an appalling suggestion (and what a cheap lie that line about sleep was; body language spoke all, but Loki did not mention this). Were he not so clearly petrified of the thought, Tony probably would have snapped back at him.

"I think what you did six years ago really fucked me up," he said.

It had.

"But... I owe you. Me and everyone else. And, right, there is still a truce—so I'm willing to give you a chance. One chance."

“That’s reasonable,” Loki said.

“Sure it is. Can I trust you, though?”

“Never. Here’s a better question: can I trust *you*?”

That seemed to catch Tony off guard. He looked at the table, back at Loki, and then at his lap, and then he said, “You can’t. Same way I can’t trust you; I could say I won’t try anything, but you won’t believe me, will you?”

“Don’t try to kill me and I won’t try to kill you,” Loki said. “That’s all there is.”

“Is it?”

“What is there to gain from causing you any harm?”

Tony thought long about it. “Uhhh... satisfaction?”

“Like this? Look at you. You’re terrified. There’s no satisfaction in that.”

“Terrified? I’m not terrified.”

“No?”

“No.”

“Boo.”

“Ha! Nice try. I told you—”

Loki fainted a blow.

Tony jumped—shrank into the corner of the couch, eyes wide, arms braced before him. He didn’t move. Didn’t breathe. Didn’t even try to reach the Iron Man’s casing on his chest; not enough thoughts left for that.

When he let his arms down, he was trembling.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” Loki said.

“Okay,” Tony whispered, and then he turned and watched the table with those same wide and tearing eyes. The coffee. His was black: no milk to cool it.

Loki wondered for a moment if he’d already destroyed his second chance. He wondered if maybe he should offer something; would it be enough of an apology to bring the coffee from a near-boil with a spell’s touch? The dialogue was even there: would you like me to cool that?—yes, please, thank you. But it never did happen.

If that morning’s silence had been bad, then this was hell. He leaned back with his pale coffee and awkwardly sipped.

“You look better,” Tony softly remarked after some time; Loki glanced up at him.

“Better than yesterday,” he asked, “or better than six years ago?”

“Six years ago.”

Of course; who wouldn't have noticed? What little he remembered from reflections had been sickly: half a shade past his normal pallor, dark-eyed, thin, always drenched in cold sweat, and with unwashed, clumsily slicked hair longer than he'd ever had time to adjust to. He was wounded. He was hungry. He hadn't slept well in months and had flown through in a haze, playing quick-trigger snark and unfamiliarity as cover—betting that no one knew something was wrong because they had never known anything else. So much was different now.

“I feel better,” Loki eventually said. “Those days were...” Nightmarish, perhaps, or maybe something else; unsure of how to end the sentence, he didn't. “Do you still think about it?”

“Sometimes,” Tony said. “Not as much as I used to.”

Loki gazed into his coffee. “I'm sorry,” he said. “I wish I could help.”

“No, you don't.”

“I do. Honestly. I know it doesn't seem that way, but I'm not a bad person; I never have been. I live for myself first and it's led to many, many terrible things, but I promise I'm good at heart. And I would help you in this moment if I could.”

Tony couldn't face him. He uncertainly lifted his mug: it was no longer steaming. “I guess that must be true,” he said, “hearing everything you've done in the last day or two.”

“But you didn't think it applies to you,” Loki said.

“No. Not really. Why the hell would it?”

“Well... you did give me coffee.”

Tony looked up. Then he smiled somehow—an honest, excited smile like for an instant he had managed to forget who they were to each other despite it all and just laugh. “It was a lot anyway,” he admitted, looking back at his mug. “But you're welcome.”

The silence was a little less tense now, but it continued.

“Yeah, weird,” Tony said above a cautious sip. “Wasn't Thor saying something about you joining the Avengers?”

“He was. I'm surprised you caught that.”

“Do you want to be an Avenger?”

“Do I look like I want to be an Avenger?”

“Yeah, that's what I assumed.” The next sip was not cautious enough; Tony winced. “I'd definitely appreciate some help with everything, especially on the Asgard piece. I figure you know something about that. But I'm also... not sure everyone is okay with you sticking around, and by everyone I mean certain people and by certain people I mostly mean Captain America who's convinced you're insane and still want to take over the world or something. It's not just him, though. I'm obviously willing to put effort into some kind of peace for as long as needed—maybe forever, to be honest, if things go well—but, um. Yeah. That's also without the rest of Earth, which is a little... grudgy.”

“I can always leave,” Loki said. “I have places I can go. I wouldn’t mind if it came to that.”

“Well, jeez,” Tony muttered, lowering the mug. “I don’t want to just kick you out. Thor would skin me alive.”

“Oh, he wouldn’t do that, but he might throw a few punches. Nothing you can’t handle, I’m sure.”

Tony took another sip. “Is this what you’re usually like?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re calm. Making jokes. Not... trying to kill anyone.”

“You say that like it’s my pastime.”

“It’s not?”

Loki fought a snicker. “No.”

“Then what is?”

“Oh my. You’re asking what I do in my spare time? If I didn’t know you any better... I’d say you’re flirting with me.”

Tony choked on his coffee. “No!” he spluttered, face red.

Ah—but they had to break the tension somehow, didn’t they?

“God of Mischief,” Loki warmly reminded.

Tony rolled his eyes. “God of Mischief,” he mocked, but he laughed nonetheless. “Then I guess you won’t answer the question, will you?”

“I read,” Loki said. He set his mug on the table. “Sometimes I write.”

“Please tell me it’s not depressing poetry.”

“Only some of it.”

“Do you also take long walks by yourself and question the meaning of life?”

“Doesn’t everyone?”

“I guess. What do you know about machines?”

“Not as much as you, but probably more than most.”

“Then we’ll get right along, won’t we?”

“Most likely.”

“Cool. Let’s shake on it.” Tony stuck out his free hand. “Don’t try to kill me and I won’t try to kill you and vice versa.”

“Deal,” Loki said, clasping his hand.

There was that look again as they pulled away: old fear, suspicion, a tense glance up and down, and a halted reflex to match a too-quick movement from one of them. Was this just another lie? A cheap promise suiting deeper motives? Would this end only in someone’s death?

The rest of Tony’s expression told him nothing.

“So... back to crunching numbers, I guess,” Tony said, checking to see how much coffee he had left: he frowned and finished it in one go. Then he went and stuck both of the mugs in the dishwasher and returned to the table with all of the papers and holograms. He didn’t look like he was doing too well, though.

“Do you need me for anything?” Loki called over the couch.

“Nope.”

Loki got up and joined him.

“Unless you have a good idea of the US economy which, by the way”—Tony threw a few holograms to the side—“is royally in shambles and has been for a while then thank you a lot but I really don’t need help with this part.”

“I think you need to take a break,” Loki said, leaning on the table.

“I did take a break. I took at least several breaks. Also, I don’t need a break.”

“Do you want help?”

“I just said I don’t need help.”

“I know. I’m asking if you want it, not if you need it.”

Tony stared down one of the articles. He seriously looked like he was about to cry. “No.”

Loki skimmed a paper: some kind of generic financial legal form. “I can’t imagine this all needs to be done today,” he said, coming over to look at the same article. “Does it?”

“No, of course not, but it’s just a lot and I’m really freaking out about it and I’d rather get it done as soon as possible because”—Tony scrolled to something else—“uh, it’s really just a massive pain in the ass if you leave it because then you have all this other stuff on top of it like—”

Loki sat beside him.

“Anyway, the point is it’s horrible and of course it’s my problem because it’s always my problem because I’m the only person capable of funding everything ever—amazing!—and it’s not, like, difficult or anything, but it’s just really frustrating and—”

This... probably hadn’t been a good idea.

“I do need a break,” Tony quietly said. “Do you, um... want to come outside for a minute?”

“I thought you didn’t trust me,” Loki said.

God, no. Not even a little bit. A leaky vat of acid was probably more trustworthy. Tony did not say this, though; only the veiled terror far behind his eyes made any mention. “I don’t trust anyone here,” he said, and then he went right back down the stairs for some air. The holograms stayed on behind him.

Loki didn’t really care to follow, but he had a weird suspicion that Tony didn’t trust him not to root around the place if left unattended and might feel safer if he did, so he did. “Surely it’s not just you shouldering all of this,” he said, sitting on a bench against the wall.

“In theory,” Tony said while he tapped something into his phone. “So we are setting up teams to offset everything like research and general logistics and all of that, but until that happens it’s still mainly on whoever’s available which is us. And me. I did get ahold of my usual circle for dealing with... whatever you want to call that disaster”—he gestured behind him, upstairs-ish—“but at this point it’s still, again, mostly on me. Which is fine but. Eh. Actually, the other thing I was more concerned with is if I can put something together to quickly locate whoever landed on Earth like, I don’t know, a global scan but that’s an entire nightmare of its own and it’s just—am I talking too fast?”

“No?”

“Right, so I need something to base the scan off for that which is usually a face, but the problem is there is no face, we have no idea who we’re looking for or where, and I guess what would work best is if I find a way to train a scan on Asgard as a whole to pick everyone apart from the rest of Earth’s population and quickly figure out who’s where and what next.”

“That seems smart,” Loki said with a nod. “What’s stopping you?”

“I mean, for one there’s absolutely no way anything is precise enough to successfully search the entire planet with criteria that vague. I don’t even know what to put in! I also have no idea where Thor went and can’t get in touch with him for shit to see if I can somehow set up a baseline from him assuming that’s not impossible, so I’m stuck filling paperwork until then.” Tony paused. “Wait, I could base it off you, can’t I?”

No. No, he couldn’t. Imperfect glamour.

“You can’t,” Loki quietly said, thumbing the knuckles on one hand in an effort to think; where was he going with this, anyway? “There are too many subtleties. I can’t account for all of them.”

“Of course not,” Tony said. “But... I guess it might be difficult to extrapolate from one person.”

Then they wait for Thor. No problem.

“Not that you would accept the offer,” Loki said, getting back up off the bench, “but if you let me have a look, I might be able to get it working myself. Subtleties or otherwise. Magic should cover them.”

“Uh, I’m kind of particular about people messing with my stuff. Especially you. No offence.”

“And if I can help?”

“You can’t. The tech’s garbage.”

“Certainly not yours.”

“Ha. Bet. Anyway, I’m going to wait for Thor.”

“Why? So he can supervise me?”

Tony stared straight ahead. “Well, now that you mention it.”

“How flattering,” Loki said. “I suppose we’ll just spend the next century waiting, then. That doesn’t sound too bad. Maybe you can rent me a brothel while we’re at it.”

Tony whipped around to look at him, his face scrunched in morbid, exaggerated disgust.

“What? I have needs.”

“You,” Tony declared, “are utterly gross.”

Loki snickered. “You’re one to talk.”

“Okay, no, I don’t want to hear about this.” Tony turned his back to him. “Stop tainting my innocent ears with your sin.”

The snicker became near-hysterical laughter. Tony did not seem especially upset, but he acted the part.

What they really needed to address, Loki decided as he composed himself, was this mistrust—that their earlier discussion was still so recent he remembered it almost word for word and that none of it had accomplished a thing. He did think, although he honestly didn’t want to think much about it at all given the choice, that yesterday’s moment on Titan would have garnered some sympathy to his advantage: “See, no such bawling mess could possibly be a threat! Trust me, please.” He thought Tony would keep it as evidence alongside killing Thanos that maybe he wasn’t all that bad, even if it remained a graciously unspoken secret. As far as he could tell, though, it didn’t mean anything: even the worst people in the universe had their moments and he wouldn’t be an exception. While it was a comfort to still be considered as dangerous as ever, it meant he needed to look elsewhere.

But he didn’t say this, of course, because at the end of the day, he still preferred being mistrusted to being patronized: he *was* as dangerous as ever and he wasn’t letting anyone forget it. Let them doubt.

“You seem ill-prepared,” he said.

“Ill-prepared? No. Annoyed? Yes.”

“My offer still stands.”

“And I still don’t trust you!”

There it was. Tony stopped—snapped his mouth shut with that same wide-eyed blush and looked away like he hadn’t quite meant to let it out so harshly, like he was scared of its consequences, and released a slow and shaky breath.

“Well, that much was obvious,” Loki said.

Tony did not face him. "I'm sorry," he muttered, and then he tucked his phone away and rubbed an eye and tried to fix to look a little more composed but couldn't. "I can't. Half a morning isn't enough. A handshake and some stupid jokes isn't enough. It won't happen that easily."

"Don't apologize," Loki said.

Tony looked like he was about to apologize for apologizing.

"Really, what do you think I'll do?" Loki exclaimed with an overdrawn sigh. "Set the building on fire? Turn you and all of your devices into frogs?"

"I hope not," Tony said, feigning a smile.

Loki smiled back. "I'm here if you need me," he said, and then he turned and went inside.

To be fair, this went exactly as he'd expected: weird and tense and fake-friendly because there was just nothing else they could do. It wasn't like he cared either way. Still, it would help to make himself useful while he was here and he did want to know what had happened to everyone even if he found it pointless, so he tried not to let his mind wander too much and waited for Tony to finish screaming into the great outdoors.

"Get over here," Tony said, visibly defeated, as he came up the stairs and headed down the hall.

"Get over here, please," Loki said, setting a paper back on the table.

"Please. A very big please. And a thank you."

There was a massive room filled with screens, more holograms, and all sorts of disjointed tech which looked to have been claimed as a workshop. Whatever fiddling around Tony hadn't been doing in the common space was here: there was a mess of experiments on the screens and a half-read book beside the keyboard. None of it looked successful.

"See? Garbage." Tony unfondly tapped the keyboard. It was wired and mechanical, unlike every single other thing in the room.

"I feel so sorry for you," Loki said. "That must be heartbreaking. Really, I can't imagine."

Tony almost smiled again but didn't. "So here's what I want to know," he said, fiddling a bit more with everything. "Can you work on the Iron Man because I don't have what I need for a full-size global search right now and if so"—he pointed to the glowing device latched to his shirt—"does it need to be out or is this fine?"

"Oh, so you don't trust me with unbridled access to the entire system," Loki said.

"No," Tony clearly lied.

Loki sat on the table.

"No, I want to see if it works on a small scale first to know if it's worth diving into. That's doable, right?"

In theory; the same spell should work and if all else failed he could always try manual input. It wasn't remotely an issue, in fact. It was more the thought behind it that wasn't sitting well. Still, he

laid a hand on the device to check.

“I guess you know what you’re doing,” Tony said. Was this too close? The confidence was draining; it looked like he was regretting ever taking up the offer. Maybe it wasn’t worth it.

“I do,” Loki said. Actually, he was completely winging everything and had been winging everything ever since a genocidal warlord with a saviour complex slaughtered his friends and family and then left him for dead, but yes, sure, he knew what he was doing.

He was about to attempt it when there was a knock on the open door.

“Were you looking for me?” Thor asked, sticking his head into the room.

“No!” Loki groaned.

“Oh my god, the timing,” Tony said. “Yeah, I was going to ask you about some stuff earlier but I think we might have figured out a shortcut. Do you mind hanging around for a minute, though?”

“Yes,” Loki said.

“What do you need?” Thor asked.

“I just need to see if something works,” Tony said.

“You mean making sure I don’t destroy everything?” Loki objected.

“Oh,” Thor said, a bit amused as the realization dawned on him.

“For the record,” Tony clarified, raising a hand, “I was ready to go ahead and try this without him here. I just kind of prefer it with.”

“What am I, a child?” Loki said.

“Yes,” Thor said.

Loki threw him a shocked look.

“Really, though,” Tony said. “I need to test this anyway.”

“Unbelievable,” Loki said, but he only sighed and then went back to what he was going to do while Thor tried and failed to look a little less out of place in the room. Seeing without seeing; magic bridged the gap. He closed his eyes.

It had been a while since he did this and he wasn’t quite sure what he was looking for, but he would know it when he found it. He searched: the nanotech stitching everything together, the weapons, the defences, large and small parts of a whole and each interwoven system lining them. Turned out it was easier to work through everything in a compressed form and he got a good feel for it pretty quickly, although to Tony’s credit, much of it was too complex for anything deeper than a surface probe. He did get the important part, though, which was the scanning tech’s entirety. After double-checking that he had the right code, he bade another ounce of magic to compile all the information into a list of search criteria—not exactly any specific information aside from some basics, per se, but rather just a knowing: it was the kind of impreciseness magical help was perfect for. Then he removed his hand.

“That should work,” he said, looking up. “Try it out.”

Tony was skeptical, but he tapped out the Iron Man suit and let it form around him. “Okay, testing... whatever just got added.”

There was a pause.

“Huh.”

“Nothing?”

Tony lowered the helmet. “Uh, no, I’m just. Surprised.”

“Surprised it works?”

“Yeah, a little.”

Loki wondered if it was perfect enough to deny the flawed glamour and if Tony had noticed. “I appreciate you underestimating me,” he said with a smile.

Tony called back the rest of the armour. “And you... didn’t add anything weird. Did you?”

“Still? Honestly, what could I do?”

“Knowing you,” Thor said beside them, “you might have had it turn green.”

Loki reeled, blushing. “Absolutely not!” he said, though the remnants of his smile were still clinging to his lips—joking in spite of himself. “I would much rather a hot pink. Purple, even.”

“I could do purple,” Tony said, thoughtful.

“Oh, you don’t know!” Thor said with a grin. “On Asgard—”

“Wearing each other’s colours is symbolic of passion, yes, I know,” Loki brusquely finished, waving a hand. “I mean, it’s an old tradition and it’s actually just as common with regards to familial and other platonic kinds of love, but”—he huffed—“either way, I’m sure everyone is thrilled to understand the punchline. Thank you.”

“Well, it’s neat trivia,” Tony said with a chuckle.

Peter choked on his potato chips.

They looked up.

“Hi,” Peter said, waving from where he was crouched on the ceiling with a bag.

Tony squinted. “How long have you been there?”

“Since... you opened the door? I, uh, followed.” Peter dropped to the floor. “Sorry.”

“Don’t you have somewhere to be right now?”

“No.”

Tony's squint deepened.

"Sorry," Peter said. "I'm just... bored. I can head out."

"Okay, look, why don't you go help Thor or something?"

"Yeah, but I don't know if I'm really feeling anything today—"

"I can join you," Loki said.

"The three of you?" Tony said.

"With Thor? No. Ew."

"Weren't you just mourning me?" Thor said, hiding a smile.

"Yes," Loki said, "but then I discovered that you are, in fact, still alive, so I stopped mourning and now I can't stand you again."

Peter continued munching his potato chips.

"Okay, look," Tony said. "I don't want you running around New York unattended. Is that fair?"

"No," Loki said.

"But he's not unattended," Thor said. "He's with Peter."

Loki almost snorted.

"I mean"—Peter twisted the bag closed—"Loki did help me this morning. He seems alright."

Tony looked at them both like he wanted to argue but couldn't, either because he had no good arguments or because he knew they wouldn't work either way. What was that line about trust? He sat heavily in the fat swivel chair.

"I saw an ice cream parlour on the way here," Loki said, thoughtful. "I could take Peter if he wanted."

"I'm sorry, are you trying to bribe me with ice cream?" Tony said.

"It's more like expressing that I don't want to hurt anyone and would actually very much like to get to know this person, but yes, I suppose I am. Is it working?"

Absolutely not; Tony fought a glare. But he only leaned back in the chair, considered it for a moment—considered maybe their discussion on trust and forgiveness and all that—and then sighed and said, "Sure. As long as you get me something."

Peter and Loki high-fived.

Wouldn't It Be Nice?

Chapter Summary

Loki and Peter attempt to distract themselves.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is dedicated to Stan Lee, who passed away on this 12th of November. I was never particularly invested in Marvel until about half a year ago, but he no doubt played a large role in my life, and of course in many others'. I can only hope to create the kinds of stories he did.

Rest in peace, Stan. I hope the great comic book store in the sky treats you well.

Now, there *was* a plan, but the plan thus far still mostly comprised that there was no plan and that the only plan was to stay alive and well because Loki had not left himself in an easy situation and lacked his usual slew of contingencies thanks to fully expecting to die before he ever made it here. And so the plan was probably closer to acting as personable as possible for as long as possible to perhaps, if it worked, fly under the radar long enough to either make a new identity and blend in or find a way off the planet and disappear entirely, which of course started with getting Peter ice cream because it looked like a nice place—a very snug and colourful little shop crammed between all the other buildings—and because he was vindictive about the fact that he was not their target audience. Mainly because he was vindictive about it, really, but also because Peter seemed like a good kid and deserved better than this and, even truce-building aside, it felt important to look out for him. Enough had happened aboard the ship; Loki wanted to keep this one safe.

To that end they didn't seem to fit together at all; they did not have scathing sarcasm in common nor smug surefootedness and were no more than two random strangers who had just washed ashore of the same disaster. But maybe that was it, and, as they stopped in front of the shop with their bounty, it seemed to do the trick. It was weird and that was a good thing: Peter, who looked very ordinary beneath a loaned glamour—none of the superhero gear he was still wearing, gawked above his chocolate ice cream cone while Loki counted everything and then threw the pints into storage.

“Definitely not bribery,” Loki declared as he made a show of dusting his hands off and smoothing his black collared shirt. “What do you think, spider?”

“Awesome,” Peter said.

“The bribery?”

“What? No. The”—Peter wiggled his free hand very accurately—“that.”

Loki pretended he wasn't disappointed. "Oh, that."

"I mean... I haven't seen a lot of magic in my life."

"No? Maybe I can show you some more. We've got time to fill."

This brought them right back to the original problem, which was they both just wanted to be away from everything. Or at least Loki assumed that was the case because if it had gotten to *him* then it certainly would have gotten to Peter; he didn't have another explanation as to why they were standing outside an ice cream shop in New York, the United States of America, North America, Earth, and so on, and suspected he shouldn't further push his luck by stopping to question it. Maybe only a little questioning. He would save the rest for later.

"This is weird," Peter said.

Yes, it was! What the hell? Loki basked in the relief that he was not the first to mention it. Yes, this was very, very weird and it would likely only get weirder. Welcome to every day of his life. "The best things are," he said.

At this point it occurred to him that they were only stalling the inevitable. It wasn't really their fault, though; there wasn't much that could be done right now even if they wanted to. So here they were, standing outside an ice cream parlour and acting normal, trying to forget the things they'd been through and carry on with their weird little lives. Not that it was working, but, well—they tried. Loki thought he looked very suave pretending he knew everything (he did not) in his all-black.

"We could go look around and see if anyone needs help," Peter said.

"That sounds like a good idea," Loki said. "Anywhere in mind?"

"Just around. It's a big city."

Alright, so the plan was to wander and try to be useful. Fair enough. At least he didn't have to keep struggling to tolerate Tony and the others. And he knew there must be something: by the looks of it the city had gotten by relatively unscathed and any repairs would be minimal but they could still check for themselves. So they headed off somewhere.

"Did you just want to get out of there?" Peter asked as they waited on a crosswalk light.

"No," Loki lied.

The light changed.

"I mean," Peter said as they crossed, "I was kind of looking for a reason to leave too. It seemed pretty tense back there."

"Isn't it always?"

Peter thought about it.

"I don't mind this," Loki said, which was true. "How far are we looking around?"

“I don’t know,” Peter said. “As far as you want to, I guess. I can get around pretty quickly with everything. But you can’t, can you?”

“Sure I can. I’ve got all sorts of ways.”

Peter started picking at the sugary waffle cone. “Like what?”

“I’m a very fast runner,” Loki said, completely serious.

“But I mean if we want to get to the other end of the city or something,” Peter said.

“I can teleport if I need to.”

Peter choked on his ice cream. “You can teleport?”

“If I need to. It’s not worth doing often.”

“Oh.”

At this point it also occurred to Loki that he was losing track of his priorities. Wasn’t he supposed to take a minute to recover and then vanish? Perform a full-fledged transportation ritual with all the bells and whistles just to be completely certain, maybe? Not waste his energy on... this. He had heard of some good places out there; there must be *something* better suited to him than this sorry excuse for a planet. But he seemed to be feeling skittish now that he thought about it—reluctant to test his luck again so soon after nearly dying several times in quick succession. Maybe he didn’t know. So on another whim he just shrugged and said, “I can shapeshift too.”

“You can shapeshift?” Peter exclaimed.

“If I need to.”

They ducked past a group standing obnoxiously in the middle of the sidewalk.

“Do you need to?” Peter asked, glancing back.

“Never,” Loki said just as they crossed a blind spot large enough for him to smile and then fade under a veil of green light.

By the time Peter looked again he was already a magpie with unusually emerald-tinged wings and matching eyes: very bright and charming and not quite aglow but suspicious at the least. He swooped up onto Peter’s shoulder—easy; he took extra care with the weight this shift for it was of the utmost importance—and shook out all his feathers.

“Holy shit,” Peter said.

Loki closed his magic eyes and nodded wisely: to be honest, he was a bit rusty with animal forms and couldn’t remember how to talk like this or if he even could. Ah, no matter.

“Okay, so are you following me or are we—”

Loki flew off farther down the street.

“Or that,” Peter said, and then he finished his ice cream and scurried after him.

It was a good view from up here: Loki saw all sorts of things he would have otherwise missed as he swerved around signs and traffic lights. He saw Peter skid into an alley to shed the glamour away from prying eyes and then swing onto the next rooftop. He saw everyone start snapping photos and he saw someone honk and wave while someone else dropped some food of their own. Nothing towards the stray bird as he dropped from his lamp-post perch and soared after Peter, although he was sure they must have looked wild together—there weren't many magpies here and most of them didn't race Spider Man. He did see less destruction than expected, but a few streets were in bad shape and places were still abandoned where no one had gotten the all clear after evacuating. Strange's den looked like shit: he wondered if he was going to get scolded for trespassing again but they evidently had bigger problems than him. Thank goodness. Back down he went.

He shouldn't have; it took so much effort to get everything right and make sure he could get even get airborne that he'd probably cancelled out the whole day's worth of rest. He could have just walked. But it felt so good to have the wind under him like this that he no longer cared: what a perfect way to distract from the chaos. What a mistake that he didn't do this more often! Why bother learning how to shift if all he ever did was alternate between variations of himself? And so while Peter leapt about looking for trouble Loki just kept at it. He did loops around the buildings and he dove between alleys and he soared into the clouds and then down again, coming up inches from the street—he almost got hit by a speeding driver and decided that was enough of that—with so much untamed exhilaration that he couldn't breathe; he'd missed this too much.

It was lovely, and for a time, everything was forgotten.

They did accomplish some little things here and there, or Peter did, anyway. He helped where he could with petty crimes and minor inconveniences because they were never short in supply and he listed ideas for a great many matters regarding Asgard, the Avengers, and all of the above and more. He offered to help a tidying crew and was politely turned down, although at least he offered. Loki tagged along where useful. But for the most part they did nothing, which was fine.

Once, they sat together on a roof, and as Loki shifted back and stretched, Peter turned to him and asked, "What happened between you and Mr. Stark?"

Loki, caught off guard and still a little disoriented by the sensation of fingers, said nothing. He thought it might be best to conspicuously skirt the topic and refuse any and all discussion and he did consider it, and he also thought about lying that he needed more time to remember how to make person words with a person mouth and considered that as well. Then he just said, "It's a long story," which was true.

Peter looked like he wanted to insist but didn't know if he was allowed.

"The usual," Loki said. "We fought. We felt it. It was awful. I also threw him out of a window which doesn't really help but—"

"You threw him out of a window?" Peter yelled.

"He was fine!" Loki said, waving his hand dismissively. "Armour and all. But... I didn't plan on him surviving. I didn't want him to."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

Honestly. Tony was just trying to protect the place. Nothing personal towards him nor anyone else who came that day. Peter, perhaps suspecting more, squinted at the street many hundreds of feet below them.

“Maybe he reminded me of someone,” Loki said, but he wasn’t sure.

“Thanos?”

Loki paused.

“I guess it was a lot of things,” Peter said.

“Enough,” Loki said. “I had business there and he was in my way. I was in pain. I was angry. I wasn’t sleeping. I couldn’t think. I couldn’t stop thinking. Of course I took it out on others because what else could I do?”

“Therapy?”

Loki held back a wheeze. “Well, I’m sure that would have been more efficient,” he said, “but I don’t think they would have let me. I think they would have had my head for even considering something irrelevant to the plan.”

“The plan,” Peter said with an empty nod. “Right.”

“You know, the whole Infinity Stone spiel and all that,” Loki said. “Serving their lord and saviour Thanos”—he shouted with arms wide like the rest of them—“for the greater good!”

“But he’s dead now, so... yay?”

And then Loki laughed and did not stop laughing because this was the funniest response he had ever heard to something like this in his life. “You helped too!” he said as he composed himself. “How unfortunate I can’t offer you a toast because I would.”

Then Peter laughed as well.

Then a siren somewhere stole their attention, and Loki, always plagued by the metaphysical, winced at the feel of death in the air. So did Peter; he spotted the ambulance almost instinctively and watched as it zipped through the boulevard, looking away only once it veered out of sight. The sombre tone took a little longer. It was hard for Loki not to imagine what might have happened. Sink into it, bit by bit. It must have been ugly. Maybe it reminded him of something. Maybe it reminded them both.

“Do you miss Asgard?” Peter asked.

“I miss my old life,” Loki said, his voice quiet and hollow. “Back when everything was going as it was supposed to. Back when it meant something to me. Back when it was home. Before all... this.”

“I get it,” Peter said. “Wanting your old life back. I feel the same.”

“But mercy isn’t really fate’s nature,” Loki said with a sympathetic smile.

Peter nodded. “I guess not.”

Suspicious Minds

Chapter Summary

The Avengers are growing uneasy over Loki's presence, and Loki is forced to reveal something he'd rather forget about.

Chapter Notes

Hey kids, what time is it? That's right! Iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiit's ANGST TIME!

[rave music]

Somewhere just around dinnertime Peter and Loki finally ran out of things to do and made their way back to the compound to recoup and check up on everything. This and Peter was hungry, much hungrier than Loki, but that was a given. The place was empty and very quiet; the main doors closing echoed across the lobby. It felt almost barren. As far as Loki was concerned there was no use coming back here and he was wary of the place regardless, but he was still tied to Peter and so he followed him upstairs to the common kitchen, which was also empty. He sat and watched as Peter opened and closed every single cabinet and cupboard there was before at last pulling out a tin of salted peanuts with a triumphant whoop. No one else came, though. Maybe they were busy. It had been unlocked, so presumably someone was around.

“Do you think there’s going to be dinner?” Peter asked above a mouthful of peanuts.

Loki realized he was staring down the hall and looked over. “There must be,” he said. “There are too many people here not to have something.”

It briefly occurred to him that they might have decided to eat out somewhere without inviting him or Peter and he decided that if that were the case he would kill them. It seemed unlikely, though.

“I can head home if there isn’t,” Peter said. “I was just wondering.”

New plan: kill them and steal their food. Just kidding—Loki would go find them and harass them to feed the child. And then kill them. If they didn’t kill him, anyway; he wasn’t sure how long the benevolent jokester schtick could compensate for everything else and he already had a bad feeling about the place. But he supposed he would find out later.

“I’ll go find out,” Loki said, creeping from his seat, and then he left Peter with the peanuts and went to investigate.

This, of course, was easier said than done because he hadn’t yet acquainted himself with the building’s layout and wasn’t sure where he was going other than he was looking for signs of life,

but he was good at this kind of thing and it helped that the layout followed a logical scheme. Should he be rooting about like this given that no one trusted him to be here? Probably not, although that never stopped him. He went through the dorms because he sort of needed the bathroom and then he went down one hall, very neat and light-footed rounds like he knew exactly where he was going, and then he went down the other only to end up empty-handed right back where he started, in the kitchen while Peter didn't even notice him over the peanuts and a phone, and, a little miffed, he went down the other other hall and wondered why he ever bothered. Then he paused mid-step as he heard a heated discussion behind one of the doors—all voices from that morning.

Loki slunk up against the door and listened quick just to be sure. Then he knocked. The voices stopped. He opened the door. "Good evening! Sorry to interrupt."

It was a generic conference room with sleek screens and plenty of natural light and a large table at which Steve Rogers, Stephen Strange, Natasha, Bruce, and Thor were seated; not a single person looked like they wanted to be there. Tony, who looked incredibly frazzled sprawled in a separate chair near the back of the room, scrunched his face and tried to process the situation.

"This is a private conversation," Steve said from his seat at the table.

"Unfortunate," Loki said. "Peter was wondering if there are any plans for dinner tonight."

"You can't just—"

"If this is a private conversation," Loki calmly continued, holding up a hand, "then you should have locked the door. I can leave; I just want to know what to tell him. He's hungry and I feel responsible."

"No plans so far," Tony sighed from the corner, "but we might order something if it starts getting too late. How is he?"

"Lovely," Loki said. "Currently eating fistfuls of peanuts in the kitchen, he appears to be in some sort of food trance. I adore him."

Tony, who looked about ready to have a stroke or several, somehow smiled. "Do you want to call him down? We can talk more on food with the expert present."

"Tony," Steve protested.

"No, it's fine!" Loki insisted, turning to leave again. "Keep discussing me behind my back. I'm not even here."

"We weren't... discussing you behind your back," Tony said.

Thor looked skeptical.

"Clearly," Loki said.

"We mentioned you," Tony said, "briefly."

"But I'm not invited."

"No," Steve said.

Loki made himself comfortable standing beside the open door. “Well, that doesn’t solve the matter of the starving child in the kitchen.”

“He’s not a child. He can figure something out.”

“Actually, he’s too weak from the lack of food and that’s why he sent me. If you don’t hurry he can and will die and it will be your fault.”

At this point Tony looked like he had not only had several strokes but recovered and then had another one in the span of the exchange. His eyes were rolled back so far into his skull they were detaching and his soul could be seen escaping his mouth like steam from black coffee as he sighed again loud enough to rattle the earth. Bank accounts crumbled. Paperwork scattered. A communist wept. No matter how smart he was and how many supergenius inventions he lined his pockets with, he had yet to come up with a solution for everyone else being dumb as a fucking rock. But yes—as they were saying, Peter was gorging about fifty times his daily intake of fat and salt in one sitting and someone should probably go feed him a vegetable. Loki glanced down the hall.

“Is he still in a food trance?” Tony asked.

“Hard to tell,” Loki said. “He’s stopped pacing and moved to the counter. The peanuts show no sign of running out and I’m beginning to worry.”

“The counter? On?”

“On, yes. Crouched on the edge. It’s quite adorable.”

“With his feet? Gross. Tell him to get off.”

Loki stepped outside. “Peter!”

“Yeah?” echoed his response.

“Get off the counter.”

Peter leapt onto the floor. “Sorry!”

“Don’t worry about it,” Tony said.

“Don’t worry about it!” Loki said.

Tony pressed his hands to his face and sighed again.

“Do you mind leaving now?” Steve said.

“Loki has the right to be present,” Tony said. “This concerns him too.”

“I don’t feel comfortable sharing a room with a mass murderer.”

“Then I guess half of us should leave then, huh?”

The room dropped. They stirred awkwardly. No more loving jokes about the spider-child and his kitchen acrobatics. Back to... well, the main issue, even if Tony claimed otherwise.

It was quiet for a long time, and, really just very exhausted, Loki felt a kind of connection with this man slumped in a chair with hands on his temples and the beginning of a thousandth sigh. And at least Tony was trying to cultivate some kind of honesty between them despite the clear mistrust and fear; the rest of them certainly didn't care—not at all surprising of those Stephen Strange, whom at this point he would have happily skinned alive with a spoon on the basis of “pompous twit who cares more about the mystical arts than basic manners” and many others. Surely he couldn't be trusted enough to be present for a conversation about whether or not he could be trusted. Tony, obviously still on his side about it all, didn't even try to look at them.

“I agree,” Loki announced, knowing fully well his opinion was irrelevant.

“You need to realize—” Strange began.

“How dare you speak to me?”

Tony held back a manic chortle.

“Why are you here?” Loki coldly continued.

“Because half of all possible outcomes of this discussion end in violence,” Strange answered, his tone equally icy. “A quarter of those I need to stop you myself.”

“I would never!”

“Yeah, okay.”

Please don't kill everyone and prove this bastard right, Loki begged of the universe, but aside from a heave of wrath firing a warning shot within him he got no response. “So what am I missing?” he asked, wisely deciding to ignore the fool's existence and perhaps his own as well.

“Oh, we were discussing how Steve Rogers wants to kick you out because he thinks you're going to snap again like you did six years ago,” Tony said. “Well, many other things too, but apparently mostly that now that you're here.”

“And that's not a good reason?” Steve said.

“Yeah, what about Bucky?” Tony said, crossing his arms.

“Tony!”

“No, because here's what I don't understand—he killed a hell of a lot more people in that time and that doesn't seem to bug you much, does it? Hey.”

“Compared to almost destroying the biggest city in the country and everything in it?”

“Are we arguing death tolls or just general chaos? Because I have the numbers if you need to refer to them but that's not my point: where are we as a group drawing the line? It's not consistent. You aren't consistent. You've written off a lot more for a lot less and I want an explanation.”

“Because Bucky has changed! Because all of these people have changed.”

“Not because he's your friend? Okay. And this is different? How do you know?”

“Do you want to take that risk?”

“For the record, I don’t want to take any risk and I would rather be at home right now. Why am I after everything able to put things aside for a second to actually think about the situation and you can’t?”

“Loki almost killed you himself.”

“At least he apologized!” Tony yelled.

The room went silent. Loki, who had not left, awkwardly shifted his weight to one leg.

“How do you know he wasn’t lying to get on your good side?” Steve asked, sounding like he was fighting to keep from yelling as well.

“Seemed more genuine than whatever yours was supposed to be,” Tony growled.

“He lies constantly!”

“Not true,” Loki said. “I lie frequently, not constantly.”

“Do you think this is funny?” Steve said, appalled.

“No, I think this is hilarious.”

“You’re not helping,” Tony said.

“You know”—Loki leaned against the doorway, a leg crossed—“I highly recommend looking up the definition of sarcasm one of these days. It might prove very enlightening.”

“Yes, I know what sarcasm is,” Tony said with an exasperated sigh. “Thank you. You’re seriously not helping, though.”

“You know I could just leave if it would be simpler? I don’t mind.”

“Please do,” Steve said.

“Please don’t,” Tony said. “Do you want to? Because if you do, then sure, go ahead, but if it’s because someone’s guilting you—”

“What’s happening?” asked Peter, appearing suddenly in the doorway with his peanuts and phone still in tow. They all looked up.

“Hey kid,” Tony said with a wave. “How do you feel about pizza?”

“Oh! That would be awesome. Thanks, Mr. Stark.”

“Loki, I can get something else for you?”

“Don’t trouble yourself with my dietary needs,” he said; beside him, Peter briefly looked up from the peanuts.

“Dietary needs?” Steve said, unimpressed.

“He can’t have grains,” Thor said.

“What? Since when?”

“Since I become violently ill when I have too many?” Loki said—a dramatic exaggeration, by the way, but no one needed to know.

“Yeah, please don’t make yourself violently ill because you’re too polite to ask for accommodations,” Tony said.

“Okay, can we go back to the more important issues?” Steve asked.

“Not being violently ill is an important issue,” Loki said.

“Could you at least find a seat?” Tony said. “Both of you. Don’t just stand there in the doorway all menacingly.”

Peter capered over and sat crisscross in one of the chairs with his peanuts.

“I like standing menacingly in doorways,” Loki said. “This wasn’t just about me, was it?”

“It was about all of us,” Tony said. “We weren’t trying to talk behind your back or anything, if that’s what it seemed like. Well, I wasn’t. Staring Contest over there insisted it was too urgent to wait on you.”

“It is urgent,” Steve argued.

“Is it?” Loki asked. “Why didn’t you have this discussion this morning, then?”

“Good point,” Tony said. “Why didn’t we?”

“Because everyone ran off before we could get a chance,” Steve kindly informed; he still sounded like he was trying not to yell.

“Oh, there were plenty of chances before then,” Loki said.

“To be fair we did have to help those other guys with their stuff,” Tony said, “but yeah, we definitely could have found the time. Which was also the original reason we ended up in here, for the record, because they’re still coming and going a bit and it *is* private to them.”

“But I’m not them.”

“Well... it was supposed to be Avengers only.”

“Then what’s with the wizard?”

“Insurance,” Strange said.

“I just saved your miserable life and that’s how you repay me?” Loki snapped. “How unbelievably ungrateful you are. All of you. What if I hadn’t been there when you fought Thanos?”

He said nothing. Really, they all did. In fact, Strange looked away like he knew something, and odds were he did. Loki stepped away from the door, closed it, and took the nearest chair, which was

the one that put him at the head of the table and Steve Rogers diagonally to his right. Steve sent him an acknowledging glare and chin-raise, but in a weird sort of way Loki only smiled; well, the entire situation was absurd.

“Nice beard,” Loki said.

Someone snickered.

“I don’t think you understand the gravity of your situation,” Steve said.

“I am not who you met,” Loki said.

“Then that wasn’t you who completely mutilated Thanos, was it?”

“Thanos wouldn’t have died any easier than that. What’s your idea of mutilation, anyway?”

“What’s stopping you from doing that to anyone else?”

“Would you slaughter what remains of Asgard and have me watch? I’m sure we can find out.”

Steve, evidently lost for words, did not answer.

“It takes more than you think to drive me to these measures,” Loki said. “I have no reason to do something like this again.”

“Then how do you explain the last time you were here?”

Loki paused. “That was different,” he simply said.

“What do you care about that?” Tony asked Steve. “I thought we were trying to establish that something like that won’t happen again, not *why* it happened. Leave him alone.”

“I want to know why it happened,” Steve said, not looking away from Loki.

“No,” Loki said.

“No?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Then uncomplicate it.”

“No.”

“Leave him alone,” Tony said again.

“Why?” Steve said. “He can’t give me a reason?”

“You don’t need to know why it happened.”

“Are you defending him?”

“Yes.”

Steve and Loki both looked at Tony.

“Can I say something?” Peter blurted.

“No,” Tony said. “Wait, maybe. Yes. Yes, you can say several somethings.”

“I don’t know what Loki did, but I think he’s really nice,” Peter said. “He’s done a lot for me even though we just met.”

“Yeah, what’d you two get up to?”

“Nothing much,” Loki said. “We talked. I showed him some tricks. He showed me around the city. We did also get ice cream, as promised.”

“You did what?” Steve said with a disbelieving stare.

“We got ice cream! I couldn’t eat any, unfortunately, but—” Loki whisked the pints into being before Tony, who stifled a laugh. “See, I needed to prove that I wouldn’t do anything if I went off with Peter and no other supervision and then I remembered oh, right, I saw an ice cream parlour on the way here and heading down there with him out of the goodness of my heart will make an excellent peace offering. You never said what sort you wanted, though,” he recalled, glancing at Tony, “so we got several.”

“I will cherish them,” Tony said.

“I didn’t know you were so fond of spiders,” Thor said, smiling.

“Oh, sure I am,” Loki said. “And this one’s so charming! How could anyone not be fond of him?”

There were a few laughs of agreement; Peter blushed hard enough to match his armour.

“Invasion of New York,” Steve said. “Six years ago. That’s what Loki did.”

“Wait—” Peter looked up. “Holy shit, that was you?!”

“Hey,” Tony said.

“Crap. Holy crap.”

“Things change, Rogers,” Loki said.

“Nothing has changed,” he said. “I don’t trust you. No one should trust you.”

“I agree with Loki,” Natasha said; Steve shot her a look. “It would be hypocritical not to.”

“Hypocritical?” Loki asked.

“You’re not the only one with a complicated past. You think we were born heroes? God, no. We grew into them. You’re right: people change, and it’s wrong to take that opportunity from you.”

“I would argue that recent Loki has been very heroic,” Tony said. “Man—the stories I heard. How many lives he saved, not just on the ship but in the whole universe. Thor and Bruce can vouch for him for miles.”

“You trusted Bucky,” Natasha said.

“Among others,” Tony added.

“Bucky was brainwashed!” Steve said, neatly dodging the second part. “It’s not the same.”

“Debatable,” Tony said. “But that’s none of my business.”

Steve looked at him, then at Loki.

“If it wasn’t clear,” Tony said, climbing out of his chair to pace, “I’m willing to move past that if you do the same for Loki.”

If it wasn’t clear, this was an unacceptable request; Steve fought to keep a straight face. “Why are you defending him?”

“I owe him,” Tony said.

“That’s it?”

“And I think we get along well. And I really felt the whole revenge monologue on Titan. He’s right, by the way: he’s not who you met.”

But was that all? What about the monologue’s aftermath? What about everything? The rest had done something; Tony certainly remembered and that sort of thing left a mark. What did getting along well mean to him? Loki frowned.

“Assuming,” Steve reminded with another curt look, “he doesn’t go all glorious purpose on us again.”

Loki, already tense from thinking on yesterday’s events, felt his insides crumble like someone had pulled the floor from under him. The words left him—but not for any reason Steve would think.

“Will you?”

“No,” Loki said, his voice suddenly little more than a whisper.

“You sound unconvinced.”

Tony paused his pacing. “Maybe he doesn’t want to talk about it,” he said. “Why don’t you find something else to harass him about besides the, uh”—he coughed—“G-word?”

Who do you think you are? Loki wanted to say to him, but at the same time he appreciated it: at least Tony was trying to keep the peace instead of provoking it, even if he was remarkably graceless about it.

“Alright,” Steve said, and then he changed the topic as requested: “Revenge for what?”

“Everything,” Loki said. “Asgard. All of it. Speaking of, who did you think was behind the invasion?”

“Thanos made you do that?”

“Seemed pretty obvious,” Tony said. “I wouldn’t put it past someone like him.”

“I don’t believe you, Loki.”

He breathed in slowly. Across the table, Thor gave him a worried frown; he hadn’t known a thing—hadn’t even suspected, it seemed. But they didn’t need to know the details. No one needed to know the details.

“Source?” Tony asked Steve.

“I don’t need a source,” Steve said. “It’s Loki.”

“Oh, so it’s personal?”

“Weren’t you the one who’s scared of him?”

“‘It’s Loki’ isn’t a reason,” Tony growled; looked like the remark had struck something and he was trying not to let it show. “You can’t pick and choose who to let into your good book based on how much you like them. He deserves to be here as much as anyone.”

“You don’t believe that.”

“You don’t have an argument and you’re trying to cover it up. Yeah—anyone else?” Tony looked over the table. “Okay, let me make something abundantly clear,” he said, returning his attention to Steve. “We have a truce. I will keep bringing this up again and again because we promised Thor, I’m pretty sure we promised Loki, and even if we didn’t, I’m not kicking anyone out right now, I’m not fighting anyone, and I’m also this close to losing it. Talk to me when you’re ready for an actual debate.”

Steve just about snorted.

“I’m still standing by what I said,” Natasha said. “We’re all tired from yesterday and we’re back together whether we like it or not while everything gets sorted. This includes Loki. I don’t trust him either, but the last thing any of us need right now is another fight.”

“See?” Tony said. “That’s a good argument.”

“Okay, let me try this again,” Steve said. “Loki hurt us all, that’s making me feel very unsafe, and I just don’t want this to end badly.”

“Great. That’s a solid statement and I understand and respect all of it. But, also, Nat just went over this and I can say the same thing for half of the people in this room, so I think you’ll need to find something better.”

“You know if I wanted to hurt anyone I would have done so by now?” Loki said, leaning back in his chair; they glanced at him. “And I... don’t. Yesterday was enough violence for a lifetime and I appreciate the shelter regardless. I don’t need to ruin that. I don’t want to ruin that. I could use the peace.”

“Didn’t think you know what peace means,” Steve said.

“Sorry, did you miss the part where I have absolutely nothing to gain from attempting something? Maybe I should repeat myself.”

“I heard you.”

“Oh! So you’re ignoring it.” Loki smiled insincerely. “Thank you for the clarification.”

“Cap, please,” Tony all but groaned. “Kid’s getting antsy. Can we wrap this up?”

“What, we’re just going to leave him?” Steve snapped. “Wait for him to stab us in the back?”

“Like you stabbed me?” Tony deadpanned.

“This isn’t the same, Tony! I know you. We’ve all known each other for years.”

“You’re right; it doesn’t hurt as much when it’s a stranger.”

“What do we know about Loki?”

“Enough,” Thor said. “He is not what you think of him.”

“How do you know he’s not lying?” Steve yelled.

Loki bolted upright and yanked Steve out of his seat with him. “How dare you?” he growled.

“Guys, stop,” Peter said.

“I don’t need to justify myself to you,” Steve said above a grunt. “Thanks for proving my point.”

Loki tried to pull him down into the wall but he caught it: they nearly collapsed over the table and ended in a tight death grip. Half the room backed off. Strange didn’t react. Thor just sighed and hid his face with one hand. Tony got up.

“Guys,” Peter said again as they both slammed against the wall.

“You’re arrogant,” Loki growled.

“I’m observant,” Steve said. They were close enough in strength that it was more like a vicious arm wrestle and maybe that was a good thing: Loki would have shredded his face by now given the chance. But then someone’s weight shifted—

“Guys!”

“Let him go,” Tony shouted just as Loki pinned him again. “That’s enough! Both of you.”

“And what did I do?” Steve snapped, shoving himself out of the hold.

“Aside from aggravating him on purpose?”

Steve’s moves were obviously defensive and it was worth noting, but the glare he and Loki shared as they pulled apart was the same: what’s wrong with you? “Aggravating? There was nothing to aggravate,” he said, leering over at Tony. “Look at him! He wasn’t—”

—forced, but Loki pulled him close and linked their minds before the sentence could go any further. Too breathlessly livid to decide otherwise: Steve’s eyes briefly shone green and Loki saw his do the same in their reflection. Time slowed. They didn’t breathe. The—the—the knife ripped through his side and he screamed: he ~~never screamed~~ grit his teeth and killed the sound somehow,

hands taut around the chains. The scent of iron rose in the back of his throat; his fingers lost their grip beneath the sweat. What did he say again? What did he—

The man wrenched the blade out with a snarl.

—he breathed in, throat lungs stomach rattling with blood. It hurt to look. Hurt to stand. His mind was static; he felt his weight pull him hard as his balance went. “I’m trying,” he softly stammered. “I’m—I’m sorry. I’m sorry, I’m—”

The mirror stared back at him. Fresh bruises on his chest. Flaking blood.

It had been a while since he last saw Thanos. How thrilled they were to know he finally understood his potential; how strong he was now! But had he said—what *did* he say?—something wrong?

He

flew several metres with a shriek. Something cracked; he heard the sound echo inside him. He reached for his ribs and—no no no no no—jolted away, teary-eyed. The movement burned; he flinched again and shallowed his breathing. How did they—was it the cuffs?—it must have been: he was so exhausted that of course he could just break like that. Maybe he owed more of his durability to magic than he thought.

“I’m sorry,” he wheezed, hauling himself to his feet. “I’m sorry. It’s a habit.”

But glorious purpose! Glorious purpose, he reminded himself. Asgard shunned him for being better, stronger: he knew that now. He knew that if he left he would be no better than before. For a moment, though, he doubted it, and he knew he was wrong for thinking so; it was purely automatic. He tried to take it back. He tried to steady his air. No—no—not again—no no no—no—

Thanos would bleed, he thought as he stared at his pale and mottled face in the dusty mirror. His tangled, clumping hair that he’d forgotten. His scars: he touched the skin and watched them vanish beneath a cloak of magic. “You think you know pain?” someone had once said to him. “He would make you long for something as sweet as pain.” Well, that didn’t mean much now; really, he wasn’t sure what it meant. He couldn’t remember how to think over the exhaustion and he had better things to worry about than empty promises. But he knew this part: Thanos would bleed. His armour looked oversized laid against his gaunt frame; he turned away from the mirror and then, setting the leathers aside, he took the undersuit. How gently the fabric draped over his hands; it didn’t grate his skin the way everything else did. It felt wrong—too soft, too fine. Ah: never mind. He tugged the pants on with a long, drawn-out grunt of pain, and did the same with the shirt and forearm sleeves. The tightness ached, but it was a comforting ache; it soothed the swelling. Protected what hadn’t healed. Kept everything in place.

Thanos; hadn’t Thanos helped enable his revenge? Wouldn’t it be—

not like this not like this not like this not like this not like this not like this not like this not like this

—wouldn’t it be thankless to go after him? If

Armour—first the bottom, then the top, then the overcoat; he was careful, observing the pieces for damage as he adjusted what he could. The boots were last. He would have killed a man for a pair of warm, clean socks to wear them with, but just the ones he’d been wearing had been lost over the

many months and he couldn't find anything in storage, so he had to make do with nothing. That was fine; he'd been doing it long enough.

“Don't fail us, boy. Remember our deal.”

He healed what scrapes and blisters he could from his bare feet and then slid them into the boots with a wince. They were—

“Allies?”

He looked up. Wide eyes—he—he was so angry; the—they would pay for this. All of them; they couldn't get away with it forever. But he looked back as the sceptre's power veiled him, suddenly clear-minded beneath its grateful rush: glorious purpose. No fear. No blood. Nothing. There was nothing. Just revenge. Right? Right. He wanted this. He was angry. It was a small price; the pain didn't mean anything. He wanted this he wanted this he wanted this he wanted this he wanted this he wanted this he *snapped* back to something: there were suddenly hands and arms between them and he saw over a thin glaze of waning magic Steve shove away and they were very, very upset over what and oh, shit, that's what he did—oh, he shouldn't have, he didn't, oh, great, now everything was ruined and they would all kill him because this just proved it all but holy shit, he stumbled out of the hold and pressed himself to the wall, hyper-aware of the numbness in his body, the thrum of his heartbeat—and—the voices blurred; he couldn't breathe. He couldn't—

“I said stop already!” someone yelled.

(breathe)

“Tony, he didn't—”

(breathe breathe breathe)

“Didn't what?”

Loki shut his eyes and heaved a large measure of air.

“He just—” Steve brought a hand to his head. “He just showed me his memories? I—”

“What?”

Well, of course it would come to that, wouldn't it? Aggressive over-honesty was one solution: better that then they kill each other. But how awful and how very humiliating and poorly conceived and this couldn't have possibly gone worse and maybe at the end of it all it wouldn't even have done anything: Loki sank to the floor and started counting in his head. He could still feel his bones splintering—the hushed breaths he took for fear of puncturing a lung.

“His... memories,” Steve quietly said. No, not just memories: the magic enhanced their vividness, their bite. They weren't the real thing, but they were close. “No—no, maybe he—”

“Faked them?” Tony offered. “Oh, no. You can't fake this.”

But at least no one was dead, right? At least the rage was gone. At least it wasn't the very, very worst of it all. At least he wasn't crying in front of everyone. At least maybe he even looked kind of cool scowling on the floor with closed eyes and scuffed knuckles and shaky breaths after monumentally destroying his only chance—right?

The room still felt like a pin had dropped; everything stopped just as soon as it started. Tony unbunched his shirt and fixed his hair and then sat on the table to think and then got right back up. He paced tiredly. The usual. “What’d he show you?”

“Thanos. Th-the things he did, he—God, I’m such a jackass.”

Tony whistled: they could have guessed as much. Any other day, he might have also mocked the irony and thrown out a snarky censure regarding the language, but it was such a sore moment that he couldn’t. No humour. Nothing. Dead silence. He crouched beside Loki. “Hey,” he softly said, “you alright?”

Loki muttered something in response and then buried his face in his knees.

“I didn’t—”

“Hey.” Tony stood. “Shut up. You did this.”

“I told you”—Steve’s voice cracked—“he’s volatile!”

“So you pissed him off and now he’s freaking out, yeah. Good job! At least he got you too, huh?”

“Tony—”

Loki vanished.

The green tint to the air took a second to disappear; Tony watched it wither into nothing, a bit startled but overall unsurprised. “And now he’s gone,” he said, trudging back around to his chair to grab his things. “Great. So much for that.” He paused to shoot Strange a vile look. “You knew this would happen. Fuck you. Pete, I’m sorry you had to see that.” Then he turned and left.

No one spoke. There was simply nothing to say.

Intermission #3: Guilt

Chapter Summary

Tony sees the disheartening consequences of Loki's experience the previous night.

Chapter Notes

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

Tony's morning was nothing special. He woke up, promptly sank into sleep once more, woke up again for real as the curtains were mechanically drawn apart, and then muttered something to himself about how wiring FRIDAY into his room was a mistake and how he would definitely remove her the next time even though he'd said that countless other days and never followed through. Then he pulled the covers tighter and shoved his face into the pillow, where he stayed for the next forty minutes before finally dragging himself off the bed to see if someone had brewed some coffee in the common space so he wouldn't need to, which, to his great luck, was indeed the case. He grabbed the largest mug he could find, which was hot pink and said "Drama Queen" in a curly ostentatious font because of course it did and he wouldn't be stopped, and dumped as much liquid into it as he could fit, which was not enough but he'd manage somehow. Then he sat at the main table and tried to prepare himself for the day.

Holograms were already up with data and everyone who wasn't eating was trying to start working through them. This early on, it looked bleak; there was a stable estimate of how much was owed and not much else, although it could have been worse. New York was scuffed at best and the alarm had helped spare a few other places. Casualties Earthside were few. But Asgard wasn't so lucky, and if anything looked bleak it was that.

The strangers who'd spent the night after the battle were obviously gone for good by now, which he supposed made sense: they had no business with anyone here and no reason to stick around after resting up, not to mention they were grieving someone and needed to clear their heads. Too bad about the raccoon—the stage presence of that guy had been absolutely magnificent—but there wasn't much to be done about it. Others were back to whatever matters they'd been tending prior to this. After the initial crowd, it felt empty all of a sudden. The regulars were there, though, minus Steve, who was probably still coming to terms with himself in his room.

"Has anyone heard from Loki?" Tony asked above the silence.

The silence continued awhile.

"No," Bruce said. "Nothing. Is he in his room?"

Looked like no one else had the guts to check. Tony crept back down to the dorms with his coffee, tried to remember which room they'd lent, and, remembering it was the farthest on the left with a small chip in the door, he knocked. He waited for an answer. He knocked again. "Loki?"

Nope. No answer.

Tony tested the handle and entered. The room was nearly untouched; the only signs of life were the tangled bedspreads and a forgotten comb by the bathroom sink, which was visible past its open door. No note or explanation or anything like it. Nothing. Not that he was surprised. Still, perhaps it was lucky of his past if perhaps a little unlucky for his conscience that he'd wired most of the building at some point in time and in some ways or others he could keep tabs on the place even where there weren't outright cameras. So he sat on the bed with his coffee in hand and asked, "FRIDAY? Is Loki in the building?"

"No," FRIDAY answered after a moment's pause. "He left about three hours ago."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that."

Tony sighed and left the room. They expected as much: no one looked up when he returned alone and sat back down with his dwindling coffee.

Of course they couldn't stop to wonder what was going on following yesterday's tussle, only suspect that, like everyone else who had left, Loki wanted nothing at all to do with the situation and then continue without him because the repairs, rescues, and more wouldn't wait. Was it odd that he didn't care at least about helping with Asgard? That would depend on who you asked, although Tony had a feeling it might not have been quite as it seemed. Would they appreciate the extra hands? Yes, but it wasn't worth it. Was this exactly the outcome Thor had expected? Well... yes, but for the most part he was too busy struggling to process the calamity's weight now that the numbers were facing him to concentrate on that. Tony did feel awful, though, especially considering he had been the one to offer a truce, and while he did also have a very fuzzy memory of a typically blasé remark Strange had dropped before vanishing without a trace about timelines and how Loki was no longer his concern (whatever that meant) and probably not any of theirs, either, he was still worried: unloading those kinds of memories with no preparation couldn't have been pleasant. So he finished his coffee, packed everything up, and went to his workshop to figure it all out.

Chapter End Notes

Oh Dear Tony Actually Gives A Shit

Reconciliation

Chapter Summary

Tony reunites with Loki and tries to convince him to come back.

Chapter Notes

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

Many miles and hours from the Avengers compound, the farmer's market was teeming. The square was blocked off and packed. It was a warm and windy late afternoon and merchants and customers alike went back and forth between kiosks with bags and boxes in tow. There was lots of talk and street music and food and drink but also handmade garments, tools, and original artworks; all the usual things in these kinds of places. A swarm surrounded a table with giant pots of soups and stews, which left the table beside it nearly empty: gourmet if much too overpriced preserved meats. Not a single person about, in fact, save the person selling them. And so Loki strolled right up, grabbed two jars of pickled fish, and realized he still had no proper money and slid a stolen goldpiece across the surface with a smile.

The woman stared back at him.

He... slid another goldpiece over.

"Where did you get that?" she asked, although it sounded more like what in the shitting fuck?

"Inheritance," Loki half-lied.

It wasn't every day this happened and for the most part she didn't mind, just took the coins and pinched them from a few ends and turned them to and fro as if she had been paid in solid gold before, although based on her reaction she may not have been. Then, with a curious shrug and glance at the items (ah, they weren't that many; what was one odd payment?) she dropped the coins into her pocket and returned to her novel. Uh. Anyway.

"Thank you," Loki said. Then he whisked the jars into storage and continued down the street.

He didn't like many places on Earth, but he liked this one. Maybe it was because it was familiar; the food was the same and the old traditions were the same and the language was so close that he could hold a fluent conversation without the Allspeak. So in times like these he gravitated to these places because they were his home away from home, and, because for once he didn't have any secret plans or missions or some other kind of business that had brought him here again, he could stop to take it in. Really, his only issue with this one was it was warmer than usual and the cheap glamour covering his many layers of leather left him overheating. But he sure looked fashionable! Clean-cut black slacks and a cozy green turtleneck sweater rolled to the elbows—nothing very high-effort, just enough to seem a little more ordinary; he fit right in. He was only a person today and today that suited him. No one ought to bother him as he inspected somehand-carved hunting knives.

“Loki?”

Well, one person ought to bother him because that was often how these things went. But he was largely out of damns to give and kept his eye on the blade for a while, thinking how wonderful it was that even with such inferior materials the craftsmanship itself was comparable to that of some of his greatest weapons. That said, he may have qualified for some kind of hoarding problem at this point and even if he could trust the strength he shouldn't. He put the knife back.

Tony placed himself conspicuously in his field of view.

“I'm not going to ask how you found me,” Loki said as he looked at some much more useful straps and sheaths.

“Facial recognition and the wondrous matrix of global surveillance networks,” Tony said.

“Comforting. Did you need something?”

“I wanted to apologize for last night.”

“So you tracked me halfway across the world?”

Tony said nothing.

“What happened last night wasn't your doing,” Loki said as he held up a very lovely hand-stitched case.

“I could've stopped it before it got that bad.”

“Nothing short of beating us both bloody would have stopped it. You know that. As much as I wish that were the case, we are not children for you to herd and if we want to fight then... I suppose we will.”

Tony looked like he was trying not to look alarmed.

“I didn't say it was a good thing,” Loki said, lowering the case. “I mean neither of us are clearly very easy to control and it's not your sole responsibility to endanger yourself trying to stop it. You did what you could. On that note, I appreciate the lack of lethal force. I know it would have been a good excuse.”

“I think I grabbed you kind of hard,” Tony confessed.

“If you did, I don't remember.”

“Still sorry. Did you want that?”

Loki took another look at the case. Then he shook his head. “I don't need it,” he said, and then he put it back and kept walking down the market. “Walk with me,” he said, not looking to see if Tony was following.

Tony jogged up to his side. “I just wanted to say—”

“Sorry? You said sorry.”

“It wasn’t supposed to be like that. We were going over some Avengers drama and it was already getting heated when you showed up. I didn’t want any of that to happen.”

“If you think apologizing several million times will make me any less upset with you, then you can stop because I never was to begin with. The only person I’m upset with is myself.”

Tony untensed enough to be obvious. “Is that why you’re in Norway?”

Loki glanced up from someone’s display of scarves. “What? You’ve never impulsively gone to another country to clear your head?”

“Too many times,” Tony said. “Guess I can’t blame you.”

It would occur to Loki in this moment that he was getting much too personal with everyone and they had no right knowing his life story. Many more things came to mind; really, he mostly wanted to know whether it was fear or just some weird kind of blossoming friendship that had dragged Tony back to him. The first seemed likely. The second...

“Why don’t we sit somewhere?” Loki said as he ducked through a gap in the crowd.

Tony already looked much more comfortable among the busy foot traffic and probably on some level thought it unwise to rip himself from his natural habitat in favour of being alone with someone he did not trust, but he followed without hesitation, albeit not very brave about it after the first few near-collisions; the side suited him more. No matter. Loki navigated just fine. He was still browsing anyway, although he didn’t think he would get anything else. He didn’t think the news would be good, either, but he would listen. He took the first bench outside the line of kiosks, a quiet wooden one nestled between two weedy buildings right by the city and yet somehow not in it. Tony found him and sat in the other end.

As usual, the silence dragged on for far too long.

“Fancy a pickled herring?” Loki asked.

“A what?”

Loki summoned a jar and passed it over.

Tony inspected the jar. “Huh.”

“Scandinavian staple,” Loki said. “And Asgardian! Isn’t that funny? Anyway, they’re good. I missed them.”

“Uh... I’ll try one later.” Tony passed the jar back. “Nice place you picked,” he said as some birds scuttled past on foot. “You had the whole world to choose from.”

“I know you didn’t come all this way to make small talk,” Loki said. “Why are you here?”

“I *did* want to see how you were doing.”

“And?”

“How are you doing?”

“Well. But that might change.”

“For the better?”

Loki smiled somehow. “We can hope.”

Tony tried to smile back. “So if you must know,” he said, “Thor was kind of worried about you too and I figured I owed it to him to find out after all that hoopla and I didn’t really have any other way to get in touch besides in person. Here I am.”

“You flew?”

“I wish. He roped me into hitching a ride with him so I could get here faster. Anyway, listen—I don’t know what your plans are from here and if you want nothing to do with me and everyone else then fair enough, but we owe you shelter as long as you need it and you’re welcome to drop back in if you feel like it’ll help.” Tony paused. “Yeah, welcome is not the right word for that. But I know you said you were still recovering and you don’t want to look for a place now and I think you should think about it. Honestly, it wasn’t you; we’re all kind of lit fuses at the moment and we just need to adjust to basic interaction with each other again. It shouldn’t be as hostile once we can lay some kind of ground rules.”

“I can handle myself,” Loki said.

“I never said you couldn’t,” Tony said. “I just want to make it easier on you.”

Loki, suddenly and uncomfortably aware that the breeze had stopped, thought about putting his hair up before it and his neck became a lump of sweat.

“Well,” Tony said, “Pete was worried too. He seems pretty fond of you.”

“And the rest?”

“Hard to tell. Neutral at best, but I know Bruce and Natasha are still on your side. Steve locked himself in his room to... think about his actions or something. I don’t think he’s in the mood to fight you any more on this.”

Loki nodded. “You know,” he said, “I do appreciate the concern, but this is unnecessary.”

“I still owe you. Actually, everyone owes you, but since I’m clearly the only person willing to repay the favour, I owe you.”

“You’ve done more than enough. That truce, for one—”

“Yes the truce!” Tony exclaimed with a groan. “Yes, the truce that we fucked up on day one? Do you know that just means I owe you even more as an apology?”

“You don’t,” Loki said. “You’re failing to see that even this is still far more than I was expecting. I wasn’t expecting the truce to last even an hour. I was expecting... I don’t know. I woke up in that bed and immediately thought I was going to die but I’m still here. Fights and all. Considering the circumstances, I’m quite happy.”

“But—”

“You don’t owe me anything further,” Loki said. “You offered me mercy even though I hardly deserve it from you. You were the one to offer a truce in the first place and, even if it’s not being honoured as well as it should be, I value that more than you know. Most people would have just killed me.”

“Yes, but—”

“But you’ve been kind to me so far. You seem to think there’s more to it. There isn’t. To tell the truth, I have more important matters on my mind at the moment than making an enemy of you.”

Tony said nothing.

“What does my brother know?” Loki softly asked.

“I’m not sure,” Tony said. “He’s speculating. I don’t know how much is accurate or just him trying to make sense of things. I think he wants to ask, but... he doesn’t know if he should. Maybe he has bigger things on his mind too.”

“Please don’t tell him anything,” Loki said.

“Definitely not, but how come?”

“I don’t want to saddle him with this. You’re far enough that you can’t feel it, but he will. And I suspect he’ll never forgive himself.”

Tony looked like he wanted to ask something else but maybe thought it unwise. “It always sounded like you didn’t like each other,” he said. “Has that changed?”

“I don’t know,” Loki said.

Tony nodded as if he understood exactly what that answer meant; Loki assumed he did. “Well, it’s not my story to tell anyway,” he said. “But maybe he’d know something about it. What do you think?”

“I agree,” Loki said, “and that’s why I don’t want him to know. Will that be all?”

“Yep. Sorry to prod.”

Tony wouldn’t blame himself for what had happened; he was a stranger for the most part and he had no hand in the events leading up to it and Loki imagined they could talk it over right here and now with no real consequence. And to be honest, it was tempting. Tony had already seen him catatonic and screaming with terror and so made a pretty good fit to hear the rest of the tale—not like details would make the situation any less humiliating at this point. Not like it would be used for anything, either: what, would Tony figure out what worked on him? How to make him talk? Tony could figure that out without the details. Sure, they could set aside a day or two and write a paper on the topic starting right from A (adoption) all the way to Z (zealot with a god complex probably fit, but perhaps that was too light a term) and still have another volume left. But what would that accomplish?

It would accomplish... nothing, really. There was no use taking the risk.

Loki formed an elastic around his fingers and bunched his hair up off of his neck. “So why else are you here?” he muttered, testing the knot’s strength.

“Pete misses you.”

“Ah, so you’re retrieving me. That explains it.”

“That’s not—no. Yes, but no. I mean, I did want to check in on you, too.”

“And I still appreciate that. I do. Unfortunately, I’m not very comfortable surrounding myself with people who neither trust nor like me and I suspect someone will turn up dead before the end of the week if I try. I assume you’re fine with that.”

“I’d like to avoid it.”

“Murder or vacation in Norway. Pick one.”

Tony shared the flattest stare with him.

“Maybe just a little bit of murder?” Loki said with a hopeful smile.

“No,” Tony said.

“Ah. Sad.”

“Kind of unoriginal, isn’t it? Why don’t you turn them into a frog or something instead?”

Loki thought about it. “That would be more entertaining,” he wisely agreed.

“Pete would lose his shit,” Tony said. “I bet he’d try to adopt them as a pet.”

“Of course.”

“But you’ll never know until you come back.”

“Such is life. Send him my apologies.”

“Or, bear with me, you go talk to him yourself because he has been texting me! Literally all morning! Asking about you and I am going insane, I cannot take it anymore, please. Forget your weird fish market and get over there already.”

“Hey.”

“Weird fish market?”

“It’s not all fish.”

“But it’s weird.”

“You’re weird.”

“Yeah. So is that a no on leaving the weird fish market?”

“If you say weird fish market one more time, I’m going to hit you.”

“Okay, change of topic. Remember what Nat said?”

“No.”

“The gist was that aside from being a dick move it would be hypocritical of us to kick you out right now just because of our history because most of the group has some dark shit in their past but that’s not the point. She, I believe, wants to help set your record straight so you don’t have to worry if you plan on lingering around Earth, and I think it would make sense to pop back in for a minute even if you’re not staying just to see how that’s going to work. I know you can figure the rest out on your own, but you don’t know the kind of people she does and she’s not offering lightly. I’d touch base with her if I were you.”

Loki considered this. “Didn’t I throw you out of a window once?”

Tony looked calm about it, but his sour stare and the way his arms tensed like he was about to reach for the casing on his shirt that wasn’t there were difficult to hide. He looked like he was wondering why they were pretending they could make amends. He looked like he was wondering why he even came. “Doesn’t ring a bell,” he said with a stiff smile.

“I suppose I’m misremembering,” Loki said. “I’m sorry to tell you that I’m not in good shape to send myself across the ocean again, so if you want me anywhere today then you’ll have to find another way.”

“Well, that’s nice because I kind of stranded myself here and Thor disappeared again.”

“Ah! So you’re stuck with me. Do you need anything? Food, drink, shelter? I can find you something less offensive.”

Tony sighed, but at least the pretending was working again.

“I don’t think I asked,” Loki said, “how you ended up here.”

“Oh, yeah. So long story short that axe Thor picked up is magic or something and he can use it to access the”—Tony took a deep breath of trepidation and rusty pronunciation—“Bifröst and that lets him do all kinds of stuff including zip around pretty much wherever he wants and turns out he can take passengers with him! He was *very* excited about this. It’s not too bad. Kind of disorienting, though.”

Loki nodded. Then he gasped and said, “Oh! That’s the one. I’ve heard of it.” He laughed. “I’m not surprised he got his hands on another legendary weapon. He seems to be collecting them.”

“Yeah, legendary, huh? Wild.”

One could argue in that next moment that they should not and may not and did not bond over verbally abusing paparazzi, but as a gaggle of excited women stopped to ask for photos with phones and all out Loki tried his very damnedest. Not that he wouldn’t have loved to sneak into a pic or two, but this was not the time and he suspected he’d best lay low while Natasha was working. He did not hold back. It was impressive. And frightening.

“Dude,” Tony said as he insulted their mothers.

They did not leave, so their phones stopped working forever all at once with no explanation.

“Bye,” Loki said.

They chuckled nervously and then scurried off with their dead weight phones.

“There must have been a nicer way to do that,” said Tony, either alarmed or grateful or both.

“Was there?”

Tony thought about it. “No,” he confessed.

“You’re welcome,” Loki said.

“Do you speak Norwegian?”

“I speak everything. Universal translation spell; they hear me in their best language and you hear me in yours and I hear in mine. It’s too complicated to explain right now. Don’t worry about it.”

Tony would definitely worry about it. He looked fascinated. But yes; not a topic for right now.

“You’d better go get him, then,” Loki said.

“He doesn’t have a phone.”

“Neither do I.”

“Can you, like... write him?”

Loki pulled out some snacks from earlier. “I ran out of paper.”

“I can get you paper.”

“And I lost my pen.”

“Paper and a new pen.”

“Actually, I forgot how to cast that one.”

Tony realized this was a setup.

“Sorry,” Loki said.

In part it was because he was nervous about continuing to waste magic, maybe a bit ironically so after frying some circuit boards for no reason other than it was funny, because even mild magical exhaustion was harsh and he needed to heal to a proper baseline before he could sustain himself. But he also really just wanted to see how entertaining trying to contact someone who was not contactable on the best of days would be. Tony had to call one person who then called another person and then he had to hang up and then he was hung up on and then he had to call more people and then he had to keep hanging up and then finally someone managed to stay on the line for longer than a minute only for the signal to cut out. It felt like a bad comedy.

“No answer?”

“No, I got him,” Tony said away from the mic. “He just won’t stop talking.”

Maybe hell wasn’t a place but a state of mind.

“Tell him to shut up already and get over here before I lose interest,” Loki said.

“What? No.”

“Oh, my mistake. Tell him I said to shut up already and get over here before I lose interest.”

Tony looked like he wanted to die. “Your brother is haranguing me. Please get over here faster.”

“So close,” Loki said with a mournful sigh.

Tony hung up and buried his face in his hands. “At least he’s coming,” he said.

“Great! In the meantime...” Loki summoned the jar of pickled herrings once more. “You really need to try one.”

Chapter End Notes

He REFUSES to get normal currency. You CANNOT make him.

Something Completely Different / Nothing's Burning

Chapter Summary

Rebuilding what remains of Asgard will be a long and difficult task. Tony swears there's a place for everyone here, but Loki increasingly wonders if he ever should have returned at all.

Chapter Notes

LISTEN I'M SO SORRY THIS TOOK SO LONG BUT HHHHHHHH THIS MONTH HAS BEEN A FUCKING MESS Y'ALL! Big Fucking Mess!!!! since I'm on the internet and I could be a 700-year-old mage for all you know I can safely say that:

[redacted: a giant explanation about why this chapter took so long because wow that's a whole lot of uncomfortably specific mental health stuff lmao except for the part where I gave myself an ear infection scratching a hell itch with a plastic stir stick and then had a flight days later and the antibiotics had just barely cleared it up enough by then that I didn't die, thankfully]

sorry for rambling and here's [one big chapter] that definitely wasn't worth a month's wait

p.s I am most definitely not a 700-year-old mage

(wait, yes, I am —the author, two years later)

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

Tony never did try the pickled herring: he insisted, after several minutes of Loki begging between intermittent fits of laughter, that he would try one later, and Loki, knowing that it would never come to a later, woefully dropped the topic. In fact, the entire aftermath and their entire trip back proved rather disappointing. Demanding Thor show up was only amusing for about a minute and hitching a ride was largely a pain in the ass, although it *did* remain a smug victory; ignoring the familiar disorientation from an unstructured use of the Bifröst and the bizarre magical aftertaste this particular one left, which probably hadn't been worth it nor justified any future headaches the Avengers threw his way, Loki was definitely still laughing at least a little.

But there was more: the main doors were locked and refused every single passcode. Thor was already elsewhere and could not mediate the resulting anguish.

“Yeah, so that’s been a thing,” said Tony, looking like he wanted to evaporate where he stood, while he attempted yet another override.

“Hey, it happens to everyone,” Loki assured. “Nothing to be embarrassed about.”

Tony was halfway through hacking the keypad when it hit him. “I hate you so much.”

“And I certainly don’t see you hiding a smile,” Loki said. “Do you want me to try?”

“I appreciate the offer, but no.”

“Shame. How long has it been?”

“Dunno. How long can you keep running your mouth?”

“Oh, I can go on forever.”

The doors buzzed.

“Nicely done,” Loki said as Tony disposed of the evidence.

Tony sighed and walked in.

Now of course this wasn’t the end and of course it only got worse: seated in the foyer, not one bit surprised, was Pepper Potts, who had probably heard he’d be around here around this time and intercepted accordingly. She looked like she had very much had it with all of their nonsense.

“Yeah, I got nothing,” Tony said as the doors closed behind them.

Loki glanced at him.

“You said you would call me back,” Pepper said.

“I did! And I’m very, very sorry and I got completely sidetracked and I’ve been so busy and I didn’t have time to call and it wasn’t on purpose and I’m very glad to finally see you in person. I’m not dead! I think.”

“Tony, it was one call.”

“It was! And I have no excuse. I’m sorry.”

“Should I leave?” Loki asked, raising a hand.

“Please,” Tony said.

“No, wait a minute,” Pepper said with that exact tone Loki was hoping she wouldn’t use. Ah: he wasn’t wearing plates and horns and he didn’t look nearly as sickly and his hair was still comfortably tied high on his head, but that was it. He wasn’t an easy one to forget.

He smiled amiably and braced himself for the storm.

“Is that—” She broke off, blinked, and hardened her stare. “Is that who I think it is?”

“No,” he promised. “You have never seen or heard of me in your life.”

“Yes, this is Loki,” Tony said. “Very fashionable! I know.”

“Tony!”

“Alright, I have a perfectly good explanation if you’ll let me—”

“A good explanation. For bringing the man that tried to kill you?”

“Yes! Yes, a very good explanation—look, he’s not trying to kill me right now, isn’t that something?—and basically everyone I know has tried to kill me anyway and I’ll explain everything to you if you calm down, thanks and I love you and I’m glad you’re concerned but I’ve had a long morning”—Tony breathed in—“and I have a *good reason*, okay? I know what I’m doing.”

Pepper was not convinced.

“Alright, definitely leaving now,” Loki announced, continuing to the stairs. “Good luck!” He waved and then disappeared up the steps with a smile.

Tony looked back at him, betrayed.

“So... you were busy,” Pepper said once the room was empty.

Tony sighed and went to join her. “Okay, it’s kind of a long story—actually, it’s pretty short, but uh—I don’t know. It’s complicated. Sort of. Not really.”

“Alright, what’s the short answer?”

“Loki killed Thanos and we owe him.”

“And now you’re friends.”

“Yeah.”

All things considered, Pepper was remarkably unfazed. But that was typical. “Is there a long answer?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Tony said. “Turns out they knew each other and a lot of that was revenge. Not just for Asgard, I mean. I don’t know the whole story, but it looks like it was mostly Thanos behind the invasion. There was... torture involved. How long, I have no idea. Physical, psychological, all that. Loki’s definitely not completely innocent and he’s not claiming to be as far as I can tell, but now that I know that—and now that he’s done all of this for us—I just can’t look at him the same way. He’s not who I thought he was.”

“He looks... healthy,” Pepper said.

“He looks healthy!” Tony agreed. “He actually looks healthy now. I know. He’s got so much more energy and he’s smiling and he’s polite and looking back you can just tell there was something awful happening behind the scenes.”

That did cover most of it—certainly the part where they were trying to get along. But Tony wasn’t very subtle and maybe it was just the way he described all of this that would account for how he got so swept up after the initial disasters died down: Pepper was already waiting.

“I’m worried about him,” Tony confessed. “I think he might be dealing with some kind of post-traumatic stress. It doesn’t look good.”

“Oh.”

“Oh?”

“That makes sense,” Pepper said. “I definitely still don’t trust him, but I believe it. And you know what you’re doing.”

“I mean, I haven’t dropped my defences,” Tony said. “I’m still being cautious. If something goes wrong, I’ll deal with it. But he’s alright.”

(This would assume he wasn’t currently stewing upstairs counting the ways he loathed thee, but aside from that, yes. There were bigger problems right now anyway.)

There wasn’t much else to say and so Tony got up to follow, only for Pepper to grab him by the arm, swing him around, and steal a very hard and well-deserved kiss. “You owe me a fancy dinner,” she said as they pulled away.

“I do,” Tony said with an utterly delighted grin, and then they both continued upstairs.

It was mostly empty: the morning’s data was still projected over the table and Natasha and Bruce were trying to decipher something at the other end, but that was it. Loki was long out of the glamour and impatiently retying his hair. Steve, not over the foreign memories taped to his mind nor the guilt that was probably chewing a hole through him, was once again nowhere to be seen; this came as no surprise to any of them.

“It’s quiet today,” Loki said as Tony sat beside him.

“Hard at work,” Tony said.

“What do you want from me?”

“What?”

“I know you didn’t drag me here just because Peter was worried about me.” Loki tapped one of the images. “Am I useful?”

“It’s not like that,” Tony said. “Would I like you to help? Yes. But I dragged you here because I know you’re still recovering and you don’t have a place to stay. It felt dickish not to.”

Loki stared into a shot of the worst street. Beside it, calculated expenses. Not bad.

“It’s really, really not like that,” Tony said, resting his arms on the table. “You’re not under any obligation to stay here.”

“I believe you,” Loki said.

Pepper sat across from them. Looked like she’d already been over the information a few times: whether she wanted to or not, she was stuck sharing at least the boring part of the responsibility by association.

“But you would like me to help,” Loki noted, skeptical.

Tony made to answer but then stopped. “I... think we should go talk somewhere. There’s some stuff I couldn’t cover earlier.”

Not ominous at all. Loki kept staring at the holograms.

“So you saved the world?” Pepper said, trying hard to make sensible small talk.

“Apparently,” Loki said.

“Should I thank you?”

It caught him off guard a little; he looked at her. “You could, but you don’t need to.”

“Thanks for saving the world.”

Somehow, he smiled. “You’re welcome.”

At this point it looked like most of the efforts were still around settling the dust and sorting collateral, although there were also steady plans to assist everyone who had been stranded on Earth amid the chaos. Lots of information and nothing to be gained from it. But maybe someone else knew.

Tony unrested his arms from the table. “Yeah, so... I did actually have something to discuss with Loki,” he said, “if I may vanish once again just as soon as I got here.”

“You still owe me a fancy dinner,” Pepper said, undisturbed.

“I do! But I really need to get this out of the way. I said I would make it up to you and I will.”

“Tonight.”

“Nope. Short notice, can’t do. Tonight...” Tony stopped, his face locked in deep, jokingly intense deliberation; Loki stifled a laugh. “We are going to watch a terrible movie and fall asleep on the couch.”

“Deal,” Pepper said, although she mostly just sounded too tired to argue. “No rescheduling.”

Whatever they had missed that still needed discussing, Loki wasn’t very keen on it, but he was even less keen on staying and so he took the excuse to leave and followed Tony out of the room with no question. Pepper went right back to work.

“Where to?” Loki asked, matching Tony’s pace.

“Given that I also need to get something,” Tony said, “probably my room.”

“Oh?”

“No.”

“No?”

“I know that look and I know exactly what you’re thinking and I am begging you. Please! Do not make this weird. I swear I will turn around and fly you back to Norway myself if you don’t get your dick out of your brain for two seconds. It’s a nice private place for a nice private conversation about normal nice things and nothing else, thank you.”

Maybe it was just the way Tony said it that made Loki burst into the absolutely smuggest laughter imaginable all while keeping up beside him. “I’ll keep that in mind,” he said, and then he resorted

to silence for the remainder of the trip. Tony didn't laugh back, but at least he wasn't angry; better this than the alternative, wasn't it? If they were too busy exchanging stupid jokes then they had no time to kill each other.

The dorms, which looked like they had been converted from extra space long ago, were identical in most respects: shiny open-concepts with lots of windows and a kitchen, bathroom, and a living room alongside the bedroom. But Tony's looked like he'd managed to get the biggest one—more like two or three of the other rooms put together. And he put it to great use. There were boxes and mountains of mechanical bits and bobs in random spots around the living area and the table was flooded with papers and there was even a spare shirt on one of the couches around it. Classic rock was playing quietly in the background. If Loki had ever learned the band, he couldn't remember the name.

"I'm not cleaning the mess and I'm not turning the music off," Tony said as he swung into the kitchen to grab a cup.

"Did you hear any objection?"

"Exactly."

Loki tucked himself into the couch without a shirt on it, backwards with his arms on the backrest, and indeed judged Tony for the ridiculous if strangely welcoming state of the place. "It doesn't seem very safe to keep isolating yourself with me," he said, which sounded a little harsh now that it was out of his mouth and he felt a little bad about it but he couldn't help but wonder.

"Yeah, but I booby-trapped this room," Tony said. "It's fine."

Loki looked around and decided that was a bluff.

"Well, that was a fun thing to walk in on, huh? Sorry you had to witness that."

"I expected worse."

"Yeah, because you ran off before it got worse. She's a good person, though. As long as you don't get on her bad side you'll get along."

Tony looked comfortable under the warm glow of an electric guitar, but, like most of their interactions so far, it was clear he was a whisper away from shooting and clinging for dear sanity to a hello-old-friend sort of dynamic that may not hold; how far did that go and how resilient was it? Was the ice walkable? No clue. The door was still agape and he was quick on his feet as he set the cup on the counter and searched for some other things. "Why speak with me alone?" Loki asked, trying to draw an estimate.

"Less drama," Tony said.

"I'm drama."

"You're sass, not drama. I mean drama like whatever the fuck that three-hour debate was last night that made me want to set myself on fire."

"Three hours?"

"Almost four. It was awful."

“My condolences.”

Tony paused looking for the other things to go fill the cup. The sink was loud. It drowned him out as he said, “Appreciated.” He turned the sink off. “Somehow I feel like you’re the most sensible person here right now, which is impressive. You and maybe Pete.”

“After starting a fistfight on my first day?”

“You may be surprised to hear that’s pretty tame compared to how our last argument ended.”

“So what you’re saying is I fit in perfectly.”

“Not exactly, but yeah.”

More and more that was the impression Loki got, that beyond the circumstances and scale he was nothing unusual around here. He hoped it would work for him. He didn’t think it would; the circumstances were bad and his part in them wasn’t small. But if Tony was on his side and Peter was on his side and Thor and Bruce and Natasha were on his side then maybe he stood a chance. As if to agree, Tony drank his water in one solemn take.

“So it’s about me,” Loki said.

“Sort of.”

Loki thought about the market he had just left and wondered how well he could fake his death, build a new identity from scratch, and make jam for a living.

“I think you might be expected to help out if you’re staying,” Tony said. “I don’t. I’m just holding up my end of the bargain, which is that you’re allowed to live here as long as you need to. And it sounds like you need to. Off the record, I think it’s a good idea anyway until we get everything sorted. Lay low, that sort of thing. People have done that here before.”

“You can’t keep me inside,” Loki said.

“No!” Tony corrected in a panic. “Of course not. I’m just suggesting it. If you want to take your chances then by all means go ahead. Just... be aware you probably count as a high-risk international fugitive in a lot of books, which is not an easy place to be.”

“But that’s not part of the bargain.”

“What is the bargain?”

“A truce with the Avengers, wasn’t it?”

“Thor wants us to keep you safe beyond just a truce.”

“Oh. That’s different, then. So you’re not doing this because you want to, correct?”

“If I didn’t want to I would have told him to go shove it up his ass and then gone home. No, it is part of it, though. Contractually but also morally. It feels fair to return the favour.”

“Pardon the skepticism. Whatever the reason, I appreciate it.”

“Anyway, as I was saying”—Tony left the cup and swooped around the counter to go scavenge the many piles of junk—“the problem is that most of us are just generally kind of shitty to each other to begin with and we’ve been in dire need of some rules around the place for ages and I think I might actually call for, like, actual hard rules instead of just a nice suggestion before everything gets out of hand.” He threw some things aside and paused. “The hell,” he said, holding up a random artifact that was not what he was looking for. “Anyway—”

“What sort of rules?”

“Be nice! Don’t try to kill each other over something stupid! If you have a problem, discuss it like a functioning adult!”

“You may be expecting too much.”

“I will write it down and tape it to the front door.”

“Yes?”

Tony left the pile of junk and went back to the kitchen in a huff.

“I like that idea,” Loki said, and then he summoned a pen and paper on the counter beside Tony, who gave him a dumbfounded look but nonetheless took them both without missing a beat.

“The things I put up with,” Tony muttered as he wrote. He turned the paper for Loki to read. It said RULES in giant letters and under that 1. BE NICE. It said nothing else.

“Have you considered a career in lawmaking?” Loki joked.

“I will literally tape this on the door.”

“What if it rains?”

Tony did not have a smart response to that.

“You realize you can’t make someone behave,” Loki said. “Either they will or they won’t. If it hasn’t worked so far then I think seeking order here might be a lost cause.”

“News to me,” Tony said. He refilled the cup, drank it down, and then chucked it in the sink.

“Are you not going to join me?”

Tony said nothing. Well, they were alone in here; it wasn’t exactly the wide-open outdoor market full of witnesses and possible allies. Better not risk the proximity. He folded the paper and tucked it in his pocket. The pen...

“Throw it,” Loki said, holding up a hand.

“From here? No way. I don’t want to stab you in the eye.”

“Throw it.”

What an unlikely test of faith. Maybe it was a good one. Tony checked his aim and threw the pen in a wide arc and Loki snatched it right out of the air between two fingers.

“Oh!” Tony exclaimed. “Lucky throw?”

“Ha. Don’t flatter yourself. I’ve had the last thousand years to practice.”

“Huh. That’s... a long time. What’s the farthest you’ve ever caught something?”

“I don’t know. I never measured.”

“Hundred feet?”

Loki thought about it.

“Hundred yards. Two hundred?”

“I think it may be in the thousands.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Not at all.”

“What about your throw?”

“I can get a hundred metres with a knife, easily.”

“How?”

“Practice! Really.”

Tony looked like he was about to say something—bullshit, maybe. He said nothing, though.

“Practice,” Loki said, “and good muscle. That’s all.”

“Cool,” Tony said.

A thin smile graced Loki. “Who’s on my side?”

“Broadly speaking? Thor for sure. Pete for sure. Natasha, Bruce, and I are your next best allies and I’m almost positive Bucky—uh, tall, dark, handsome, I think you’ve seen him? Hangs out with Steve a lot?—will back you up with his life. I can’t get a read on the rest yet.”

“And the wizard?”

“That guy? No clue. He said he doesn’t care about you anymore after last night and then disappeared. I don’t know if that’s good or bad, but he shouldn’t be bothering us.”

Loki frowned. “He doesn’t care anymore? Does he know something I don’t?”

“I think he knows something all of us don’t,” Tony said. “But he won’t say. He just doesn’t consider you a threat on his scale anymore. Something changed.”

“For the better?”

“I hope so.”

“What did he do with the Infinity Stones?”

“Last I heard he was permanently sealing them away.”

“Is that enough?”

“I don’t know. It’s not my area. But he sounded pretty confident.”

“He always does.”

“True.”

The song was stirring, whatever it was. It made this feel more familiar than it should. Tony, seeming to remember all of a sudden what he was doing, went to keep searching the room. Loki got up and joined him.

“What do you think you’re going to do after everything?” Tony asked as he pulled out what might have been a charger.

“I don’t know yet. Stay alive. I’ll see from there.”

Tony pulled out some other things. “I think we should have a formal meeting,” he said. “Real serious one where I go off on everyone and threaten actual consequences. Will that work? No. Does anyone here mutually respect each other enough to get anything done? Nope. Am I mad? Yeah. If I’m getting dragged into this again then I’d like it to be with minimal emotional damage. Should this be a reasonable request? Yes! Do you see how stupid all of this is? You’re the only reason we’re even alive right now and we can’t even sit our asses down to thank you without dredging up old drama. I do not need drama. I need to clean up after Thanos and his idiots and go retire.” He lifted a torn wire. “What the—”

“That’s a high bar you’ve placed,” Loki said. “Surely I don’t deserve basic decency after saving half of all existence?”

Tony put the wire down. “That better be sarcastic, Loki, or so help me.”

“Of course, Tony.”

They did not stop to ask when the cold business last name address had been exchanged for friendly first name or why or if it even mattered; whether it was a mark of trust or just part of the joke made no difference and perhaps any questioning would be unlucky. But they both noticed it. Ah: odd allies in the can you believe this crap war! Welcome. Please be a good omen.

“You’re staring,” Loki said.

“I was... trying to imagine what your hair looks like without all that grease,” Tony said, which may have been several million times worse than whatever he was actually doing.

“If you’re not laughing yet”—Loki tested the knot—“you’re doing it wrong.”

Tony considered for a few seconds what could possibly be so amusing. Then, just as the guitar in the background crested, he gasped and whispered, “Goth Merida.”

“Who?”

“Oh my god, okay, so the main character in this one movie and Pete made me watch it once because of course he did has this outrageously big poofy curly hair that’s like half her body mass, right, except it’s red, not black, so—”

“Goth Merida,” Loki said, nodding wisely.

“Goth Merida.”

“Would you be helping me if you didn’t owe me?”

Tony paused. “I’d have to see,” he said. “Considering the situation with Asgard, probably.”

“Don’t you at least have some kind of grudge against me?”

Tony paused again. “Either way, I don’t need more enemies, so if we could become even just neutral that would be pretty great. Seems practical. Also, watching you beat up Thanos was the coolest thing ever and I’m in awe. My respect for you is currently through the roof.”

“You could have taken him.”

“Doubt it. I barely scratched him. Anyway”—Tony climbed to his feet and went back to the kitchen with some things—“I’m also not too keen about the, like, upsetting experience interrogation or whatever that all was and this has been a problem in the past with other people where they feel the need to dig for details that just aren’t relevant. Steve doesn’t need to know the exact minute specifics of what happened with Thanos and you don’t need to personally show him I don’t know what at your own detriment just to prove a point. He has some stuff he doesn’t want to talk about and I have some stuff I don’t want to talk about and everyone else has some stuff they don’t want to talk about and he’s not specially entitled just because of who you are. I *am* concerned about this because I have a feeling it’s going to keep happening and not just to you and it needs to stop. We’re supposed to be working, not letting this place devolve into a cesspool of angst and psychological warfare again.”

“I’ve never seen you this responsible,” Loki said with a smile as Tony re-refilled the cup from the sink and chugged it: he choked loudly. Many long and painful seconds passed. It began to seem like he may die.

“You don’t even know me!” Tony shouted above a cough. “That’s so mean.”

Loki went back to the couch. Behind him, he heard Tony getting more water. “I’m worried about your bladder,” he said.

“My bladder is fine, thank you.”

It occurred to Loki how ridiculous this entire situation was. Why should anything absolve him of almost wiping a city and its civilians off the map anyway? Forget any truce or exactly how great his part in it had been; it was a tall order and likely nothing on the small sins everyone else had buried over the years. No one would think him innocent. No one would think him worthy of a clean slate. And the written aspect? He, off the record, thought laws were a universally stupid thing to be argued with whenever possible for the very reason that they did not cover these complexities, but that did not change that they existed. Did they have a plan? Did Tony have a plan? Or did he crawl back here for nothing?

“Hey, you better not be thinking it,” Tony called from the kitchen.

Loki turned. “Thinking what?”

“That you need to personally dig up shitty memories every time someone doesn’t believe you.”

“What? No.”

Tony walked over. “You’re thinking it. Right now.” He pointed with the cup, which still had some water inside. “I can feel it.”

“I’m doing no such thing.”

“You’re not? Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

Tony drank the rest of the water. “So you’re telling me with absolute certainty that you won’t hit anyone here with your memories again, ever, at any point after this conversation.”

“Exactly that, yes.”

“Oh. Well, good. Because from now on, you may consider me your personal trauma fairy, here to protect you from putting yourself through more fucked up shit because of”—Tony waved his free hand—“some inconsiderate asshole who, uh, doesn’t understand that you *are*, in fact, worthy of basic fucking decency, and that not everything that comes out of your mouth is a fucking lie, like—like that you were *tortured*, for Chrissake. Do I need to swear more, or am I clear enough?”

“I understand,” Loki assured with a nod.

“Do you?”

“Yes.”

“I’m gonna pretend I didn’t notice you rolling your eyes.”

“Me? Never.”

Except he had, and, while perhaps the wrong thing to have to roll his eyes at, it was a funny enough response that Tony just... sighed and tried not to laugh as he returned the cup, collected all his things, and left the room. Loki jogged after him. They stopped by the workshop for Tony to drop off the junk and then continued to the main area, where the holograms were still up and information was being aimlessly circulated. Tony went to get some coffee from the kitchen, which surprised no one. Loki sat back down and tried to find where he’d been reading.

There *was* progress; they seemed to have a plan and checklist for everything and the very broadest issues had been covered. And they *were* searching for anyone who had happened to crash on Earth. Still, aside from a few massive sums and many well-organized photos of damages there was no real data, and aside from Svala and her mother and someone from the other side of the country who had done the clever thing and called for help after the disastrously unstable warp stranded them in a tiny four-building desert settlement there was no trace of anyone else: whether they were elsewhere or had simply never made it to Earth, no one knew. There were much worse warps in the universe and

missing the mark by a few continents was impossibly lucky by those standards; given that, it might very well have been the former.

Loki, of course, was quite a bit more pessimistic regarding the matter. “Three?” he said, glaring dimly at the holograms.

Tony sat with a steaming mug. “To be fair,” he said, “it is a little difficult searching for someone without even knowing who we’re searching for.”

“Three,” Loki said again. “Three people?”

“It’s only been a day,” Bruce said. “These things can take a while. It could be weeks or months before we get everyone accounted for.”

“Last time we did a headcount there were several thousand passengers on that ship,” Loki said, not looking away from the data. “Pardon me if I’m not particularly comforted.”

“Not to agree,” Tony said, “but seriously: it’s only been a day. I... think you need to give it some time before you decide all’s lost.”

“Don’t tell me how to feel.”

“Okay, sorry.”

Tony, for the record, seemed unconvinced, but Loki didn’t hassle him about it. Sometimes white lies were better; sometimes they weren’t. Either way, this wasn’t working. He got out of his chair and left without a word.

They did have an escape craft outside, battered and useless out front by the building’s spare wing, and all the equipment salvaged from it. Tools and boxes. A tent in case it rained. Thor was elsewhere: from the notes he was trying to track down someone who had, according to the guy who wound up in a desert, unwisely split and made for the city with only frustration and the clothes on their back. Maybe he’d show again soon. Maybe he wouldn’t. It didn’t make much of a difference. Loki wished he had a reason for coming out here, but he really didn’t: he just sat on one of the crates and tried not to think. Thanos, huh? He stared at the trees in the distance. This wasn’t working at all. This was awful; wasn’t it his fault, anyway? Or had he misremembered something? Thanos had come for him, not the others—not mainly. Not at first. Thanos. Thanos. Thanos. Thanos. Thanos.

Thor showed up with two people.

“Well, there’s five,” Loki said, not very enthusiastic.

“Five is better than three,” Thor said. “What are you sitting there on your own for?”

“Brooding. I haven’t brooded in a while.”

Oh! Of course. Okay, then; Thor dusted himself off and went to sort some things out with the newcomers.

They weren’t alone for long before everyone else from the incredibly disappointing meeting came down to see who was faring how. Loki, quite content with brooding on the crate, was silent. He

picked at his hands and pretended he was doing something. He wondered why he was here. He thought and kept thinking.

It was true that he needed somewhere to stay until he could get on his feet and it was also true that he didn't want to deal with the things he and Tony had just been discussing; to be honest, he wanted to just sit in his room and have a quiet, boring life for a while. But he wasn't sure what his part here was beyond that. He was neither an Avenger nor particularly Avengers-adjacent and he wasn't really helping: hell, it was his fault this ramshackle little pile of supplies and destroyed escape crafts was here in the first place. And he wasn't really Asgardian; he wasn't really a refugee and he wasn't really affected by everything the way everyone else was. No one really liked him and he didn't really like them. He didn't belong at all. So what was he doing here?

Tony, after some surely important conversation, took a running leap onto the same crate and sat beside him. "You alright?"

"Lovely," Loki said. "You?"

Tony didn't buy it. "Anything I can do?"

Loki thought about a funny retort but couldn't bring himself to. "I'm surprised you got ahold of the escape pod."

Tony looked out at the vessel. It didn't look too bad; it had some big dents and cracks and burns but otherwise one would never be able to tell it had barrelled through a tear in spacetime and then crash landed in a forest. But he probably knew better than anyone that it would never fly again without replacing so much that it was no longer itself. "We couldn't leave them lying around," he said. "Plus, we can use the parts."

True. They were fairly large and although they had been damaged, the raw materials were valuable. "Not worth bringing them inside, though, is it?" Loki said. "I'm sure you have the space."

"We do, but yeah, it's too much of a hassle. No easy way to drag them around in this state, hence why we kind of just dumped them here. Actually, a better use for all that empty space right now was emergency housing until we can set up something legit. Hopefully not for long because it's not very glamorous but... desperate times, y'know."

"That's smart."

Off a ways Loki saw Svala join the group as they were all introducing themselves. She looked small and lost surrounded by adults many times older and taller than her but otherwise seemed to fit right in. He wondered how her mother was faring.

"Cute kid," Tony said.

"I think she'd fight you on that."

Tony laughed.

"Where do we go from here?" Loki asked, turning to look at him.

"I don't know," Tony said. "I guess that depends on you and Thor. I think it would be nice to try and rebuild somewhere, which is easier said than done but we've got options. Assuming anyone

even wants to stay on Earth.”

“It is a bit of a backwater, but it’s likely the best we’ll find. Thor has good connections and I doubt anyone’s in the mood to search for someplace better.”

Tony gave him a wounded look. “Backwater?”

“Relatively speaking,” Loki said.

“Oh. Ha. I guess.” Tony hoisted himself up the rest of the way onto the crate. “Tell me first... is it safe to settle down? I don’t want to raise any alarms or anything; I just know Thanos had a huge army and I don’t know if anyone left behind feels like vengeance.”

“Not likely,” Loki said. “They were no loyalists. Most went where the riches were. His true allies were few and they died with him. Once word gets out the rest will just find someone else to beg for scraps.”

“Sounds like you know the type,” Tony said.

“I do. Life in a kingdom will give you an eye for these things.”

“Ah, our very own strategist. I assume you know how unfathomably awful Earth’s politics are.”

“Not the worst I’ve seen.”

“Oh, god. I’m sorry.”

Loki mustered a laugh.

“Yeah, no interesting times here,” Tony said. “Aside from the usual. The rest is just a maze of paperwork and politicians and you’re not even allowed to duel for things anymore. So if we did want to rebuild somewhere we pretty much have two routes: we can try going for a country and fail spectacularly because establishing a new country in this day and age is a giant pain in the ass with or without connections, or, infinitely less complicated, we pick somewhere nice and add a city. Doesn’t give you as much power, though.”

“Maybe so,” Loki said, “but does it really matter?”

“Does it? You tell me.”

“I don’t care. I don’t think anyone else does, either. We’re alive. We’re safe. If we all went our separate ways today and Asgard never becomes anything more than a name, that would be just as well.”

“Understandable. It just feels fair to do something because we do have the resources.”

“Of course.”

Thor was telling stories of them. Loki, slightly but slowly more and more alarmed, tried to pick out the words from here.

“What do you think about Norway?” Tony said, leaning on a hand. “You clearly like it. Maybe everyone else would too. I could buy everyone a house there.”

Loki remembered being told by his father not long before Asgard's ruin to remember that place, as if he had known they would be looking for a home. "I would love that," he said. "Norway would be perfect. It's not too different and I've got some good spots in mind. If we could settle along the coast..."

"That's best-case," Tony said.

"We'll find a way. And if we don't, I still don't care. We lost everything. A cave would work at this point."

"Okay, come on, you don't want a cave."

"Oh, I don't need one. I have the Avengers to mooch off of."

"Don't get used to it."

"You're not going to remove me, are you?"

"Me? Nah. But someone else might want to."

"You won't let them."

Tony made no attempt to argue.

"Hey," Loki said as Thor began to tell an embarrassing story about him.

"That's not good," Tony said.

Loki hopped from the crate and went to intercept them.

"There you are!" Thor said. "How was your brooding?"

"What are you doing?"

"Talking."

"Talking! Yes! About—"

Svala latched onto his waist. "I missed you!" she said. "Where were you?"

Loki tried to free himself from the child vice grip but couldn't. "Hello to you too," he said, struggling to return the embrace. "I've only been gone a few days. I was busy."

"I thought you were dead," Svala said, staring wide-eyed up at him.

"Me? Never."

"So you got him?"

"He did," Thor said. "Just for you."

Loki pulled her off him and picked her up.

"And you have a cool scar now," Svala said, smirking at the half-healed cut on his eyebrow.

“Not as cool as you,” Loki said.

“I hope you like hugs,” Tony said beside them. “Doesn’t look like he’s letting go soon.”

“Never. You’re stuck with me forever.”

She groaned dramatically.

“How’s everything going out here?” Tony asked.

“Excellent. I’ve captured a child.”

They all laughed.

“*We* never met,” Svala said.

“Tony Stark. Hi.” He waved.

“One of Earth’s great heroes,” Loki said. “We fought together.”

“And great engineers,” Tony added.

“And great engineers, yes. He’s not so good at being humble, you see.”

Tony snickered. “Neither are you.”

“Oh, well—you’re not wrong.” Loki looked back at Svala. “How’s your mother, by the way? I didn’t see her here.”

“Good,” Svala said. “Thank you.”

“It’s a start,” Thor said to Tony. “It’s not much, but it works. And we’ve got help.”

“Of course,” Tony said. “Can’t leave you hanging after all these years.”

Svala dropped from Loki’s arms. “And we’ve got Loki,” she said. “If he can kill Thanos he can do anything, right?”

He smiled. “Right,” he said, but it had never felt emptier. This was the last of Asgard and it was all on him.

“You’re in good hands,” Tony said.

“Not anymore,” Svala said, smoothing out her dress. “I just left.”

Everyone laughed again except Loki. He saw Tony look at him.

“We were going to go bring some things over,” Natasha said, “if you could clear somewhere to store everything.”

“Yeah, and maybe in the meantime we can figure out where to put this too,” Tony said, beholding the dead spacecraft. “Will do.”

“Can I help?” Svala asked.

“Sure thing, kid. I’ll give you the tour.”

“Alright,” Natasha said. “We’ll be back later.”

She and Thor went to check some things first before they left. Pepper went with them. Desert guy, city guy, and the other new person talked about the sky beginning to cloud over and then went inside. Bruce went inside too.

“You want to go check in with your mom real quick, scope out the area?” Tony said. “I’ll be with you in a minute and we can start figuring stuff out.”

“Okay,” Svala said, trudging off towards the spare wing.

It felt lonely like this, just the two of them in a massive field outside a massive building while it looked like it was going to rain. Loki wondered what Thor was thinking and whether that had something to do with him. He wondered if it was obvious he didn’t want to be here.

“What do you want to do?” Tony asked.

Loki stared up at the dull sky. “I want to go back inside,” he said, “and read a book and not talk to anyone.”

“Is that all? You can do that. There’s a library on the ground floor too, if you happen to be into research-oriented nonfiction.”

“You won’t harass me about not putting in my share of work?”

“Should I?”

Evidently not. Everyone was already getting busy; they had their own tasks, all of which Loki suspected he’d be able to help with.

“I guess a reason would help,” Tony admitted, putting on a pair of glasses with one hand. “I’m just curious. Feel free to ignore me.”

How many reasons were there? Loki couldn’t count them. Asgard was gone. The land no longer existed. The people were dead. Neither was even his and nothing he did would ever clean his hands. All he could think about was Svala telling him how he’d carried her out of the fire; would she look at him the same if she knew he was why this had happened? How many people had she lost? How much of her family was gone that she wasn’t mentioning? He shouldn’t be here. He should leave. Better that than he further break everything trying to fix it.

“I don’t know,” he said.

Tony looked up at the clouds as well. “To tell you the truth, I’m not sure I trust you enough to hang around the building on your own. I don’t want that to be the case and I feel bad having to say it, but…”

“I just want to sit somewhere quiet and read,” Loki said. “I’m not in the mood for mass destruction.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“You’re not going to tell me how that’s not what you meant?”

“Um... no. I think I was definitely kind of implying it.”

Loki managed a tired smile. “Fair enough, I suppose.”

“Yeah, I’m not asking for much. Just don’t touch anything you’re not supposed to and if someone asks why you’re loitering around the premises or something, tell them you live there for the foreseeable future and I sent you. Also, if the main doors are locked again for some reason and no one’s there to buzz you in, you should be able to get them open with, uh, five, three, eight, nine, zero, eight, two, four. You get that?”

Loki nodded.

“Tell me if it doesn’t work. Thing’s so unreliable,” Tony added under his breath, “it’s easier to just pick the lock most days.”

“I’ll manage,” Loki said. “Don’t let her talk your ears off.”

“Not if I talk hers off first.”

Loki smiled again and went the other way.

The main doors weren’t locked, luckily, and the lobby was empty. It felt an awful lot like he was trespassing even if he did live here and have every right and he hoped no one would jump at him. There was a floor map on one of the walls showing several sets of stairs, several elevators, and at least two dozen rooms, only some of which were labelled. A gym was one; a library was also one. He stepped back from the map and oriented himself. Hallway to his right, door on the left. He glanced at the image again just to make sure and headed down.

There was a long line of windows and chairs along the farthest wall and a table in one of the corners; the rest of the room was rows of bookshelves, as anticipated. It was a pretty nice room, too new and shiny like everything else but somehow welcoming. Calm and quiet. Weeds were growing beneath the windows. He wasn’t much of a nonfiction person at all but he had his topics that interested him and figured he would find something, so he made his way through the aisles with his head tilted until his neck hurt looking at the numbers on the side and trying to remember which were what. World history? He browsed for a few seconds before taking out what claimed to be, despite its preposterous size and weight, *A Brief History of the United States of America*. Eh—something like that would be more than enough to fill the hours, and if he was going to be reading, it might as well be something useful. Catching up on countries always worked.

Loki tucked the book under his arm and carried it upstairs with him. He was cautious entering, slow and tight-shouldered, but it was as deserted as everywhere else; the holograms were off and the chairs were tucked in. He wasn’t sure what he had expected, only that he was on enemy ground and felt wrong reading a book of all things. How did he know someone wouldn’t claim otherwise and try to fight him? How did he know this wasn’t a trap? How did he know he wasn’t going to die here?

But the room remained empty, and, standing still with the giant book, Loki realized no one cared as much as he thought they did. He set the book on a couch and looked through the kitchen for something to eat or perhaps drink.

He did think about a regular cup of water, but it left a strange taste in the back of his mind and so he went to see if there was any tea. There was an electric kettle by the kitchen sink that was a little underfilled, but he didn't really feel like topping it up so it would have to do; he flicked it on and began searching the pantries. In order, there were dried goods, cans, baking supplies, and an absurd quantity of spices. The second-last one had two tins of ground coffee and a dozen different teas; he grabbed a box without looking—pomegranate black tea, very fancy—and retrieved a single bag and then returned the box. He got a plain, entirely unexceptional purple mug from the next pantry and set it on the counter, by the kettle, and watched and waited for the water to boil. He dropped the bag in the mug. He kept waiting.

He, for some reason, was very keen all of a sudden on making no sound as he poured the water in, so he carefully took the kettle with both hands and did just that: he breathed in, breathed out, and then tipped it at such a precise angle that the stream almost floated into the mug. Not a splash to be heard! It was a stupid thing to be proud of, but he found it boastworthy.

Steam rose sluggishly from the mug's depths.

He waited for it to die, drifting in and out of focus awhile, and took the mug by the handle. His fingers didn't stray once as he carried it to the couch. He also made sure he kept it firmly at his side when he sat down, away from the book; he never spilled drinks when reading—years of doing so had taught him the necessary coordination and reflexes—but it wasn't his to spill on and he didn't want to scald himself. He feared he would. He imagined it happening and panicked. So, very, very carefully, he set the mug beside him on the table and opened the book.

Chapter End Notes

(this chapter was merged from three separate ones, eating a comment in the process; [here it is for archival purposes.](#))

just to be clear I expect the entire marvel fandom to refer to loki exclusively as goth merida henceforth, myself included

When the Doubts Hit

Chapter Summary

Tony wonders what their best course of action is and if he's making a mistake.

Chapter Notes

have you ever seen an ice rainbow? when it's cold enough, the moisture in the air freezes and turns to ice fog, and if the sun hits it right, the light gets refracted just like it does when you see a regular rainbow, although the ones I've seen have all been vertical pillars, not arcs. neat!

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

Tony didn't know why he kept doing it.

Loki, whoever that meant to them, was not the same person they had once met. He was gracious with his words and never short on a please or thank you, and, though he had his moments, he carried himself lightly where the rest of them would have opened fire. He was all smiles even when he wasn't: he joked more than not and was reserved on true danger. And nothing had been more telling than the gentleness with which he held Svala, so much so that if Tony didn't know any better he could have assumed they were family: they sure had the curls and wit to match. Oh, Loki didn't have that feral rage burning in his eyes. There was murder there the first time Tony had looked: something dark and bloodthirsty and itching to strike at any given moment. Cold death. Unfeeling ruthlessness. Fear me, they had said; I am better than you. But that look was gone now, and in the few days he'd been back it hadn't appeared once. Even on Titan, even when he lashed out at Steve, there had been no trace of that reckless urgency. It was difficult to put in words, but Tony knew it. There was a real person there this time, not just anger and desperation, and he was good. And yet—

And yet, at the end of the day, he was still Loki.

No matter how much Tony tried to deny it, he was still the man who nearly killed them all. No matter how many years passed, he was still the man who had taken his life and shattered it from the inside out. No matter why he had done so or how much he had meant, he did.

Tony could deny all of it. It didn't change a thing. He was still terrified of Loki and he couldn't understand why he kept trusting him. He wanted to say never mind and drag him back down here, but that would really only make things worse; now was the best time to prove to themselves they were no danger to each other. So he went after Svala, hoping he could get something useful done in the meantime, and tried to forget about it.

The emergency shelter was in what used to be a big sort of industrial area since it had all the necessities: sinks and stoves, showers, and space. It wasn't anything special, but it was clean and

tidy and perhaps the safest place in the city for short-notice mass housing and it would likely stay there because even if they found no one else there weren't enough dedicated dorms for everyone. Svala didn't seem to mind, though, nor did the folks unpacking by a window. She spotted Tony and came over. Her mother mostly seemed relieved she had places to be instead of just stewing.

"Morning," Tony said. "Sibella, right? I'm... sorry about the glorified warehouse."

"Better this than the streets," Sibella said with a weighty smile.

"I've been asking around and I think we should be able to get something more comfortable until we can set up permanent housing. Hopefully it won't be long."

"No rush. Thank you for the help."

"Glad to hear it. Come on, kid." He nudged her. "Let's go investigate."

It was a good place if a bit depressing; the folding beds and chairs were supposed to make it home but only felt strange and sterile. The only upside was the cozy daylight from the same huge modern windows as the rest of the complex. At this point, though, it would have to do. The two of them went to empty more storage. Tony had already passed through briefly and suspected he would be hoarding most everything for himself, among those many, many more scraps and spare parts to fill his room and the workshop he was, quote, borrowing, but he tried his best to be picky. Svala started clearing drawers and grouping similar objects on the floor.

"Oh, hey," Tony said, taking a little device. "Can you save these if you find any more of them?"

"What's that?"

"It's, uh... it's kind of like if you have a bunch of circuits all together and you need to—"

"What's a circuit?"

"It's like a... highway? For electricity. With a lot of signs telling it what to do."

Svala laid another of those on the counter. "What's a highway?" she said, but it was unclear if she was just messing with him or not.

"Okay, a highway is—the point is these are really useful."

She squinted at it like she had just found a weird bug. "If you say so."

They kept digging for some time, during which Tony could not shake the worry that he shouldn't have left Loki free to do whatever. What he knew so far did not compute with what he had seen and what he had seen was just as tender as it was frightening at times and it wasn't clear where the midpoint was: sure, here was this kid that Loki had personally saved from a horrible death, but what about the rest of them? Was there really no reason to start things again? This was a powerful place and there was much one could get to on their own. It was a dangerous game to play with someone they were still struggling to understand.

But Svala wasn't worried and they just kept tidying. Most of the stored items were in boxes quite shortly, out of the way for greater necessities, and Tony left with her to see where they might be able to keep any ships and such that were retrieved, functioning or not. They checked the other rooms and they checked outside and they checked the hangar, which might suffice if they switched

the parking plan a little. They also checked the regular garages, which were significantly less full and perhaps ideal. It was unclear how they would transport anything beyond dropping it in the front yard, though.

“You know most of them won’t work,” Svala said as Tony tried to visualize a layout. “The warp burned everything up.”

“Then how did you get here?”

“They worked for a little bit.”

“Hmm.” Tony took his glasses off and pocketed them. “Even if they don’t work anymore, we need to get them out of the way. And the parts can be recycled if we can’t fix them.”

“Okay.”

Tony suspected that Loki could up and just teleport everything inside but was reluctant to ask, so, as they usually did, they would deal with it themselves when it came to that. He and Svala got quite a bit done pattering around organizing things, though, and at least the small stuff had somewhere to go now. There wasn’t much else to do and she was content to idle on her own, so he thanked her for the hard work and left to run some other errands. (The Iron Man wasn’t broken, by the way, only giving some kind of sporadic mechanical trouble with things such as the autopilot and tracking. Not a problem; he knew his way around and could manually compensate. If needed, he had his copilot he could consult.)

He was sort of productive. He checked in on some things in the city and he grabbed some supplies and he answered some calls, among those one from Peter asking permission to stop by again later, but that was largely it. It was disappointing, and, not knowing what else to do for a while, he continued around the area and tested the scan Loki had helped configure to see if he was lucky: New York wasn’t small and he was sure there must be someone. And so he searched. He flew from one end to the other and then back, which took him no time at all, and because it took him so little time he did it again to be certain, and, still quite hopeful as nothing came up, he went over the compound to check if perhaps the scan in fact didn’t work. But it worked perfectly, flagging a very round number of matches even through the walls, which Tony found baffling. It was flawless.

He, of course, was too stubborn to go down that quickly, so he put on a playlist of his favourite songs in the background and made another loop. New York’s long reputation as the world’s capital of absurdity and chance tended to help, but save for what appeared to be a clown flash mob (classic New York) and someone robbing a corner store while wearing a fursuit (also classic New York) he didn’t see anything notable. It was frustrating and, although he didn’t want to, he understood: how could this happen? How could such a grand civilization vanish? Three, five now, seven with the brothers, was a broken number. They had been many millions, still many hundreds and thousands aboard the ship, and now they could be counted on a hand. He hoped they were faring well elsewhere in the universe and he could have been right, never to know for they were simply too far, but Thanos had been ruthless: whoever hadn’t slipped away into a crack in spacetime wouldn’t have had much left to try. It was horrendous. He didn’t have a word for it and he hadn’t even been there; he wondered what its survivors had to say about it.

And he still didn’t trust one of them. After all this, what motivation was there for any of the things he feared?

Tony knew that if Loki had been planning anything, it would have been on Titan, days ago, with the de-Thanosed Infinity Gauntlet: it would have been laughably easy to just grab it and run. But this had never happened. There were no other such opportunities nor a reason to search when they had more pressing issues and he had said it himself: even if he wanted to, he wasn't foolish enough to try. And he *didn't* want to. Or at least that was how it looked because no one but him could know for sure what he wanted. He spoke kindly of Peter and he was gentle with Svala and Tony could only imagine how much deeper it had gone in those many months aboard the ship, united by a common disaster, about which they all must have had enough stories to fill a book. Perhaps it was true that the invasion had just been a matter of the wrong place and time and Loki hadn't meant to and perhaps if he had he no longer did. In life no one could ever know what was honestly true; they could only trust. Weighing the past against the present and what they stood to gain as much as they might lose, Tony could not find an easy answer.

He picked the uncertain one as he landed on a roof for a pause: "Is Loki still in the building?"

FRIDAY seemed to think about it. "Which one?"

Tony sighed so hard he swore he felt his soul momentarily exit his body. "The one I gave you access to."

There was a brief pause. "He is," FRIDAY answered.

"Doing what?"

"Reading."

"Cool."

"Don't tell me you're worried about him."

"What? No. Hell no. I just don't want him causing any trouble."

FRIDAY went silent, but not before Tony heard what was indisputably a doubting giggle. He wished he had never installed her.

At this point it was clear the only course of action worth anything was to boot the same information into a global scan and hope, but the truth was he still didn't know how Loki had managed it; there were no major surface differences between Asgard's refugees and any other human and scans based on anything subtler than what the eye could see were effectively impossible. So then there was the inevitable question, which was: had it been pure magic at work? Or was there some underlying technology he just hadn't figured out? He couldn't do anything until he knew what he was working with. In any case Loki would have almost certainly known how to get things going, and had Tony dared to ask maybe he would have found out. This was fine and all except for the part where he was terminally chickenshit about even breathing wrong around him (see earlier rant) and didn't even know how to let him touch the Iron Man without catastrophizing; those systems connected to everything under the sun and it was a much bigger act of faith to sit him down with the world at his fingertips.

At this point Tony, unable to make sense of the image of Svala in Loki's arms against the one of celestial hellfire and death in this city he loved, wondered what anything even meant anymore and decided he would just go ahead and ask instead of running himself in circles forever. So he reluctantly packed everything up and returned to the compound, where he assumed the usual drama

would start again soon, only to find in perhaps the most cosmic twist of fate imaginable that when he climbed up the stairs the first thing he saw was Loki: sprawled on the couch, eyes closed and a book face-down on his chest, with one hand pressed to the cover and the other brushing an empty mug on the floor. His breathing was so soft he could have been mistaken for dead. He looked peaceful enough.

Tony stopped.

Well, here they were: somehow, trust or lack of or otherwise, Loki had managed to relax enough to fall asleep in one of the busiest areas, while Tony wasn't even comfortable letting him touch his things. He didn't know what to feel, although shame came to mind. He walked over and bent to take the mug, very slow and easy, and froze as there was a shift, a hitched breath, a moment where it seemed all was lost. Then the moment passed and he soundlessly placed the mug in the dishwasher, sat in the adjacent couch with his phone and asked, one by one, if anyone had found success. There were some answers, but none of them sounded promising save for one wildly uncertain hypothesis about another possible landing site; he'd have to test it later.

He sighed and set the phone down. Here they were. What now?

Loki turned again and it began to seem like he might wake, but after a long and nervous minute with nothing it became clear that he was solidly passed out. Tony leaned in, breath bated, and eased the book out from its protective hand. He flipped it over and skimmed the pages and then closed it and placed it beside his phone. Then he looked at Loki again. It was often; despite the deep slumber it didn't seem very good. Every time he thought he hadn't awoken him by accident something moved and he found himself second-guessing, and he did because it must have been much-needed sleep to happen like this and it seemed kind to let it be. He worried, though. Hoping to ease his nerves a little, he went to check for food.

The only worthwhile items in the fridge were condiments and someone's leftovers and Tony didn't dare touch the latter. He closed the door very slowly and moved on to the pantries: there was almost never anything ready-to-eat in there, but it didn't hurt to look. He searched for a minute, found nothing as expected, and then returned to the couch and resumed his worrying. There was no point staying; he could be in his lab, solving his technological predicament, or in his room, where there actually was food most of the time. But Loki—

Tony glanced at him again, expecting some movement, but nothing happened. He leaned back and continued weighing his options.

Many minutes passed before there was the sound of footsteps down the hall, and Tony sat up just as Natasha turned the corner and frantically gestured for her to keep her voice down. She looked at the near-corpse in wonder.

“Anything?” Tony half-whispered.

“Nothing so far,” she answered just as lightly. “Thor's got some ideas, but—”

Loki kicked out with one foot.

“Nightmare?” Natasha asked, sparing a frown.

“I don't know,” Tony said. “He's been doing that a lot. I was... going to ask him for help with something, but I don't want to wake him up. He's been through a lot. Rest is always good.”

She gave Tony a vague look akin to raising an eyebrow.

“Yes, I am worried about him,” Tony admitted. “Don’t get me wrong, I almost had a panic attack the other day just sitting in the same room. But... look at him. I guess I just pity him somehow.”

Perhaps it wasn’t quite pity, but it was something; it was hard to look at him like this and not forget, if only for a moment, everything that had once been. He was only a man right now, exhausted and curled up on a couch like all of them had done at least once in their lives. It felt rare and sweet in the strangest of ways.

“Pepper wanted to talk to you,” Natasha said.

“Oh?”

She was just coming up the stairs; Natasha shushed her same as Tony.

“Oh.” Tony stood. “Okay. Hey, could you watch over him for a bit?”

Natasha was hesitant, but she agreed. “Alright,” she said. Then she sat where Tony had been as the two left the room.

It wasn’t any sort of danger watch or the like; really, in this moment she pushed everything aside as well and thought not about how they could have and would have once killed each other but how uncomfortable he must be scrunched between the wooden armrests in heavy leather armour and boots. She thought it a little funny when he quirked onto his back again, loosening what remained of his updo and sending the hair into his face and open mouth, and wondered if he was aware. She wondered how he was coping as, amid all the tossing and turning, he whimpered something in a foreign language. Mostly she thought the same thing Tony had: this was not the man that attacked them.

She reached out and gave him a gentle nudge, stirred him a bit but not quite, and watched him quiet down eventually. Then there was silence, and the two of them remained there in the warm and dusty kitchen not as enemies nor heroes and villains but simply as people.

Chapter End Notes

oh I love pain :)

Take Two (It May Not Be as Bad as It Seems)

Chapter Summary

Although the situation is still tense, Loki wonders if things might be looking up.

Chapter Notes

hey I broke a bunch of stuff but it's hopefully alright! I promise it's still the wholesome wholesomeness we know and love 🥰 you are all very cool thanks for reading —the author, 2021-ish

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

It was never fully clear exactly when and where Loki awoke, only that it wasn't the place he'd fallen asleep in. And he didn't remember falling asleep; the ceiling was as unfamiliar as the sensation of his body. He felt like he'd stepped out of one dream and into another, dazed and numb and with a waning headache and cold sweat on his back. He convinced himself he was dead for a while as he tried to reaccustom to existence, swallowing the dead person dryness out of his mouth and struggling against the cushions into a sitting position. His hair flipped forward and he remembered that he had hair and pushed it away with a hand. What had he been doing last? Time? Date?

He remembered at once, and, after a glint of embarrassment, he panicked. Oh, he *was* dying; he must be.

The book was on the coffee table and the empty mug wasn't on the floor (said coffee table had been out of arm's reach) which told Loki someone had come by at some point, and so he panicked and kept panicking because not only had he completely and irreparably humiliated himself but he could have never woken at all: this place would kill him if it got the chance. They might as well if this was his idea of helping. He sat a little straighter and finger-combed the rest of the hair from his face, which was difficult because it was tangled beyond belief. Then, uncomfortable beneath the drying sweat, he pressed a hand to his chest: there was a wash of green light and an odd prickle as the spell cleaned him and then nothing.

The place was still empty, which Loki supposed made sense: everyone was too busy working to hang around. And here he was sleeping on their furniture like he owned the place—and someone had seen him! Of course they had. Picked up his trash, too; at least they were considerate. But now he didn't know what to do. The book was interesting, but he was a bit burned out and couldn't think very well at the moment anyway, and he didn't have enough direction to start helping with something on his own. A clock. He needed a clock. His first priority was figuring out what time it was. This was harder than expected, but after much wandering around the room he found a simple white analog hanging on the wall. Four thirty-two, it read, which did not make things better at all. He had slept for hours! How did this happen?

He finally stopped staring at the clock and returned to the couch.

In a way it was nice that his biggest problem right now was an accidental nap and not everything else, although it did not make it any less of a pain particularly given that he had yet to enter the right dimension and had the bad feeling he wouldn't any time soon. He still wasn't sure how to spend the evening, but he remembered that he had never taken the food out of his holding space and, because it was silly to clog up his dimensional pockets like that, he went to his room to find a spot for them. There wasn't much: just the two jars of herring and one of strawberry-currant jam, a couple miscellaneous snacks, and a very expensive Asgardian vintage that he did not remember ever putting there, which was a bizarre but pleasant discovery. It was holding up fine by the looks of it, but even wine didn't last forever; he'd have to do something with it soon.

He stuck everything in the pantry and then glanced at the sink. His mouth was still awfully dry, but on second thought... no. It wasn't that urgent.

Quite exhausted of options, Loki slipped back into the hallway and went to see if Tony was around somewhere. There was no answer from the bedroom: he knocked, waited, knocked again, and then continued down the hall to the workshop. The door was open, and, perhaps unsurprisingly, Tony was right where expected. He looked like after days of anxiety he had at last found his haven, reclined in a rolling chair and dressed cozily in sweatpants and a tank top without the always-there case on his chest while he fiddled with a disembodied Iron Man helmet. No music was playing, but this didn't seem to be a problem.

Loki settled against a table a few metres away and waited to be noticed.

Tony looked up. "Oh! Sleeping Beauty has finally awoken," he said, cracking a smile. "How was your nap?"

"Why didn't you wake me?"

"Was I supposed to? Sorry." Tony poked at a panel on the side of the helmet. "I've had people flip out on me before," he said, "so I figured it was best to let you sleep. You looked like you needed it anyway."

"I didn't."

"Sorry. I didn't want to bother you."

"How many people saw me like that?"

Tony seemed to think about it. "Uh, just me," he said. "Why?"

"It's not important," Loki said, suspecting Tony was covering to make him feel better.

"Ah." Tony nodded. "Yeah, just—" The panel snapped off and he jolted, eyes wide, as it arched in the air and landed squarely in front of Loki's feet with a dull clatter. "I didn't mean to do that," he said, hand frozen in place. "Definitely did not mean to do that. Wow, that's some trajectory."

Loki stooped to retrieve the piece and set it on the desk Tony was sitting at. "What exactly are you trying to do, then?"

“I’m trying”—Tony wheeled himself to the opposite table—“to fix the world’s most stubborn short circuit.”

“It’s not something I did, is it?”

“Oh, no.” Tony waved his free hand dismissively. “No, not at all. It’s been doing weird shit since Titan. It’s not really super urgent, but it’s better to deal with it now than when it’s actually a problem, right? Hey, can you pass me that screwdriver?” he asked, pointing to the floor.

Loki bent to pick that up, as well, and placed it beside the fallen panel. “I’m not your servant.”

“No, of course not!” Tony said. “But I’m allowed to ask favours of people while they’re in here.”

“I suppose. How’s Asgard?”

“Lost. Speaking of, I was going to ask if you could do whatever you did with this”—Tony tapped the helmet—“on that computer right over there.” He pointed at the array of monitors beside them. “See, normally anything here would have been connected and I could sync everything to the system if I needed to and, I guess I need to, it would all be there, but for whatever reason it just doesn’t want to. Compatibility issues with your magic or something.”

“There shouldn’t be,” Loki said. “It’s just a different sort of technology; I didn’t do anything you couldn’t already do on your own.”

“Ah, and magic is just science I don’t understand, that whole thing?”

“Effectively.”

“You know, I want to believe that.” Tony set the helmet down and leaned forward in his seat, resting his arms on his knees. “Funny story, though: it’s really not.”

Loki smiled. “Too many extra steps?”

“Jeez, yeah, way too many extra steps. You’re trying to compare a triangle to, like, a Klein bottle.”

“A what?”

“Exactly! Ugh. Magic. No offence. Anyway, here’s what I want you to do.” Tony kicked at the table leg, propelling himself back to where the computer sat. “I’m gonna set up a global scan—super nifty! Same thing I did when I tracked you down in Norway—and you’re gonna help. Well, I’d like you to help; you’re cool with that, right?”

“I’ve got nothing better to do,” Loki said, walking over. He sat on the edge of the desk, next to the keyboard. “Why do you only have one chair in here?”

“Uh, because it’s my workshop and I make the chair rules.”

“Of course you do.”

Tony brought up a series of maps and grids, and then, with several seemingly random keystrokes, a blinking text box in the centre of the screen titled SEARCH CRITERIA. Loki turned to look at everything.

“You know what you’re doing,” Tony asked, “right?”

“Never.” Loki stood. “Get off,” he said, pressing a hand to the chair’s armrest. “I’m not giving myself a spinal injury because of your poor planning.”

Tony snorted and left the seat.

Loki sat and looked at the screens, at the keyboard, at the screens again, and then squinted. He summoned a tentative spark of magic to his fingertips and rested them on the keys, and then, hesitantly, he closed his eyes. It was like the last time in that he let the spell guide him, weaving its energy through all the little bits of software and trying to determine what and why and how. The system was mostly satellites; that part was easy. They were sorely lacking compared to the suit, but they’d been modified with the same adaptive scanning technology. He opened his eyes and stared at the box. Hmm. He flicked his wrist and the screen stuttered: several of the maps went dark, overlaid with a flashing OFFLINE, before winking once more into visibility a few seconds later. It ought to work; all the same technology was there and he’d done it before. He pressed a hand to his cheek and eyed them uncertainly.

“Everything good?” Tony asked.

“Hold on,” Loki said, still staring at the screen. “I should be able to make this work.”

Tony nodded.

Loki brought a hand back to the keyboard. He did the same thing he did before: willed what he was looking for and let magic assume the rest, which in this medium had some interesting results. The computer, not sure how to parse such a request, converted the otherwise largely metaphysical knowingness into many millions of lines of specifics from the most basic to things he didn’t even realize. As it configured itself it began to slow and he was able to read the points. He leaned back in the chair and watched the growing text.

Tony came up behind him. His eyes fell on the weight: an average of three-hundred percent more in relation to humans. “Really?” he said, brows furrowing in disbelief. “That is... heavy.”

“Hadn’t you noticed? Everyone’s much heavier than they look.”

“It’s not something that comes up often. Is it just Asgard?”

“The Æsir, certainly. Those of Asgardian descent. But there are others.”

“You?”

Loki shifted in the chair, causing it to creak loudly. “I’m pretty close,” he said. “Give or take a few hundred pounds. I don’t remember the exacts.”

Tony looked back up at the screen. “Oh, come on! You can’t scan things like that.”

Loki followed his gaze. “Can’t you? I have fail-safes on my spells and none of them are going off, so yes, I’d say you can absolutely scan things like that.”

“Chromosomes? Seriously?”

“You’re underestimating what your technology can do.”

“What? No. I’m just saying—”

The text flickered. Loki pressed his hands to the keyboard again and watched the letters shift, cycle between various languages, and then settle; the sentences resumed their formation.

“Still good?” Tony asked.

“I know what I’m doing.”

The next line finished typing itself out; nothing further followed. Loki skimmed through the list and then slowly stood.

“That’s it?”

“It should be. You owe me for this.”

Tony sighed dramatically. “As expected,” he said. He sat in the chair and confirmed the new criteria, added the location (everywhere on Earth), and then started the scan. “Thanks, though. I really appreciate it.”

“How long will this take?”

“A day if we’re lucky. I’d give it several.” Tony rolled back to the helmet. “I’ll leave it running and see what happens,” he said, picking it up. “What about you? What’s up?”

“I’m fine. A little bored,” Loki admitted after a moment, “but I’m fine. I’ll go finish that book.”

“Spider kid came by earlier,” Tony said. “He’s still worried. I told him you were good, but he kinda wants to see for himself, you know?”

“That’s sweet of him.”

“Will you talk to him? Seeing him worry makes me worry and... you understand. He should still be in his room—last I checked he set up some video games or something and dragged everyone into it. Maybe you want to join.”

Loki nodded. “I’ll stop by,” he said. He glanced at the helm. “Good luck with that.”

Tony managed a smile. “Thanks,” he said, and then he returned to poking wires as if nothing had ever happened.

Loki took another look at the screen. Various progress bars had appeared beside the maps, some racing along and others barely moving. It was slow indeed, but the spell had worked flawlessly from what he could tell; that was all he needed to know. He quietly turned and left the room.

It seemed quite peaceful now, nothing like the vicious miasma when they’d first gotten here, but the hazy, half-asleep feeling never wavered. Paranoia’s cousin—as if he was still dozing on the couch and might wake up for real if he let himself and the world, only an ill-formed dream, would wink itself away. And paranoia’s cousin did not come for no reason, but for the most part he couldn’t find what it was to stop it. So he drifted, unaware of his own feet, and hoped it was a false alarm that would go soon knowing that sometimes that wasn’t the case. Not an easy task: he turned the corner and struggled to remember which room was Peter’s. Third door, but which side? Right? He

made for the right door and then froze, fingers on the handle, in a fit of panic. Nope. Left. It was unlocked; he eased it open and quietly entered.

There was a console haphazardly wired to the TV and a game on the screen, as promised. The everyone Peter had invited was Sam, Bucky, Natasha, Pepper, and Svala, many of whom clearly had some degree of better things to do but nonetheless appreciated being dragged over. They were settled in various positions in and around the couch, with Peter perched knees-up in the closer end; he spared only a split-second glance over his shoulder as Loki walked to join him. “Hey!”

“Hi,” Loki said, sitting on the couch arm. “Are you winning?”

“Nope,” Sam answered. “I’m kicking his ass.”

“Yeah, because you blue-shelled me,” Peter shot. He sighed and glanced up again. “It’s this—it slows down whoever’s in first place.”

“Oh.” Loki turned to look at the others. Natasha gave him a terse, semi-polite nod from across everyone between them. He skeptically matched the gesture. “How have you been, Peter?”

“Uh, good, thanks. You?”

“Good.”

“That’s... good.”

Sam guffawed. Peter blushed and pressed himself deeper into the couch.

“Don’t worry,” Loki said. “No one ever has an actual answer for those.”

“Okay,” Peter said, and then he returned his attention to the game.

Peter was a smart kid and by the looks of it hadn’t done this for nothing; it was just the kind of lighthearted absurdity they all must have needed to inch away from the vitriol. They had probably come to the same conclusion. It took a while to figure out who was who, only that Sam was demolishing everyone and Peter, Bucky, and Svala were giving him everything they could. He had first place right until Peter stole it at the finish line and then he threw the controller. Loki stopped it in midair with a flick of his wrist.

“Dude,” Bucky said as the controller floated back into Sam’s lap. Svala tried not to laugh.

“He’s right,” Peter said. “Please don’t break my things.”

“I won’t let him,” Loki assured, wriggling his fingers for emphasis. “I’ve got quick reflexes.”

“You do! Thanks.” Peter turned to scroll through the courses. He paused at one, heard a loud protest from Sam, and then sighed and picked another. “Mr. Stark sent you?” he asked.

“He did,” Loki answered. “Why?”

“I was just curious. He, um—yeah, I came by earlier, but I guess you were busy. I was getting worried about you.”

“I heard. I really appreciate it, and thank you, but you don’t need to worry about me. Honest.”

“I know. I just don’t want you to have to deal with this kind of stuff alone.”

Stuff like Thanos? Or stuff like Steve Rogers being a disagreeable brick wall? Both?

“These things happen,” Loki softly explained. “Don’t dwell on them. I’ll be fine.” His voice almost broke on the last word and he swallowed hard, thinking how ironic all of this was; wasn’t he the one dwelling? But Peter seemed to accept it.

Lighthearted was not the right word: it was rancorous anarchy and lives were at stake. They played no CPUs and bikes only and Peter made the very best of it. He swerved and skidded through every unbeaten path and whenever someone passed him he passed them right back—mostly Sam, sometimes Natasha. Sam was seconds from the line when Peter once again did just that. This was not taken well.

“That’s it,” Sam said, tossing the controller into a couch crevice and trudging off. “I’m out.”

“Come on, it’s not that bad!” Peter called over his shoulder.

“Nope.” Sam collapsed on the bed. “How the hell do you keep doing that?”

“Magic?”

Loki snickered.

“Hey,” Peter said to him, “why don’t you play?”

“Does he even know what a video game is?” Sam asked, sitting up slightly with a quirked eyebrow.

“What do I look like?” Loki said.

“Not answering while there are children here.”

“He thinks you have a leather thing,” Bucky said.

Sam sat up fully. “Hey!”

“Lots of people around in armour,” Bucky continued, looking over the couch. “Not sure why you’re making it a big deal.”

“This does not answer my question.”

“Does Loki know what a video game is?”

“Obviously!” he said, quite offended anyone would think otherwise. “I’m the fun brother.”

Sam, apparently accepting this, fell onto the bed once more with a grunt. Peter grabbed the free controller and handed it over for a quick tutorial and then picked a course. Weird but, again, confused laughter was so much better than screaming matches over past sins.

“Just to be clear, I’m not going easy on you,” Peter said.

“Not a problem,” Loki said, fully convinced he was going to destroy him.

“He *is* going to beat you,” Bucky said.

“He won’t.”

They loaded up an ice track to test the theory. This did not go well given that Loki had a long history of smugly saucing every single game he had ever touched in every single form both on and off the planet, and, in large because he thought it funny to cut Peter’s streak short, he passed them all within seconds. Halfway through the final lap Peter sped into first place as usual, but not for long: Loki knocked him right out inches from the finish line with a triumphant “Ha!”

Peter’s jaw dropped. Behind them, Sam fell into hysterics. Looked like this had been going on for quite a while and this was his first taste of reality.

“Okay,” Sam managed between laughter, “maybe you do know what you’re doing.”

“That was a fluke!” Peter said, glaring up at him, but this only made everyone laugh harder.

“Round two?” Loki offered. “You can’t prove it was a fluke without a second attempt.”

“Oh, you’re going down,” Peter shot back, which turned Sam’s laughter into passionate wheezing.

The new pressure to win meant liberal ramming and use of items on Peter and Loki’s part, doing whatever they could to slow both themselves and the other two players, although Bucky and Svala both stumbled a full lap early on, voiding the latter concern and leaving them free to wreak havoc on each other. Following a series of tricks throughout the course, it seemed Peter was going to win, with him sluing into first shortly before the finish line, but he relaxed moments too soon: Loki kicked him off the track and casually claimed the victory with another self-satisfied cackle.

“You are not getting away with this,” Peter said.

“Looks like I am!” Loki said. “You should have thought before inviting me.”

It was a mess. Every single round was them teetering between first and second while the rest of the room hooted and roared. Sweat was pooling. Hearts were racing. The floor beneath them trembled as Peter bolted forward only for Loki to slide him into a hellish pit of lava. Vehicles were crushed and roads were decimated. This was no longer a game but a war. Round after round, Peter fell to wins stolen at the finish line in a manner all too familiar. Sam called this karma, a statement agreed upon by everyone except for, of course, Peter, who was still attacking the game like his life depended on it.

Many rounds passed and eventually Bucky and Svala dipped out to watch the drama with everyone else. Sam wasn’t letting this go unpunished and leapt from the bed. “Alright, pass me the controller,” he said, finding his old seat. “Two against one. You are absolutely going down.”

“No thanks,” Loki said. Bucky nearly pissed himself laughing.

Not much was different, but near the end of the final lap, after multiple delays and detours between the three of them and very many deaths, explosions, and more, Sam dashed into first. Loki was about to counter the move when Peter blew both him and himself off the track. Then, somehow, Sam won. A curtain of silence fell over the room. Bucky clapped.

“Smart,” Loki said. “Was that your heroic sacrifice?”

“Maybe,” Peter said with a grin. He stretched, yawned, and then asked, “Do you want to keep playing?”

“I’m fine either way.”

“Sam?”

He shook his head. “You two can keep going. I’m gonna head out.”

“Ah, I see,” Bucky said. “You just needed that one victory to sate you.”

Sam laughed. “Could be. Anyway”—he stood—“have fun. Don’t hog the wins.”

“We’ll try,” Peter said. “Bye, Sam.”

“Bye, Pete,” he said as he opened the door and left.

A second passed.

“Alright,” Pepper said, crawling out of her seat, “I think I’m going to go too.”

“Aw. That was nice, though.” Peter smiled up at her. “Thanks.” He paused. “Nat?”

“I don’t have anything urgent,” she said, “but...”

“You don’t have to stay if you don’t want to.”

She nodded. “Have fun.”

Svala was getting bored and Bucky had other things to do, so they left as well. Loki, who had no other things to do and appreciated the chance to shut his eyes to the world for a little bit, moved to the freed cushion and made himself more comfortable while Peter removed Sam from the roster and started a Grand Prix—CPUs on this time.

“Thanks for being here,” Peter said, not looking away from the screen.

“I’m happy to join you,” Loki said. In this moment he was; it felt like the only normalcy he had gotten here and the only normalcy he would be getting for a very long time going forward. It was lovely and he was afraid if he left it would never return. But at least for now it stayed and they made the most of it.

‡

Many rounds and an unknown amount of time later, Tony walked in. “Oh, no way!” he said, stifling a laugh. “I can’t believe you roped him into this.”

“Excuse me,” Loki said. “He didn’t rope me into anything.”

“No? Huh.” Tony wandered over to where they were sitting and leaned against the side of the backrest. “Who’s winning?”

“Undecided,” Peter said.

“Are you staying for dinner?”

“Uh, yeah”—Peter jerked the controller—“I think so.”

“We were thinking of ordering Chinese. That’s cool with you, right?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Loki?”

“Is still avoiding grains,” he said, “but other than that, I’m happy with anything.”

“Most but not all grains, yeah? Wheat mainly?”

“Correct.”

“Yeah, this place is really good on that. Lots of options and substitutes and minimal cross contamination. How about you finish that round and come down? I need to do a headcount, anyway.”

“Alright,” Peter said.

Tony nodded and left the room.

They sat there a bit longer after the round, shook hands and all that. Peter tidied up and piled his things on the couch. The room felt like a safe space now and it was difficult to leave not knowing if things would start boiling over again, but food was more important so they went down together. And it was busy. Almost everyone including the folks staying temporarily was there talking options while Tony leafed through a menu. He looked up and then continued reading. It sounded like he was just going to get a little bit of everything.

“Okay, and a lot of vegetables too because it’s not healthy otherwise—”

“It’s Chinese takeout,” Pepper said.

“Yeah, what’s your point?”

Many people laughed, but Tony remained deadly serious.

“Fine,” Pepper said. “I will get a very large quantity of vegetables to counteract the fact that it’s not, as you want to believe, healthy.”

“Wrong. If it has vegetables, it’s healthy.”

“Correct,” Sam said.

“How much stuff do we have without gluten or dairy? Enough for a few people?”

Pepper slid her notes across the table. “I thought you weren’t doing that anymore,” she said.

“Oh, I’m not,” Tony said, picking up the notepad. “Loki’s got some food sensitivities.”

“What?”

“Confirming,” Loki said as he found a seat. “They make me violently ill.”

“Yep,” Tony said. “Do not need any violent illness here tonight.”

Pepper took the notepad back.

“Anyone want anything else?” Tony asked. “Deserts, something?”

Peter raised his hand. “Do they have bubble tea?”

“Yes they do! Flavour?”

“Strawberry?”

Pepper wrote it down.

“Okay, anything else? Going once. Going twice. No?”

The room shared a collective shrug. Pepper dialed the number. It was a long call; many minutes passed as she read off the list. Not everyone was here, but they would be down. A big face missing was still Steve and he was easy to notice when he moused into the room. Loki glanced at him. He glanced back. They didn’t say anything—just wondered how to behave in each other’s separate corners. Tony folded the menu into an airplane to hide that he was watching.

It was a lot of food and it would take a while, so they kept talking. All sorts of things; it was tired but familiar conversation and it was good to laugh at. But Loki never decided on what to say to Steve and Steve never decided either and the two of them spent a long time awkwardly glancing back and forth at each other. On the verge of an apology and not quite an argument. Just... tension.

Steve got up and sat with him and Peter.

“Hello,” Loki said. “Busy night.”

“Sure is,” Steve said.

They watched the menu airplane looparound the room and glide down the stairs all the way to the lobby. Sam gave it a thumbs-up.

“I wanted to apologize for yesterday,” Steve said. “I think I really overstepped there.”

“Did you rehearse that?” Loki asked, which was unfair to imply and he worried he had just spoiled a genuine apology by shoving his foot in his mouth again: Steve gave him a look. “Sorry. That was defensive. I do appreciate you taking the time to speak to me. I’m... not sure what to say.”

“You don’t need to say anything. Tony’s right. It wasn’t fair to corner you like that and I don’t want it to happen again.”

Loki did say nothing. Not that he understood where it had been coming from or that he was pleased to have such a diplomatic recovery or that he honestly kind of didn’t accept the apology at all and could tell it was forced; well, what did that change? He didn’t want to be making enemies here and would rather make amends now and be done. He assumed it was a common experience.

The main doors closing echoed through the building. Thor came up the stairs with the menu airplane and set it on the table.

“I think I could take back what I shared,” Loki said, “if you wanted. You shouldn’t be shouldering memories that aren’t your own.”

“Leave it. They’re probably good to keep on me. Helps me understand.”

It was a brave move; even though they had never happened to him they would feel like it and likely blend irreversibly into everything else someday. What it would help understand wasn’t clear. Maybe why those many years ago hadn’t been a fair test of character. Maybe why it had happened. Maybe nothing, really, because not one single factor could explain such a matter in its entirety. Still, it was thoughtful to seek empathy.

“I’m sorry for slamming you into a wall,” Loki said.

Steve managed a thin smile. “It didn’t hurt.”

“To be clear, I don’t expect your trust. I don’t expect anyone’s. But... I’d rather not discuss the last few years at this time.”

“I see why. Do you want to start over?”

“Absolutely.” Loki stuck out a hand. “Hi, I’m Loki. I like long walks by myself, mysteries and romances, and I don’t want to take over the world. Don’t attack me and I won’t attack you.”

Steve’s grip was very firm. “Hi. I’m... Steve Rogers.”

“And?”

“I don’t think he has any interests other than patriotism,” Sam said across from them. Tony wheezed and pretended not to be listening.

“Surely something,” Loki said with a smile.

“Big fan of dogs too,” Steve said.

“Excellent! So am I. Mostly the big ones.”

“The big ones are the best ones.”

“I love big dogs,” Peter said. “Especially the really dumb friendly ones.”

“Exactly!” Loki said. “You understand.”

“See?” Sam said. “Common ground already. Glad you made up.”

The look they shared as they escaped the taut handshake wasn’t so clear on that and they were already parting ways again. Steve joined another table and Loki went to get the book that was still in the kitchen. Peter returned to his room and reappeared with a fat backpack over one shoulder. They stalled for time over a wild and long debate on things that did not matter, such as fabric, weather, and robots, which led to Tony holding a passionate speech on the history of silicon and its use as a semiconductor. Loki threw in some points about alternate materials elsewhere in the

universe and the similarities and differences. Peter, who knew more about the topic as a whole, spent a huge part of the conversation exchanging fun facts with Tony. Everything considered, it felt remarkably ordinary and Loki thought it would be nice if they had more evenings like this going forward. He hoped. And Tony did manage to segue into something about setting aside grudges so they could get more meaningful things done.

It wasn't an easy issue; everyone had one grudge or another and Tony was audibly struggling through some parts. He kept looking at Bucky. He kept looking at Steve. He kept looking at Loki, who tried hard to appear nonthreatening but wasn't able. "But we can't do this again," he said. "The last few days have been awful for everyone and we have a lot to deal with and I want us to be able to focus on that, not... everything. Leave the drama at the door. If we can't keep this place neutral, it's not going to work."

"I like that," Thor said.

Tony couldn't smile. "I hope it lasts this time," he said, seeming to be remembering something.

"For Asgard's sake?"

Many eyes turned to Svala, who said nothing.

"It's a good sake," Loki said. "I think it merits effort. I'm willing if everyone else is."

There was a long silence.

"I'm willing," Steve said. A few nods followed him. He seemed just as lost as Tony; if he could do it, maybe they all could.

"Good," Tony said.

Pepper got up to go fetch their order.

That was that, then. Tony never did tape his single rule anywhere, which was disappointing, but it was clear enough. They went back to less stressful conversation: this time, how to build the perfect paper airplane. Although it was still an uneasy situation, they were able to get over the worst of it and Loki did not spend much longer wondering who would fight first. It was a tragic feast, but not a bad one. Peter shared his tea with Svala and passed him a fortune cookie to open but not to eat. It said *You are doing everything you are supposed to be doing*, which Loki doubted but he supposed he should keep it in mind. He hoped it was true.

Chapter End Notes

we stan a comic relief chapter with serious undertones

Methods for the Madness

Chapter Summary

Maybe he was wrong.

Chapter Notes

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

There was a sense of obligation in the morning; it felt like the first day they were to start some kind of proper work now that the groundwork had been established and a plan set out. It was a very cold and clear and fresh morning and a good day for beginnings. But Loki couldn't stomach it, and, numb and exhausted under the tangled bedsheets, he didn't get up for a long, long time after when he should have. Much of it was trying to shake himself awake only to realize it wasn't going. More was spent staring at the wall on his side dreading how long this bout might last: most weren't brief. He supposed this was his life now and for the foreseeable future. He also supposed he should close his eyes and go back to sleep, but he never did. Largely he just waited even longer to be sure no one would be around to fight him about not doing anything.

The common area was empty by the time Loki left and he went only because he thought it useful to check for cold coffee and run, which he did. After many yawns, he found a mug, set it on the counter, and (breathed) tipped out what remained in the pot slowly, soundlessly, and as precisely as he could. The mug was large enough that there were several inches to the rim so he didn't have to worry about spilling. He steadied the pot, docked it, and (breathed?) reheated the coffee himself with thermokinesis like it was not a gargantuan waste of both time and energy when he could happily tolerate stale caffeine. Not even any sugar nor something in place of cream; who cared? He was too out of it to give a damn and just took his magically reheated coffee and trudged back to his room.

But those lights were humming. Static sounds and city noises from an open window. Loki felt himself vanishing as he breathed. He thought about spilling the (hot) coffee on himself if he wasn't careful. He watched it with cold and murky eyes. Leather on skin. Feathery steam. There must be quite a bit to clean from the floor.

He locked the door behind him and sat at the table.

Ah—and that: he visualized the electrical matrix, found the outlier, and broke in. Maybe this was why he was so uneasy. “Good morning, FRIDAY,” he said. “Could you relay a message to Tony? I know you're spying.”

There was no answer for a while, and, were he any less confident, he would have convinced himself he was insane and talking to himself, but he waited her out. “Not exactly,” she said. “In this room I can only track audio and energy levels and extrapolate whether you are here or not based on the spikes in activity your magic creates throughout the building. As there are no cameras in any of the private quarters, I have no other power here.”

“But you *are* spying, then.”

“Yes.”

Loki took a long and furtive sip from the mug.

“If it’s any solace to you I can access other rooms as well,” FRIDAY said, “but I’ve been told to keep an eye on this one.”

Taking the system offline entirely would be a liability; a scramble should suffice. No hard feelings on FRIDAY’s end: she was just doing her job. But if this was Tony’s idea of trust and neutrality then there would be problems.

“Anyway,” Loki opened above the mug, “if you’re listening to this then you’ve discovered I’ve blocked your AI from accessing my room. Very sorry about that but I will not be taking compromises on my privacy. Trust means trust, Tony. If I cannot be left unattended even here then I will not be staying. I realize you’re concerned about me and I appreciate that, but this is incredibly patronizing and a fundamental act of disrespect against my word. I honour my truces. If you don’t, then you shouldn’t be offering them in the first place.”

Maybe this wasn’t a good idea after all.

“Frankly, I don’t understand what you’re so worried about,” Loki said, getting up with his coffee to go get the rest of the wheatless dairyless but otherwise very delicious chow mein from the fridge. No, this was a normal breakfast, yes, he knew what he was doing, leave him alone. “I have nothing here but myself. There’s very little I can get to on my own and none of it is any of your concern.” He paused to unpack and warm the food. “I think you should know”—he grabbed a fork and returned to the table with everything—“that supervision isn’t what’s stopping me. I’m not keeping my head down because I don’t want to get caught. I’m keeping my head down because I don’t want to fight anymore. I think—”

(heart racing?)

The fork in his hand didn’t feel there.

“I’m not some prisoner here,” Loki said, very quiet, his voice suddenly strange and distant. “If that truce really is still on, then you’ll respect this. I won’t harm you if you won’t harm me and if you need security here to make sure of that then maybe we need to re-examine our agreement. And don’t try to override the magic, by the way: it won’t work. Talk to me if you have an issue, which you should have done before this.”

FRIDAY said nothing, but he got the overwhelming sense she agreed.

“If Tony insults me after this,” Loki said, “and I have a feeling he will, then would you please tell him—and only if he insults me first—he can bite my ass?”

Nice. That’ll teach him.

“Fine,” she said.

In spite of the fleeting panic in his chest, the sense that he was doing something terribly, dangerously wrong though he was well within reason, a sliver of a grin darted across his lips.

“Thank you.”

“I hope you’re aware how unwise this is.”

“I am. He’ll come after me at some point. I know he will.”

Or maybe not. Maybe Tony wouldn’t look; maybe he would never even realize. FRIDAY said nothing as Loki raised a hand and blocked it all with a quick gesture. Just like that—a low sort of magical scramble around the room that was just the sort of thing he needed to counter her without any damage. Peace and quiet. Tony wouldn’t notice a thing unless he searched.

Loki picked up the fork, thinking he should have kept the chopsticks, and started his... brunch.

It felt odd to be eating alone like this and he wasn’t wholly certain he liked it. Raised on extravagant meals and family feasts, it had become typical to only do this if something was wrong: he was away or in trouble or ill and dying. Running from the end of the world with a stolen salad from a grocery store. Trying not to remember the sour scraps he’d eaten alone in

To be fair, he did drastically oversleep. He’d just missed breakfast; no big deal. Everything was fine—or, well, everything except for the part where he was eating with a fork because he was exactly the sort of pretentious twit that would find issue in that. As he scraped at the corners, though, shovelling the last noodles onto the flat of the prongs, his mind wandered elsewhere: he missed Peter. It wasn’t quite a full-fledged yearning so much as he wanted some more time whittling away all that gloom together. There was something special in the way Peter treated him, a profound sense of love and wonder that was rare to come by, and its absence left a void. Peter knew what had happened. Peter knew there was no good reason to trust him and trusted him regardless. Peter made him smile. But what was he saying? It was as pathetic as all those memories; why care so much about someone he didn’t even know? Why let himself grow fond? Peter was a good person, but loving him would be the first mistake here and maybe a costly one. Reason to let down the guard. Reason to...

Loki stared at the empty mug.

There was a dishwasher in the kitchen, but for three items it felt a little wasteful and it would take too long to wash them by hand. So he cleaned them with magic, vanishing what remained with a green flash in very much the same way he had found to clean himself without need for a shower, and returned the fork to its drawer and then headed down to drop off the container and mug. It was still as forlorn as before, luckily. He rummaged through the kitchen cabinets, found where the reusable containers went, and carefully stacked the one he was carrying atop the not-so-structurally-sound pile on the shelf. Then, once he was sure they wouldn’t fall if he breathed on them, he shut the cabinet door and walked out.

Right: now what?

The empty room did not answer him, nor did the papers on the table. There was still no clear objective for him here: he had helped Tony with the search and helped set up some plans but

otherwise didn't have much to do at this point. And Natasha had never gotten back to him on all his legal matters anyway—how did he know he wouldn't get mobbed if he went out alone? People like Stephen Strange may have only lost interest because he was under watch. So he... well, he didn't do nothing. He went to see what was in the building. He *was* allowed. Tony hadn't said no, just not to touch anything he wasn't supposed to. Tony also hadn't said exactly what he wasn't supposed to touch.

Big was an understatement; the compound was huge. There was everything—several floors across several buildings of shiny storage rooms, research rooms, conference rooms, and more. Places like the tech lab Tony had occupied and places like their gathering spot and its forest of holographic displays. A gym with all sorts of training equipment and an infirmary beside it. Massive garages and a more massive hangar filled with jets, helicopters, and anything else someone might need as well as a dock outside. It was just what you would expect of the Avengers and the money that must have gone into it was unfathomable. But it was empty, seemingly abandoned before it had ever been populated to begin with. They had everything and there was no one to use it. Too much drama; maybe the public view was just as unsavoury as the private one.

Loki returned to the hangar, alone, and stared down its long expanse. His boots left echoes on the hard floor. The scorched escape pod felt small beneath the arena of planes and so did he.

He pushed open the creaking hatch and sat inside.

They made these standard-issue: they were sturdy, cheap, and portable and a staple in the spacefaring universe. One would hope they didn't have to spend long in one because their portability made them cramped and uncomfortable, especially since many times more passengers than built for would be forced to crowd, but they were efficient in their getaways and often enough to reach safety elsewhere. That would assume, of course, no one attacked them as they had no onboard weapons with which to defend. Unfortunately, most catastrophic ship failures were a result of attacks. They also did not often have food or drink onboard as many ship crews tended to ill-prioritize that until too late. But on the off chance their assailant didn't catch up and the passengers didn't starve, they did a good job.

If Loki forgot that these had been their few survivors' only life raft through a cold storm of death then it almost felt cozy. Like a little reading nook. He examined all of the buttons and tabs and wondered how good the autopilot had been. Did everyone have flying experience? He did, as did many people in Asgard: it was rare to find someone who had not travelled by starship at least once in their lifetime and there was a vast culture around shipwork and piloting. But to the commoner, who did not care for travel beyond their neighbourhood, it may not have been so essential. Despite the long months he had never acquainted himself with everyone aboard the Statesman to know from what kind of life they'd hailed and it worried him now.

He leaned back in the seat. It still smelled faintly of space.

No one knew this was his fault. Maybe Thor, but he didn't seem to have told anyone. That Thanos never would have tracked them if not for the Infinity Stone aboard and wouldn't have led such a massacre. The shadow looming above their suddenly tiny and helpless ship was burned into Loki's memory. Well, it all was. The realization—oh, shit, he knew that one; he had been on it before. He knew them. He knew what happened there. Glory! Rejoice: today they were a part of something greater. No old god could help him because what Thanos wanted Thanos got. Not this again. What a miserable wretch he was to fall prey to this man twice. And so oh—oh, gods above, not this, not like this, not you; no wonder he couldn't face him. No one faced Thanos and came out alive. He

wished he could have found the strength earlier, before everyone had already been killed. He wished he didn't have to stand alone on Titan knowing no amount of blood he shed would bring them back. If this was the best he could do, then he was glad he wasn't king: he didn't deserve a throne.

Thanos. Thanos Thanos Thanos. Loki stared at the planes through the glass and tried not to cry.

He left the hangar heavier than before, not sure why he had come at all, and kept stirring around looking for something to do. Tony's workshop seemed empty as well: he knocked many different times but never got an answer. Before he knew what he was doing or could stop himself, he snaked an ounce of kinetic energy through the tumblers, lined them up, and unlocked the door. Tony... may kill him for this.

He mostly just wanted to see what there was—nothing malicious. If FRIDAY was still snooping, she could say as much. It was a big room and although Tony was keen to complain about the technological inadequacy, much of the equipment inside looked incredibly expensive and advanced: one did not see this on Earth very often. Keyboard aside, the intricacy of everything was stunning. And while Loki did not bother himself with these fields nor know enough about them to appreciate many of the machines around, he admired the space Tony had cultivated here. It felt familiar in a way, not at all different from the rich clutter he would have built for spellwork and magical study given the opportunity.

There was a folder on the desk labelled "For Shredding." Loki opened it. It was a file on himself, standard biography and criminal information with an unflattering photo attached. His name had been whited out and rewritten a few times and was simply itself now with no surname, which he realized he liked. He wanted to read the long parts but never did; he couldn't imagine how bad it must be and he would do nothing but further remind himself of things that ought to be forgotten. Whoever had decided this was to be destroyed, he hoped they knew what it meant to him.

Holding this folder knowing that he had broken into the room completely unprompted was not a good feeling and he wondered if he even deserved it. He closed the folder, put it back on the desk, and locked the door behind him. In the end he just returned to his room and stuck himself in the couch with the giant history book and a huge and heavy fur blanket from storage and pretended he was elsewhere.

Many hours later, there was a loud and violent chain of knocks on the door. "Loki!" Thor shouted. It sounded like something was on fire.

Loki fell out of the couch and went to open the door. "What?" he snapped.

"Dinner's ready," Thor said.

Loki stared back at him. "All that for dinner?"

"I thought you might be asleep," Thor said.

"At this hour?"

"Magical exhaustion does tend to result in physical exhaustion as well."

"How would you know that?"

“You’ve told me.”

“What? I’ve never told you anything.”

“So are you coming for dinner?”

“Is this a trick?”

“Why would I trick you?”

Loki gave him the look of someone who had been tricked many millions of times before.

“I tried it,” Thor said. “It’s good. It shouldn’t harm you.”

“Alright,” Loki said. “Thank you.”

Thor nodded and went back down. Loki tidied up and then followed him. Somehow it seemed emptier than the previous night although it looked like there was a similar amount of people. Whatever was on smelled good; Loki wasn’t too mad about the aggressive invite.

“There he is,” Tony said at the table. “How’s your day been so far?”

“Fine. What am I smelling?”

“Pork and sweet potatoes! Absolutely fabulous.”

Loki went to the kitchen for a plate and then found a seat.

There were papers around but nothing projected at the moment: it wasn’t fair to spoil dinner with more bad news. So they ate over light conversation and tried not to kill each other, which went surprisingly well. Still, there was an empty sort of dread hanging over the place, as if they were about to discover something terrible or perhaps already had. Nothing on the topic of him spending the day exploring nor that he was here at all—now that the initial shock had worn off there seemed to be bigger problems. Natasha was typing on a laptop between bites and Tony checked his phone often.

Many people split after dinner, but it was still very full when they opened everything for another evening summary of the situation.

“And this is the search you were working on,” Thor said as Tony scrolled through something.

“Uh-huh.”

“Is it done?”

“Not yet, but it’s starting to stall out.”

“But that’s quite a lot so far.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

Loki watched thinly over another coffee. “How many?”

They looked at him and then at each other.

“Um... I mean, it’s not done yet,” Tony said.

“But it’s close.”

The rest of the table was waiting as well.

“How many, Tony?”

He said nothing.

Loki got up and walked around for a better look. “Relax,” he said as Tony shirked away. “I just want to see.” He flicked through the images.

Tony, not knowing what to say, watched heavily. They must have all felt it. The quiet room became even quieter.

“That’s all?” Loki softly said.

“Yeah.”

“That can’t be right.”

“That’s what it says.”

Loki sat back down. “Twenty-seven?”

“But that’s only who we found on Earth,” Tony said, maybe sensing the alarm. “We don’t know that most of the survivors aren’t doing just fine somewhere else.”

“Thanos wouldn’t have let them go far,” Loki said, no more comforted. His voice felt a bit thinner. His chest was shutting. It felt like something inside him had died.

Tony turned the displays off.

“I told you this was useless.”

“Okay.”

“Okay?” Loki yelled. “Does this look okay to you?”

“That’s... that’s not what I meant,” Tony stammered. “I, um—”

“Loki,” Thor said.

“Don’t.”

He didn’t.

“Thank you for the dinner,” Loki said, and then he took his coffee and went back to his room for the night.

:(

Hopes

Chapter Summary

Tony tries to maintain a positive outlook.

Chapter Notes

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

It was still true the scan had never finished, and, perhaps more optimistic than most or just too stubborn to go down this early, Tony held on to the uncertainty. He knew this kind of tired cynicism and he knew it made sense; the chances were miserable at best even if they pulled out all the stops and he was probably only stalling. He suspected as much. But he meant to see it through regardless and it was the very first thing on his mind when he woke: how long had it been, anyway? Had he missed something? Maybe he needed to run it again.

He stared up at the ceiling as the last of whatever he'd dreamt misted away, and then, deciding that it wasn't at all as urgent as it felt, he turned onto his side and smushed his face deeper into Pepper's arms and, like everyone else must have also been doing, tried to imagine the world wasn't once again in shambles. This didn't really work, but it did the trick at least for as long as it took him to slowly and unwillingly ooze himself off the bed and go get dressed. Then he left to figure out a breakfast because thus far there was food only in the communal kitchen: he heard Pepper follow.

Maybe it was one of those mornings for everyone else too. No one had even made coffee; they just sort of sat there with the information.

"Where are we at?" Tony asked as he joined the table.

"Trying to get in touch with everyone," Natasha said. "So far eight people have gotten back to us about the situation and they're happy to stay here. There are a few injuries that need to get looked at but it doesn't sound like anything serious."

"Okay, does anyone need transport?"

"Already arranged."

"That was fast. Did Pete leave? I don't want him missing school."

"We kicked him out," Sam said. "He said he'll come in this evening."

"Ha. Okay."

It felt empty without him and Loki. Thor was elsewhere as well. Bucky too. Tony hoped they were up to better things than staring at spreadsheets on an empty stomach at eight in the morning. At least no one was fighting, though. He scrolled through some things.

"Is Loki up?" Bruce asked.

“Probably not,” Tony said. “I can go check.”

Bruce nodded.

The door was locked when Tony found it. He wasn't sure if he should knock and hesitated for quite some time there, but in the end he gave it a few raps anyway. There was no answer at first. “Hey Lokes, you awake?”

Somewhere inside, Tony heard a muffled, sleep-dazed, “No.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“What do you want?”

“I was just checking if you want to come talk some stuff over with us, maybe figure out a plan for the day. We can make breakfast too.”

“You woke me up and there's not even breakfast yet? What's wrong with you?”

“But I can—it won't take that long! Really, maybe like ten minutes. I just need to, uh—”

There was a loud grunt and the sound of a couch heaving followed by a thud. Then the lock clicked free. Loki came to the door looking like a train had hit him: his eyes weren't fully open and his hair curled and frizzed in every single direction and the fur blanket was tangled halfway around him and dragging on the floor. He was the spitting image of Goth Merida after all, Tony thought, and he also looked like shit. Maybe it was better to let him sleep. But it was too late.

“What?” Loki said again, glaring half-lucidly at him.

“Um... sorry,” Tony said.

“*You're* sorry?” Loki snapped. “It took me hours to get to sleep last night! I was finally getting comfortable.”

Tony tried not to start crying. “There's just a lot of stuff going on and it would be nice to get your input or something—”

“Do I look capable of input right now?”

“You look really nice with your hair like this.”

Loki, a bit like a computer that had crashed and was currently rebooting, stared back at him with no discernible reaction for a few seconds. “You must be joking,” he said.

“You have good curls,” Tony stammered, too far to back out now. “A lot of people pay money for that! It looks really... thick... and healthy.”

Loki continued staring at him. “May I go back to sleep now?”

“Yep. Sorry I bothered you.”

“*Bjáni.*”

“What?”

Loki slammed the door shut.

“Okay,” Tony said, and then he pretended this had not happened and went back down to the common area and sat and exhaled hugely.

“No?” Bruce said.

“He yelled at me for waking him up and then slammed the door in my face so I’m going to assume so, yeah. Pretty sure he also called me a dumbass.”

“Don’t take it personally.”

“Trying not to. Where’d Thor run off?”

“He’s with Bucky in Wakanda,” Natasha said. “They think we might be able to set up there until we can figure everything out.”

“Wakanda! No way. I guess Bucky’s pretty good friends with them, though, huh? That would be fantastic if he could work something out there. What does everyone think of that?”

Natasha seemed to shrug. “There’s not much of a consensus,” she said. “So far it looks like as long as it’s clean and safe no one cares where they go. But... this will be good.”

“It sounds like it. Wow, that’s great news.”

There were notes on that too: correspondences and requests and explanations both printed and digital all around the table. Big and important connections with the right people for a situation of this magnitude. Largely they were just asking everyone, throwing ideas back and forth until they found something that stuck. Tony still liked the thought of Norway as a permanent location and hoped they could come up with an arrangement. First they needed a shorter-term solution that was not a spare wing in the Avengers compound, though, which just might be Wakanda after all. It seemed like fate; maybe Thor and Bucky would have some luck winning them over.

“I guess we all know what we’re doing,” Tony said after a long silence. “Dinner at six?”

Yep: this was definitely one of those mornings.

They got up and got their things and parted for the day. Natasha continued working on some things in the corner. Tony went to deal with his worsening caffeine addiction and Pepper went to make a breakfast, which no one else had found the energy to do, although she could not decide on something to make with what was available. Mostly the two of them wondered how they managed to get dragged into this again, but at least it was just a lot of logistical work and not more alien warfare. Nothing they didn’t already do.

“Good morning,” Tony said as Loki shuffled into the kitchen and fell onto the couch.

“Good morning,” Loki mumbled above a sleepy nod. “I’m sorry I yelled at you.”

“It’s okay. Did you want a summary?”

Loki shook his head.

“You do look very nice like this,” Tony said about the braided-back bangs to keep some of the curls out of the way.

“You *are* allowed to laugh.”

“Nope. Honest.” Tony filled the first mugful for him and then returned the empty pot to continue brewing. “How’s sleeping in armour, though?” he said as he set the mug on the table.

“Cozy,” Loki said, graciously taking the mug. “You should try it.”

“I have. Can’t say I agree.”

“Was it leather?”

“Point taken.”

Pepper looked skeptical, if perhaps uneasy, as Tony sat beside him on the couch without the usual buffer space between them. There was no way someone barely keeping their eyes open was a threat, but one never knew. “I hope you have ideas for breakfast,” she said, scanning the fridge again.

“If you let me in there I could make something,” Tony said.

“You don’t know how to cook.”

“Hey! I only burn eggs sometimes. Leave me alone.”

“How do you burn eggs?” Loki asked.

“With great dedication,” Pepper said.

Tony got up, angrily snatched a mandarin from the fruit bowl, and sat back down. “I want a steak for breakfast,” he said.

“We are not having a steak for breakfast.”

“But you’d have it for lunch? Breakfast is a construct, Pepper.”

“There’s no steak here.”

“Fine. Then salad.”

Pepper seemed to consider this. She grabbed an armful of produce and then closed the fridge and moved to the counter.

“Natasha’s still here if you want to go talk to her,” Tony said as he peeled the mandarin. He offered it to Loki, who took a few pieces. “She’s making a lot of progress on your case.”

“Why?”

“Well, maybe ask what the details are, see what that means for you—”

“Why is she bothering with me?”

Tony didn't know what to say. He watched Loki pick apart the pieces with sleepy fingers and eat them just as tiredly. Wash it down with more coffee. It looked like they were losing each other and the fatigue might win again soon; he braced to catch the mug at some point.

"Because Thor asked her to?" Loki mumbled above a sip.

"No," Tony said. "She has her own reasons. I think she really does want to give you a fighting chance independent of all of that."

"Because she owes me," Loki deduced with another tired nod.

"What? No. Like, she legitimately wants to help. I'm impressed."

"So she wants to use me for something, then?"

This train of conversation felt familiar.

"I appreciate the effort," Loki said, nodding again. "It must be a complicated matter."

Tony handed him the rest of the mandarin. "Maybe you should eat and go back to sleep."

"That might be wise."

Pepper finished assembling the salad and got a bowl for herself. "I need to go look for some things," she said, also taking a fork, "but I'm free if anyone needs me."

"Have fun," Tony said, although that was unlikely knowing their date had been spoiled by a sentient prune from outer space trying to kill everyone only to somehow reunite the Avengers instead and she had to clean his mess now by consequence of association. He got up and went to split the remainder between him and Loki. "Do you want to come help me out with some stuff today?"

"I want to sleep and then keep reading."

"Oh. Okay. Dinner at six?"

Loki nodded, but it looked like he wasn't listening anymore. He got his half-finished coffee and his half-finished mandarin and one of the bowls on the kitchen counter and then disappeared back down the hall with no farewell or further conversation. Tony supposed that could have gone worse and took everything to his workshop.

A day couldn't have been enough for such a search and Loki had a point: there was no way their final estimate was twenty-seven. It was surreal and arbitrary and hard to buy even with the increasingly concrete evidence because it made no sense. There were things in this universe that should not be possible, things that stuck out like they had been pasted there from another reality and then peeled away to reveal some kind of cosmic prank—the very uncanny things; a face that wasn't a face and a danger that only showed itself in fragments. How many people remained of Asgard felt the same. It might have made sense if Tony had been there to see the blood firsthand instead of struggling to assemble narratives from the few horrific details anyone dared mention, but maybe it still wouldn't. He could only perceive it as the data and he suspected that was the case for all of them. It wasn't real; how could it be? It felt like a bad joke. But there it was in the middle of the screen:

28 MATCHES FOUND

28, not 27, on account of Thor, but not 29—28 officially; and not 28 found so far or 28 found search in progress. 28, search complete. Tony stared at the number until the pixels had burned themselves into his retinas, as if he could rewrite it through willpower alone, and tried to comprehend it.

It mostly just felt like... nothing.

There must have been more to the matter; it was never as simple as launching a few computer programs and waiting a few days and then receiving an answer, case closed, go home. There were next steps, secrets to solve, followups to run. Several dozen calls and some cross-checking to realize he hadn't even done it right and he had to start over and then they would have the correct results. And they would not be so bad. Just a wrong calculation, thankfully! Here was the proper answer. But Tony could not find a next step and he could not find anything wrong about the input and he felt his heart sink into the chair along with him. What did he tell Loki? What did he tell Svala and the children like her? He had no good news, only this and a million other tragedies. At best it didn't hurt him because they were not his friends and family that he had lost; he was just their messenger. He wondered how they hadn't shattered altogether.

He still suspected they were misleading themselves looking at who had made it to Earth and that many more had found safety elsewhere, undetected and unbeknownst to the rest. Finding a warp to even anywhere nearby was an impossible feat of luck and not a fair read on the situation. There must have been countless other routes and the warp itself hadn't been the most predictable; it was perfectly plausible that the same warp had taken people to different places and Tony had heard of such a phenomenon before. It already seemed quite certain that at least one person left unaccounted for was alive—the nameless warrior who had helped herd the ship's passengers and then vanished amid the flames. They had found no corpse nor her weapons and she was not one to go down without a fight and if she and everyone with her had survived the initial onslaught, then they could have very well escaped and found safety in a different direction. The escape pods were hardy and so were they; it must have been possible.

Still, the empty number on the screen was disheartening. Thanos wouldn't have let them go far; of that much, Loki seemed certain. Maybe they all were and he was just the only one to show it.

There were other things which were not so disheartening, such as the repairs, and Tony was excited to see what the deal with Wakanda was because even if they converted a few dozen extra rooms into dorms this wasn't the best solution. And if they had a country like that to back them up then they would stand a pretty decent chance elsewhere; friends in high places were invaluable in situations like these. Given the circumstances and that they had only just started, he didn't think it was half bad. But maybe he was also too optimistic for his own good. It was enough that he believed anyone else was still alive. In any case, he got quite a bit done. He met with some people and he exchanged some information and he came back with yet more forms and contracts and then did it again. He wished Loki would come out for a minute to proofread everything, but Thor was the king; though input from everyone and certainly his brother would be nice, his was the final word. If Loki or anyone else wanted no part in it, no one could force them. So Tony went about

compiling bits and pieces for whomever it concerned and with time to spare, too. After hearing a few new people had been dropped off at their tragic little glorified warehouse, he went to go say hi.

More crates filled the yard and there was a giant standing tent over another escape craft, this one in much worse shape; Tony wondered how it had held at all. Thor and Bucky were back and talking with everyone over some food.

“There you are,” Thor said. “You missed the fun.”

“Couldn’t have been very fun without me,” Tony said. “How’d it go?”

“They need to think about it,” Bucky said, “but it sounded good. We might have something by the end of the week.”

“Wow, that was fast. I hope it works out.”

“I think it will. Thanks, Tony.”

Tony’s smile was tired and reluctant, but not much more. It was a big favour, after all.

“Have you seen Loki?” Thor asked.

“He came out for five minutes to get breakfast and then immediately went back to his room. He was pretty out of it. I don’t think he slept well.”

“Fair enough. Magical exhaustion’s not easy on the body. It might be some time before he fully recovers.”

Tony remembered watching him toss and turn on a couch and wondered if that was the case.

“Tell him there’s chocolate,” the wolfish girl beside Svala chimed in. “He *should* come.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t wake him up again,” Tony said. “He was pretty mad at me earlier.”

“He’ll be madder if he finds out we ate everything without him.”

Tony contemplated this deeply. “What does Thor say?”

“She may be right,” Thor said. “According to him, chocolate is one of the only good things to come out of this planet. That and coffee.”

“I think I agree,” Tony said.

“Man has his priorities straight,” Bucky said. “I’ll go slide this under his door.” He grabbed a chocolate bar off a table with other sweets and wrote *More outside* on the wrapper and then left.

“There is no way that’s going to work,” Tony said.

Bucky returned shortly with no Loki.

“At least you tried,” Tony said.

Bucky shrugged.

“So who’s this kid?” Tony said as the other girl reappeared with more food. She looked older than Svala but not by much and had the complexion of a woodsy mountain.

“Crow,” she said over a mouthful of cookie.

“Crow?”

“It’s a nickname,” Svala said.

“Am I allowed to know what it’s a nickname for?”

“No,” Crow said.

“No,” Svala said as well.

“Okay, Crow it is,” Tony said. “Cool. Who brought the food?”

They looked at each other.

“Natasha?” Svala said.

“Really? Wow. She’s doing a lot of hard work here, huh?”

“I like her,” Crow said over another cookie. “Val would have liked her too.”

“I’m sure she will,” Thor said; Tony tried to smile. “We’ll introduce them if we see her.”

Svala and Crow did not look convinced, nor did Thor: it sounded like he was just desperately trying to lighten the situation. Tony hoped she was alive but wondered if maybe he was being too optimistic too.

Loki appeared suddenly in a flicker of green. “First of all, how dare you?”

“Told you,” Bucky said; Tony almost choked laughing.

Loki threw the chocolate at him. “This has milk in it.”

“Oh, sorry.” Bucky flipped it over to read the ingredients. “I think there are other kinds.”

Loki sighed and went to look.

“I can’t believe that worked,” Tony said, joining him at the table.

“Neither can I,” Loki said. “What can I say? I’ve got a weakness.”

“Any other weaknesses?”

“That you should know? No, that’s mostly it.”

There was something so strangely familiar about watching him sift through all the desserts. He seemed so... human. That wasn’t the right word, of course, but Tony couldn’t figure out how else to describe it. That they were just ordinary people here stuck in the very same life—different but not where it mattered. Was this how Loki was supposed to be? Without Thanos? It was lovely. They needed more people like him around.

“Wanna come say hi to Svala?” Tony said.

“No.”

Spoken too soon; Tony frowned.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Loki said. “I just really need to be alone today.”

“Okay. I... hope you feel better?”

“Thank you.”

“What are you up to tonight?”

“Not much. Just reading. I might make some tea later.”

“Are you planning on coming for dinner?”

“I don’t think so. I’m not very hungry.”

“Am I bothering you too much?”

“Only a little.”

“Sorry.”

Loki left the table with a stack of various desserts as well as a few more savoury items. He smiled and waved an excited chocolate bar at Svala, who smiled and waved back, and then he vanished. The sparks in the air fizzled away as if he had never even been there.

“He seems satisfied,” Bucky said.

“Yep,” Tony said.

None of them spent much longer outside: some people went to the spare wing and some people left again for other business and Tony just went back up to look at everything and see where they were at. As usual, the only substantial change was an increase in expenses. He bounced around for a while, checking facts and reading some things, and even stopped to run the search again though he didn’t think it would do anything.

As the team trickled into the common space, Tony was skeptical. He stared at all the stale data.

“Still no Loki?” Bruce asked.

“Not today,” Tony said. He was sure some of this might be useful to learn, but after the last time, he wondered if maybe it wasn’t. The number projected between the photos and lists felt no less empty than before, nor did the names and confirmed found. Was that all this was? Data? He realized how heavily these sorts of things had weighed on him when he was in it full-time and questioned whether he should have bothered coming back.

Beside her papers, Natasha picked at a plate of finger food from downstairs.

“He has been through a lot,” Tony said, leaning on a hand. “I don’t think it’s fair to expect him.”

“Not fair?” Steve said. “This is Asgard we’re talking about.”

“People grieve differently,” Natasha said, the words very plain and gentle, as she stared down the papers in front of her. Tony, already suspecting the same, left it there. Bruce seemed to understand as well. Maybe it hadn’t even occurred to the rest of them; Loki didn’t look the type. That one? Their Loki that had almost destroyed a city and everyone in it and laughed? But it would explain a lot. They were all quiet.

“It’s not that complicated,” Tony said. “We can get on fine. He already helped with the most important part. Don’t worry about him.”

Peter, also with a plate full of snacks, was clearly doing just that.

“ Any dinner plans?” Tony asked, hoping to change the topic.

They thought on it for a while but no one seemed to know or care. Those that did had already figured something out. Peter loudly snapped a ranch-dipped celery stick.

“... Okay.” Tony got up and took his things with him. “Goodnight, folks.”

On the way out, he called Pepper for that fancy dinner.

Chapter End Notes

Tony slowly coming to terms with the fact that he may be considered a "normal person" in the company of these freaks

And on It Goes

Chapter Summary

Loki struggles to cope with the new developments. Tony tries to keep the peace between everyone.

Chapter Notes

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

Days passed and Loki did not show.

Much of it would be the tail end of magical exhaustion after all; tired aches that came and went and a questionable appetite as his body scrambled to make up for him blowing out what was effectively raw vitality. His sleep was strange and feverish and the hours were a thin blur dotted with random bouts of shivering and nausea. And he did try to sleep. Sometimes he came to panicking but not knowing why, stumbling into the bathroom in the middle of the night only to forget why he was there and half-lucidly empty himself with the very magic he was straining to conserve. At one point he could not stop sneezing and he also began to smell something similar to burnt lavender and sage. But this thankfully did not last, and, for the most part, he busied himself reading books and taking the occasional walk around the yard for no other reason than he could not bear the drama.

“How long does it take to recover from a fight?” Steve said at the table.

“Thor already explained this,” Tony said. “Loki used up pretty much all of his magic running around that day and it can take ages to come back from. It’s not like normal exhaustion.”

Loki, not fully awake in the kitchen, pretended he was alone.

“What *is* magic?” Sam asked.

“I think it depends,” Bucky said, “but he said a lot of the time it’s like you’re harnessing your life force, so it makes sense that if you go too heavy on it you’re not going to feel good.”

“Yeah, huh?” Tony said. “Hey Lokes, is that true?”

“Lokes?” Steve said with a furrow of his brow.

Loki set down the coffee pot. “Does it matter? Either way, you won’t leave me alone.”

“I was just wondering,” Tony said. “I don’t know anything about magic.”

“What does it feel like?” Sam asked.

“Awful,” Loki said.

“How long has it been? A week?”

“Longer if you keep harassing me. Who made this? It tastes like coal.”

“That coal is strong,” Tony said, raising a mug. “You’ll appreciate it later.”

“Man, don’t give him your caffeine addiction,” Sam said.

“Hey.”

Loki took his cup of coal and left the kitchen.

“Come down for dinner,” Tony called after him, but he never did.

The next morning, there was a knock on his door. He went to open it.

“Good morning,” Thor said.

“What do you want?”

“Svala’s mother is ill.”

Oh, gods, what a terrible way to start a morning. “And you call that good?” Loki said, stepping out and shutting the door behind him. “Ill how? Where is she?”

“It doesn’t seem serious,” Thor said. “She’s been in some kind of pain recently. She said you might have an idea.”

“Is she getting proper help? I’m not proper help. I’m not a healer; you know that, right? I’m probably why she’s like this in the first place.”

“I don’t think so. It looks like you healed her fairly well given the injury. But she is getting proper help.”

“And Svala?”

“We’re looking after her for the day.”

Loki pressed a hand to his forehead and tried to relax. “It... might be the bones,” he muttered eventually. “There were some breaks and I don’t think they set well.”

“That could be it,” Thor said. “I’ll let them know. Thank you.”

Thor looked like he wanted to ask how things were going, but he didn’t. He turned and headed down the hall to find whoever he needed to find and that was that. Loki considered going back to sleep but suspected he wouldn’t be able to; if Svala ended up an orphan, he couldn’t forgive himself knowing he was why the ship had been destroyed at all. So, largely against his will, he went too. Same old. She was the only difference in the room. Thor was already gone.

“Good morning,” Tony said at the table.

“Is it?”

“I hope you have a good morning.”

“Unlikely, but thank you.”

“The coffee doesn’t taste like coal today.”

Loki went to check.

“Hey,” Tony said as Svala threw a playing card down over his. “You can’t do that.”

“Actually, she can,” Sam said.

Tony frantically riffled through his massive hand. “Yeah, well, I can do this,” he said, countering the move.

“Ooo. Not good.”

“Hey, can you take a look at this?” Bucky said, passing some papers from Natasha to Tony.

Tony tucked his cards away to read through everything. “Oh, cool,” he said. “So this might actually happen, then?”

“What?” Svala said, leaning over his shoulder.

“Norway! It’s this really beautiful country way up north. We’ve been talking about it with Thor and he thinks it’s a good place for a home. But if we can get everyone’s input on it first that would be great. Here, check this out.” Tony formed a field of photographs amid all the holograms: colourful villages and sprawling cities, ancient cliffs and forests, and the endless ocean. “It sounds like some of the culture’s really similar,” he said as he scrolled through the images, “things like language, art, food, stuff like that, but it’s also excellent in terms of resources and a huge world power which is going to be super helpful down the road. Seriously, the exports”—a few charts popped up beside the photos—“but you... probably don’t care about all of that.”

Svala pretended she understood the numbers he was reading. “That’s a lot of fish,” she said with a big nod.

“And we have a lot of connections to people there,” Tony said, picking at more photos, “which is another reason why this works well and not one of the neighbouring countries for example because it makes the whole diplomatic process—oh! She has the same name as you!—it makes the diplomatic process easier if you already know the people you’re talking to, right?”

“Absolutely,” Svala said with another big nod.

“I think you’d like it,” Tony said. “What do you think?”

“It sounds amazing.”

Alright, that was enough of that. Loki took his coffee and made to leave.

“Do you want to come run some errands with us later?” Tony asked. “Maybe we’ll have time to show the kid some landmarks or something.”

“I’ll think about it,” Loki said, and then he was definitely leaving only to be stopped by Thor coming back up the stairs at that exact moment. He startled and almost dropped the mug. Some of the steaming coffee splattered on the floor. His heart lurched. “Hey! Can you watch where you’re —”

“Sorry,” Thor said, stepping aside.

“You’d better be! If I—”

Thor scuffed the drops out with the toe of his boot. “Good as new.”

No no no no no no no no no no what—Loki turned and set the wet mug on the nearest surface and wiped his hands off on his sleeves and tried to figure out what to wipe the mug with but couldn’t and sat at the table beside the mug and its drying coffee drips and sighed tremendously. He was shaking.

“Your hair looks nice,” Svala said.

Loki didn’t know how to face her. “Thank you,” he said.

There was nowhere on the planet he wanted to be less than he did here in this moment, but it helped that he wasn’t really here: he stared into the depths of his black void coffee and tried to remember the face’s angles. The room became an amphitheatre of wrong decisions. On a knee he would find himself explaining all of his shortcomings while someone took notes only to be laughed at later behind the flames. Did he know they were sharpening their knives on his limp spine? Did he know he was just getting pawned off for something better? Did he just... not care? Maybe it didn’t matter to him after all. He would have let this man kill Thor in the name of pride and hardly flinched; what was everyone else to him? What was Svala? Were any of them anything? Ah—sure they were.

You think with your heart, not with your mind, said the disembodied voice of Thanos in his head, and Loki wished he could prove him wrong but knew some lies were too big to keep together: he very well did think exclusively with his heart that he pretended he didn’t have and that was why he was here now. If he’d thought with his mind perhaps it would have occurred to him that killing Thanos wouldn’t compensate for the eons of death and destruction wrought across the universe in the pursuit of

Glory!

and oh old gods above they killed everyone, didn’t they? All of Asgard but a small handful currently cooped up in a garage martyred as stepping stones to salvation. And all of many others. And he had been there too as they tore his broken spirit apart and convinced him he wasn’t just a footnote, someone to bleed dry under the guise of some mockery of power and revenge—that the strongest steels were forged in pain and he needed them if he wanted payback. But he didn’t really want payback anymore. And all he had left was coffee that looked like their mothership’s farthest chambers and a burnt taste in his lungs.

By then the coffee was cold and the conversation was over and he had no idea where he had been, only that Tony looked very concerned in the other chair while everyone else packed their things and was patiently peering up at him from behind a pair of glasses. “Do you think Captain America looks better with a beard or without?”

“Excuse me?”

“Oh, now you’re listening. Personally, I like the beard.”

“Is this a joke to you?”

Thor, who Loki did not remember seeing come in, passed him a paper.

“What is this?”

“A contract,” Tony said.

“I’m not signing anything.”

“You’re proofreading it,” Thor said.

Loki slid the paper back to him. “Proofread it yourself.”

“Are you planning on contributing anything to this at all?” Tony said, leaning on a hand.

“No, actually.”

Despite the casual confidence, this seemed to catch him off guard. “Oh. Um. Okay.”

Loki knew Tony was right: it was only fair to contribute if he was going to be sticking around and injuries, most of which had healed, were not any excuse. He was probably also among the smarter people in the room and imagined he would be useful if he bothered—much more fit to help pick apart the data than to act like he had something better to do, which he didn’t. Still, as he dragged the paper back and tried to look cool, all he could think was that this was... pointless. He didn’t say this, of course, and he was sure he looked very engrossed skimming everything, but it must have been obvious.

Tony slid a tired look in his general direction. “What do you think?”

Loki considered it for a long time. “Do you want the honest answer or the nice answer?”

Tony also considered it for a long time. “Is there an honest and nice answer?”

“I think you should brace yourself,” Thor said to Tony.

“Words can’t hurt me,” Tony said.

“You’re wasting your time running after Asgard,” Loki said. “You can’t fix what happened. You can’t save everyone. The vast majority are dead. Thor and I are alive by a fluke. If you want to be a hero so badly, you need to understand that there are times when you have nothing left to give. And I do believe you have nothing.”

“Jesus Christ,” Sam said.

Tony was silent.

“I don’t mean this to be cruel, Tony,” Loki said. “I realize how it sounds and that’s not my intent. But you weren’t there. You don’t know how far the damage goes. Anything any of you can do to help will feel like mockery at best.”

“Should I just drop everything, then?” Tony said, trying very hard not to shout it. “Do you want me to do nothing? Yeah, not everyone is dead, but I guess you’re right: let’s make sure whoever’s still alive gets absolutely zero help with even just getting on their feet. Screw it. They can fend for themselves. While we’re at it, I’m sure Svala’s single mom will have no problem finding a part-

time job at a department store and supporting her. I was thinking of getting them hooked up with financial assistance but you're completely right."

"I'm not stopping you," Loki said.

"Oh, yeah, you're just doing everything you possibly can to make me want to stop. Sorry, I thought I should try being a good person for once."

"There are no good people."

"Loki, please," Thor said.

"Do you disagree with me?" Loki snapped.

"Yes. I do."

"Then you're an idiot."

"I invited you back," Tony groaned, his face in his hands. "If you can't have a decent personality for two seconds then I will *enthusiastically* uninvite you. Do you want to stop, maybe?"

"I want to see everyone alive again," Loki said.

"And I don't?" Thor said.

"Do you?" Loki yelled, standing. "Tell me! Do you call that smile on your face grief? You weren't even there for the worst of it. I carried the children, not you! I had to choke back my tears long enough to tell them how brave they were. I had to live knowing it was my fault."

"And I had to live knowing I was their king!" Thor roared.

Loki stared him down as all the pins in the room dropped.

"I don't care whose fault it was," Thor said. "I was supposed to protect my people. Do not speak to me about grief, Loki. You know nothing of how I feel."

They had not seen him angry in a long time; his was a simmer, deeper and darker and much more dangerous in its stern coolness. And they would likely never see it again. For him, foolhardy optimism and nonchalance was a much stronger weapon. But he was angry when it mattered.

"You're right," Loki admitted with a bow of his head. "I'm sorry."

The room never quite recovered. They stewed for a bit. The meaningless holograms stayed up; the occasional flicker was the only interruption. Thor looked lost in thought. Tony looked even more lost in thought. Loki sat back down and fiddled with the mug. No one else said anything. Maybe it was better that way.

The table slowly sank into silence. The frustration rose. At least one person looked on the verge of a stroke, but that was typical. Nothing new or notable stuck out on the displays aside from more price estimates: although Tony in particular didn't seem worried, he did seem in dire need of a nap and maybe a vacation before his brain melted. The rest... oh. Various cabinets and drawers rattled as Svala, perhaps to distract from the miserable conversation she was sadly witness to, dug through the kitchen for something sort of edible. For a while it was the only break in the silence.

“Can I have this?” Svala asked from behind the fridge door, a fat salami in hand; they looked.

“Just that?” Tony asked after a moment. “Do you want anything else with it?”

Svala thoroughly inspected the fridge. “Can I have this too?” she asked as she pulled out a package of fancy cheese.

“The essentials,” Sam agreed. “If you get some bread maybe you can make a sandwich.”

“Do we have bread?” Tony asked.

“There was bread this morning,” Natasha said.

“I want a grilled cheese,” Svala announced.

“With salami?”

“As one should,” Tony said. “Personally, I approve.”

“Do you know how to make a grilled cheese?” Sam called.

“Yes,” Svala said.

Loki was positive this was not true but said nothing. Neither did anyone else. Svala closed the fridge, put the cheese and salami on the counter, and located the bread. Then she opened the fridge and tried to find butter or something like it. Then she closed it again.

“Did you check the door?” Tony asked.

Svala opened the fridge again and checked the door. Then she closed it, still empty-handed.

“You can use oil too,” Natasha suggested.

Svala went to look for oil but, after many minutes, could not find that either.

“Okay, we cannot be out of both butter and oil,” Tony said. “I literally used the butter this morning.”

“A lot of time has passed since this morning,” Sam said.

“I bought a four-pack of butter two days ago!”

“We’re a lot of people.”

“There is no way we used a four-pack of butter in two days! Is someone drinking it? Are you drinking it? How do you use that much butter in *two days*?”

Something hit the table—a stack of papers someone had finally finished reading or a disillusioned pen or maybe just elbows propping up hands propping up a limp head. The holograms dusted the table’s surface with soft light; if stared at long enough, Loki thought he could imagine what the reflections were supposed to look like. But that was not the case, and, like everyone else at the table, he was pendulating somewhere between boredom, despair, and homicidal mania.

“I think we have bigger problems than not having butter,” Sam said as a hologram—any of them, didn’t matter which—updated once more.

“Is anyone going to feed the kid or do I have to drive to the store and buy some fucking—”

“Tony,” Natasha said.

“Stupid horrible infuriating terrible churned fat my mistake”—he slammed a hand to his forehead and breathed in and out very slowly—“or are we just going to sit here and keep running in circles until morning?”

He looked like he needed a stiff drink or ten; maybe they should take a break after all. Steve sifted through some papers on his own. Loki wished the whole crew was here because at least then it was entertaining if not productive.

“Tony,” Natasha said, “there’s too much to do and we’ve barely started.”

“Implying I don’t know that more than anyone here,” Tony said with a nod, “but yes, continue.”

“I don’t think anyone’s in a state of mind to keep track of butter,” Steve said.

“Probably because they’re not eating! Did you have breakfast today? No?”

“Okay, back to repairs,” Sam said. “Tony?”

Loki raised a hand. “I propose shifting all accountability towards the wizard.”

“Rightfully so!” Tony shouted, sitting up. “Last I checked neither him nor the alien spaceship trying to blow him up had anything to do with us and I don’t understand why—”

“He’s not here and he’s refusing all contact,” Steve said, “unfortunately. Unless we can get a hold of him”—he set the papers aside—“accountability is on everyone else who was involved.”

“Oh, I have ways,” Loki said.

“If your ways include sending him a letter bomb then no,” Tony said, “but I appreciate and share the sentiment.”

“Ah. I have no ways.”

“Neither of you are helping,” Steve said.

“And you are?” Loki said with a leer. “Please. You’d accomplish more scrubbing ash from the streets with your bare hands.”

“Somehow I’ve done more than the guy who keeps making passive-aggressive remarks about everyone’s efforts without so much as lifting a finger to contribute.”

“Also agreed,” Tony said.

His coffee lit on fire.

“You’re the one who begged me to be here!” Loki exclaimed while Tony tried meekly to blow out the fire. “This operation is useless with or without my help and I’m shocked you think anything I could offer can possibly salvage it.”

“Then do it yourself,” Steve said. “Since you think everyone will just bring you down.”

“I think you don’t know what you’re getting into,” Loki growled. “When will you learn—”

“Please don’t start this again,” Tony said.

“You don’t understand!” Loki yelled. “And you refuse to understand—”

“Okay, you are starting this,” Tony said, nodding in defeat.

“Oh, I didn’t start it,” Loki said. “Do you have any idea what this means? I’ve seen this many more times than any of you in my life and I know when there’s no use. If you want to shoulder the financial burden, then go ahead—and I support that!—but that’s all you can do. I don’t want to pretend to be useful just so I’ll be left alone. I don’t want to waste my energy running in circles with the rest of you. I will help when I believe there is a genuine change I can make. If you don’t like that then that’s not my fault.”

“Dipshit,” Tony muttered under his breath.

The flaming mug evaporated into smoke and glitter with a bang.

“Will that be all, Stark?” Loki said: Tony looked mid-realizing that may have been too far and he should stop if he valued his life, but for the most part it was hidden well. They shared a thin frown.

“You owe me a coffee,” he responded.

“I don’t owe you anything. By the way, your calculation’s wrong.”

“What?”

Loki got up and found the diagram in question. “For one of the smartest men on the planet,” he said as he scrolled through everything and then waved it over for him to see, “you sure know how to drop your decimals. Don’t thank me.”

Someone chuckled.

“Do you have to be so smug about it?” Tony muttered, retyping the number.

Loki sat on the table and looked through the holograms for more errors.

“Remind me again why we’re putting up with this,” Sam said.

“Because your pet genius can’t even get his equations right,” Loki said.

“It was a typo!” Tony yelled.

“That typo would have cost you several million dollars. Good job.”

Tony got out of his chair and went to slam his head into the wall.

Svala was still in the kitchen and still in need of food and mostly just very, very tired while this unfolded. She said nothing—only dug through some more drawers for cooking utensils that she could not use because she had no butter nor oil.

“Well, congratulations on doing something meaningful today,” Steve said.

“More than you,” Loki growled. “You can’t even—”

“Can you, like, stop?” Tony called, looking up from his wall.

“No!” Loki yelled back. “Because I have had it with your—”

“Loki?”

He stopped: Svala stared awkwardly at him from the kitchen. He almost yelled at her too and then felt truly, terribly awful. He stepped off the table. The rest of them sort of lost sight of whatever they were supposed to be arguing about too.

“Can you help me?” Svala said, holding up a pan. “Please?”

For a moment Loki almost cried as well—or maybe he would have if he let himself feel the situation; he never could get close enough. Svala reminded him of too many people and knowing that she was barely alive now was a lot to come to terms with. It hit him all at once. “Of course,” he said with an uneven smile, and then he left the stupid table and its stupid problems and joined her in the kitchen to look for oil. The collective bewilderment filled the room.

They did get back to the data eventually, sometime between when Loki did in fact locate a bottle of oil that had been tucked away behind many other containers and when Svala, not very familiar with Earth but with enough common sense to logic her way around the place, set up the pan and stovetop and a cutting board and such. Maybe it was better like that—relegating the stick in the ass elsewhere so he wasn’t just aggressing everyone. Not that it really mattered to him. He plunked the bottle beside the other ingredients.

“Do you want one?” Svala asked as she took the oil.

“Oh... no, thank you.”

She tried to pour a little but poured out a little bit too much.

“Maybe someone else wants one,” Loki offered, noting the flustered alarm.

“I want one,” Tony called.

“He wants one.”

“Okay,” Svala said.

Svala didn’t need much help with anything and Loki mostly just paced around the kitchen wondering whether he was emotional support or if he’d just been called over to stave the fighting, although he did have to correct her knife posture a few times. She double-checked he didn’t want any and kept the burnt ones for herself. He wished he were so thoughtful.

The rest of the discussion was dull and he spent it calculating how much bread and cheese he could eat without noticing. He didn't remember the night, only that he felt strangely empty when Svala left with Thor and that he wasn't hungry for dinner.

There was another knock on the door in the morning.

"It's unlocked," Loki said behind a book.

The door opened and Tony stuck his head in. "Hey," he said. "How are things?"

"Bearable. Did you need something?"

"Yeah, I just wanted to apologize for last night. I have a peace offering if you want to hear it."

Loki glanced up from the book, which was an effort given he was lying on the couch.

"Would you like... clothes, by any chance?" Tony asked, cracking the door open a little further as he leaned on it.

"I have clothes," Loki said, but everything he owned had burned on the ship and his wardrobe consisted of the armour on his back and not much else.

"Nice clothes," Tony said. "The expensive kind. Sort of a welcome gift. Living in armour doesn't seem very comfortable."

"It most certainly is," Loki said, suspicious of letting his quite literal guard down here.

Tony squinted at the book. "What are you reading?"

Loki raised it to show the cover: a giant compendium of Earth fauna—oddities, curiosities, atrocities, and more. Now with full-colour illustrations.

"Oh, cool!" Tony said. "Looks like a fun time. Anyway, I'm completely serious. I needed to go get something for myself and I have zero qualms packing a bag for you. What do you say?"

"Is there a catch?"

"You might not like what I get or it might not fit you."

Tony really was serious, then. It was almost endearing. Largely just to see where it would go, Loki sighed, closed the book, and said, "I'm sure I will. And if something doesn't fit, I can alter it."

"Aha! I'm on a mission now. I *will* find something you like."

"All the best luck to you. Can I keep reading now?"

"Yep. Sorry to bother."

The door shut.

Many hours passed, during which Loki wondered if he had hallucinated this whole interaction as he flipped through species, but perhaps it was real after all for the door did open eventually following

two dozen knocks in what sounded like Morse code and Tony popped right back in with a giant shopping bag over one shoulder. “Special delivery! Armani and... stuff.”

Despite having startled badly at the knocks, Loki couldn't help but laugh. “To be honest, I thought you were joking.”

“I do not joke.” Tony flipped his sunglasses into his hair. “Okay, so picking out clothes for people that I don't know very well,” he said, “turns out, is stressful, so I pretty much just grabbed you some basics and this one other thing—listen, this other thing!—that just caught my eye and I am completely a million percent positive that you will love it.” He placed the bag neatly on the floor, right beside the couch, and then straightened himself and removed the glasses. “What's up with you? Living the good life?”

“Good book,” Loki said, turning it around to show a full-page photo of a baboon's red ass.

Tony wheezed. “Very glad to hear it,” he said, trying not to die laughing.

“How's Thor?”

“Honestly, I haven't seen him and I have no clue. I think he was being all diplomatic somewhere? Norway or Wakanda. Both, maybe. Yeah, both.”

“Is he having any success?”

“Yeah, it's been going pretty great so far. Would go better with you there.”

“It... really wouldn't. I'm not much of the diplomacy type.”

“You aren't? Dang. If you want to at least try, though—”

“I don't.”

“Okay. Don't forget to stretch sometimes.”

“Bye, Tony.”

He turned and left, shutting the door behind him.

There was no way Tony had gotten anything decent. None. Sure, they had a similar affinity for immaculate dress, but that was it. Even so, he'd put enough time and thought into it that Loki just had to wonder—and what *was* that one thing he said he'd love? Surely nothing. Definitely. Alas, he was excited to solve the mystery and so he left the book, carried the bag to the bed, and laid everything on the sheets one by one. They were all simple, inoffensive staples in versatile styles and a variety of fabrics and in his colours as well: a few plain tees, a few different kinds of pants ranging from formal to cozy, a few collared shirts including one with a lovely black lace pattern, and...

Oh. Oh, there it was.

At the very bottom of the bag was an emerald green coat of silk-lined velvet, almost robe-like in its design. It was ankle-length, two pockets and no clasps, and draped like curtains in a light breeze. It felt like something he would have worn at home; stepping away from the bed to hold it up in all its detail, he wondered if that had been the intent. Tony's offer as a whole had sounded like a weird

prank, but this didn't. Not a bit. It wasn't the truce that had helped or sitting for game nights and dinners with everyone nor the room, which seemed too much like a temporary arrangement to feel at ease in, and it wasn't the little stockpile of familiar foods in the pantry either. It was this that Loki felt himself clinging to and he almost cried over it. How exhausted he must have been to find shelter in a piece of clothing. Just like when he nearly yelled at Svala, he feared that if he started crying now there would be too much for him to ever stop. So he tried not to. He cleaned himself up with magic to save time and right away started taking things off and putting things on in front of the bathroom mirror.

He tried a tee and, finding it a little loose for his liking, tightened it to a more form-fitting shape and did the same with the others. But they were soft and comfortable and felt nice on his skin, which was still scuffed and bruised in places and probably tired of never seeing sunlight under the leather he was too afraid to remove on enemy ground. The button-ups looked gorgeous on him and only needed smaller collars and the rest had no sizing issues at all. It was quite a feat knowing most of it had been guesswork, both fit and style. He tried different combinations and wearing things in different ways and he even tried them with different hair too. Although the cut by his eyebrow was deep and obvious—the face never injured well—it had healed decently and only gleamed in some angles. Otherwise, he looked good. And he smiled, weeks-old injuries and everything, and decided that maybe this wasn't so bad. He loved every single item and he still couldn't believe that Tony of all people had even offered to begin with, nor the sheer effort expended. Was the armour that bad?

Loki quadruple-checked the bedroom door was locked and then, just to get it out of his system, he twirled in the coat: the fabric moved freely, light and fluid in its motion, and settled against the curve of his body like a feather. Excellent. He regretted no part of it. Satisfied, he slid his boots on, piled the other clothes in his arms, and folded them into the empty dresser by the bathroom. Then, slowly, he went back to the couch.

Past the giddiness over the new clothes, there was no curbing that worry that if something happened he would be too unprepared like this. And that wasn't the case: he could conjure his armour in seconds regardless of what he was wearing. But what if he couldn't use magic? Wait. No. When had that ever happened? Sure, it was painful sometimes, but he could force himself if he needed to—and it wasn't like anyone here could bind him, right? They didn't have the means. Not like

(Did they have the means?)

That would also raise the question of whether Tony was just trying to get him defenceless, which was a ridiculous question and not even a smart one because they already knew he was a force to be reckoned with even at his worst. Tony was famous for his generosity; what kind of malice could there possibly be in such a gesture? And he surely knew that if it came to that all it would take was one well-placed knife and that armour or a lack of would change nothing—and why would he wait until now to try something, anyway, rather than attempting on Titan? Hadn't that already been established as a good enough reason not to fret? Yep.

It all seemed stupid when put like this, but Loki struggled to calm the thought. Still, he distracted himself pretty well with the big and colourful animal encyclopedia. He kept reading until dinner, when it occurred to him that he hadn't eaten all day without even noticing and should go have something.

Dinner itself was okay.

They never could get a break even for dinner, though, and so the food was served with more updates and information. Loki, increasingly not there, did not remember much of it other than when he went to subsist off Tony's caffeine addiction leftovers, which had just finished brewing at a perfectly normal time of day ready to be had with dinner.

"Hey, I knew you'd like that!" Tony said while he filled a plate of food in the other end. "How does it feel? Cozy?"

"Very," Loki said. "Thank you."

"But the boots!" Tony whined. "You should have told me to get you some shoes. It could have been such a nice outfit otherwise."

Loki looked down at his scuffed and stained leather riding boots that had become more grey than black walking several round trips to hell and its equivalents, did not see the problem, and said, rightly so, "But they're *very* comfortable."

"Please. You're making my fashion sense cry."

"Fashion sense? You're wearing sneakers and a band no one under fifty has ever even heard of."

Tony gasped and made an expression like someone had kicked a puppy before his eyes. "I'll have you know I'm forty-seven! And that's not true."

"Hate to say it," Sam called from the table, "but he's right."

Tony spun around. "Excuse *me*."

"You brought this onto yourself," Loki said. "Leave my boots alone."

"Leave my bands alone! How mean. Don't talk to me or my bands ever again."

Loki took his things and went to the table. "No."

Tony did not recover from that, nor from the many laughs that followed, and it was a running joke for a while. But it wasn't much else. It didn't make the usual debriefing any easier.

Loki would never really know what it was or how and when and why exactly it happened; he never really did and he would be hard-pressed to think of something now as he sat breathless and thoughtless and just shut his eyes and bent to the table and tried not to let the feeling of his mind on fire get to him. Tony could definitely tell behind the glasses. Maybe they all could. It felt like they were waiting for another storm. The silence was maddening and he—no, where was he?—and then he—and then he—tried so so so so so so hard not to start crying and they could definitely tell. Somewhere between Thanos and the ship and the fall and every single thing after and before, he was burning. He couldn't breathe.

He was certain as he picked up the paper (which one?) that his body really was on fire and his eyes were wet with tears and that he was doing something wrong again and someone would start yelling. Not that it ever bothered him; all the silver-tongue quick-wit sarcasm to death made an excellent defence and he couldn't turn down a fight at the best of times. But in this moment he no longer trusted it. If he could break once he could break again. And so he put everything into holding back the sudden terror. Still stare. Jaw clenched. Text failing to make it past the static in his head.

“It sounds fine,” he said, a thin cough on the words, and then he slid the paper to Tony without anything further and tried to understand.

Tony looked like he had bigger concerns than Asgard. “Glad to hear,” he said, smoothing the paper with a slightly furrowed brow. Then he grabbed something else and started over: “Okay, next...”

Why was he here?

“Do you want to talk?”

Loki stared at the coffee he didn't remember filling and counted slowly in his head. Falling backwards. Lungs empty. Skin on fire. Shame and loathing. Everyone else had already left for the night; it was just him and Tony. Maybe they thought this was better. They didn't need his kind around.

“Looks cold,” Tony said, leaning on a hand.

Still nothing.

“Are you sleeping?”

“Every night,” Loki assured, taking a sip of the cold coffee.

“Yeah?”

“Mhm.”

Tony tried to smile but mostly failed. “How many hours?”

“Get out of my business, Stark.”

Ouch.

“Okay,” he said. “Sorry I asked.” He stood and pushed his chair in. “Goodnight.”

“ Goodnight,” Loki said, not looking up.

Many hours passed watching the holograms alone over the cold void coffee, into the quiet and dreamy late night, for good news that never showed.

Chapter End Notes

also I wouldn't normally do this just because of how wordy it is but this chapter's outline was hilarious and I needed to share this part

- tony comes in at some point like hey you've been wearing that armour for like a week straight do you want like casual clothes or something

- loki internally: As a result of not only my suddenly reawakened trauma, but the battle of New York (circa 2012), I have crippling paranoia around the Avengers, especially you, and I fear that if I'm not constantly battle-ready I'll be captured, or worse, killed. I stay awake at night thinking, "Why am I here? Why have I accepted shelter among my enemies? Am I so foolish to believe they won't try to harm me, or do I simply not care?" It is hubris and nothing else that has led me here. I know my time is limited, and when the day arrives, I'd like to be prepared, lest in my dying hours I be haunted by the knowledge that I could have lived; that I was naïve for thinking I was anything more than a burden to you, Tony, and that I deserved a second chance at all; that my own demons were, as I'd always believed, the cause of my final mistake. Please understand, then, when I say I'd prefer to remain in my armour.

- loki externally: Tee Short™

that is all thank you

Omens

Chapter Summary

Something seems to be breaking, but it isn't clear what. Loki tries to keep himself together.

Chapter Notes

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

Their part in everything was minimal, and, as they forwarded the right information to the right people and prepared operations for the various responsibilities left over from the chaos, it began to feel like they were done unusually soon. Of course that couldn't be further from the truth: the repairs and funds would take ages and so would locating or building new housing for the refugees, whichever was chosen in the end, and despite the overall minimal footprint between their quick acting and the death of Thanos the ripples would be around for longer. How did Asgard integrate into Earth, for example? How did the planet's hot spots, like New York, prepare for the many more inevitable disasters it would keep attracting? Did the Avengers plan on staying together after this? All that and more remained to be found out as their work increasingly began to consist of waiting and seeing and not much else. Waiting to hear back from Wakanda. Waiting to hear back from Norway. Waiting to hear back from the tragically few survivors spread across Earth. Updates tended to be that there were no updates.

Loki, already knowing he would hear nothing new, began to disconnect more and more. He stopped coming for dinner because he frequently wasn't hungry and he knew they would just fight again. He stopped leaving his room because it was simpler; if he wasn't hungry and he didn't want to deal with everyone and he had stacks of books to burn through, then there wasn't much use sticking his head out for a few minutes only to return soon after. It was quiet and he liked that. It hadn't been quiet in his life for a long time.

He wished he could enjoy it, but the truth was his mind was uncomfortably loud without anything to drown it out and he became restless after the first few days of keeping to himself. So he started looking for other things to do. He remembered seeing a gym on the lower floor and, one very early morning after a quick breakfast on his own of dry goods and fruit, he went down to kill some time.

There was a wall of targets at the farthest end of the room with many different throwing objects racked nearby: knives, darts, even a bow and a few arrows, and more. They were person-shaped, marred with thousands of little scrapes and cuts, and, by the looks of it, recently used; the wood had a certain look that was recognizable with practice. Loki checked there was no one behind him and then took out the smallest knife and shot it cleanly into one of the targets' head. Then another. Then he went and yanked both free; the fresh marks in the paint stared palely back at him.

After inspecting the damage, he turned and went farther away for a second go.

He aimed, closed his eyes, and threw the knives at two separate targets. Both dead centre, but it somehow wasn't as satisfying as he thought it would be. He retrieved the knives, placed them in their prior location on the rack, and then, curious what the difference was, he summoned a random

dagger of his. It was quick, less than a blink between the evocation and the blade lodging itself into the wood, but the shot felt... off. Too off; he went to examine the blade and, as suspected, found it dull as a rock. He couldn't even remember the last time he'd sharpened any of his things. And so then, he realized, he could spend his day sorting through his collection and doing just that: why not?

He didn't, though, and mostly just trucked around the room trying out different trick shots, none of which were any more satisfying. At least he was in good shape.

The door opened while Loki was cleaning a knife by the targets. He looked up and saw Steve.

"You're up early," Steve said as he closed the door.

"You're also up early," Loki said.

"I'm always up early."

"Do you need me to leave?"

It seemed to cross his mind for a moment, but not for long enough. "No," Steve said. "This place is for everyone."

Though true, there was an awkward sort of formal stiffness between them as they tried to go about their business in the room. Loki spent a long time cleaning and polishing every single knife and also the targets. Steve looked pretty calm doing his morning stretches on the soft floor, but he was clearly expecting the situation to turn sour again.

"How's your sparring?" Loki asked on a hopeful whim.

"Oh"—Steve rolled to his feet with a grunt—"it's been a long time." He stood. "Not a lot of people here make a good partner."

"You're too strong for them?"

"Yeah, all the..."

"I could take you."

Steve looked back at him.

"We're close," Loki said, putting the knife away and the cloth beside it. "I remember. I was surprised you could hold up to me."

"I thought you were still recovering."

"Not that I can tell. What do you think?"

There were many other ways to deal with a dull morning, many better ways than a consensual fistfight to get some energy out, and Steve, rightly so, seemed skeptical about it: there was no guarantee someone wouldn't use the moment to pull a knife. But aside from the murder risk there was nothing to lose, really, and so he just laughed and said, "Sure."

“That’s the spirit,” Loki said, right away sliding his coat off and folding it over a bench with great care, and then he joined him sharing the same sort of confused but not unhappy laugh and they were a mess of clambering arms before anyone could blink.

Steve was not him and would not know how familiar this was and why it was so precious now of all times. He was also not Thor, who was the usual partner, but that didn’t seem to be a problem. No one else would probably ever even know about this and it was a mystery why they decided it was a good idea in the first place—they both slammed hard into the floor wrestling for control and at that point they definitely weren’t backing out. And they were a good match, too. They tried pinning the other and tried different hits and holds but nothing ever seemed to stick; most of it was a long and easy stalemate, which was the way these things ought to be. But someone eventually slipped and Loki ended up face-down under Steve and tapped out above a grunt.

“Did you pull something?” Steve asked, climbing to his feet.

“I don’t think so.” Loki rolled onto his back and exhaled loudly. “Ow.”

Steve helped him up. “Good show,” he said with a pat on the shoulder.

“Ha. We must be best of friends now, aren’t we?”

It was mostly a joke, but the silence that followed was... disheartening. By the time anyone had an answer it had been too long to say anything without making it even more awkward. Loki just nodded and fixed his shirt and grabbed his coat, which was easy after cleaning himself up in an instant to save the bother of showering first. The feeling of being overpowered left a sour taste in his mouth and his pounding heart felt more like an omen than wholesome exhaustion, but he didn’t mention it.

“Where’d you learn to fight like that?” Steve asked.

“Around,” Loki said. “Many different times and places. Good to know I haven’t lost it.”

Steve did not ask if he was coming to dinner or even to breakfast. He also did not ask what in the world he did alone for days on end. He looked like he wanted to ask *something* but didn’t know what. It was strange and uneasy while they put themselves back together, as if none of it had ever even happened. Once the adrenaline faded there were no other traces left.

“Take care of yourself,” Steve said as Loki, not in the mood to stay any longer, made for the door.

“You as well,” Loki said, and then they never spoke of it again. The lonely morning passed and there was no good news or even bad news, only the very same strange uneasiness between shallow naps and long books.

Either an hour or a day later, there was a knock on the door.

Not Tony not Tony not Tony—

“Hey Lokes, you in there?”

Aghhhhh.

“Yes!” he said, clambering into an upright position: the fur blanket flumped onto the floor and with it the book. The thud was massive and woke him fully. When did he—“Hi. What do you want?”

“Just checking in. Permission to enter?”

What? No. What in the—

“No, I—hold on. Shit,” Loki hissed to himself. He blinked the sleep away and frantically finger-brushed whatever hair he could manage into a more reasonable state than the unwoven basket it was now and ow, his head. “Um...” Nausea. Fear? He seemed to be panicking but wasn’t sure. He laid a hand on his temple and counted: one, two, three, four, five. One, two, three, four, five. Breathe and keep breathing. “Um, permission—permission granted.”

Tony inched the door open. “Good morning. Afternoon. Something. It’s almost one o’clock, actually.”

“Good day?” Loki suggested. “All of the above? Hello, maybe?”

“Oh, yeah, I guess. Hi. What’s happening? Everything good?”

“Wonderful. Just reading again. More reading. I love books.” ‘I love books’? What the hell kind of lead-tongued sentence—

“Yeah, I can see that,” Tony said. You’re not... I don’t know, bored?”

Yes! Goodness, yes. He was bored out of his bloody wits. But that was not anyone’s concern and he would do very well going right back to sleep on the couch, thank you, please leave.

“Not at all,” Loki said, trying (and failing) to ignore that his speaking mind was lagging behind the rest of him and busy yet somewhere in dreamland. “And you? What have you been up to? Built any machines lately?”

“I guess if you consider fixing the weird stuff that was going on with the Iron Man, but that’s pretty much it. Asgard! Listen, I’ve been running around dealing with everything the last few days and I am thrilled to announce that, drum roll, Norway is fully on board and we got a giant plot of land and construction is on and in the meantime Bucky is settling everyone in where he was staying in Wakanda.”

“You found everyone?”

“Everyone on Earth at least, yeah. That part’s out of the way for now.”

“How many people are you building for?”

Tony thought about it. Actually, it didn’t look like he was thinking about it: it looked like he was thinking about whether he should say it. They did have numbers from between the first deaths, which had been many and comprised the majority, and the escape crafts that had been filled. Loki knew they did. Not a small amount of time scurrying through the flames was spent bouncing live updates across the echoing halls and intercoms; they had done the math together and knew the threshold of impossibility. They may have had twenty-eight now. They may not have had much more even if everything went right.

“Surely more than you might need,” Loki said.

“Yeah,” Tony said. “We talked to a lot of people and have it planned out pretty well. How many folks are staying in one place, who might move in the future, et cetera. Actually, if you want to come join us and work out a layout—”

“Please no.”

“Oh. I guess. I mean, it’s a pretty big team effort. Everyone else is pitching in some ideas about the place and most of it is doable. Maybe you had something in mind too.”

“I want it to be safe.”

That much was obvious, wasn’t it?

Tony nodded. “As safe as can be,” he said. “I think it looks pretty unassuming on the surface, but it’s surrounded by backup and it’s not a location that’s targeted the way some places are. Like, uh, New York. But it looks good. I saw the last version of the plans and it’s really good. And it’s also right by a bigger place which is of course close to a bigger place so it’s not isolated from the important cities or anything like that. I think you’d like it.”

“I hope so.”

“Did you know everyone’s calling you a hero?”

“... For?”

“Just in general. You did do a lot of heavy work. I think you underestimate what it’s worth.”

Was it underestimating if it was true? What kind of a hero let most of them die?

Loki stood and adjusted his coat, and also his shirt, which had both gone lopsided at some point during his slumber. Then he sat down again and pretended not to notice the blanket and book on the floor and said, “So you’re checking in. Why?”

“Just letting you know about the outside world. And I wanted to ask—”

“I’m sorry,” Loki blurted.

“What? Why?”

They stared at each other. Loki wondered what his problem was as well as how to spontaneously combust.

“Oh, for FRIDAY!” Tony said. “No, I know. I found out, like, last week. Got your strongly-worded postscript and everything. I mean, I had it coming.”

“That too! I—”

“Hey.” Tony raised a hand. “It’s alright. Breathe.”

He was breathing, damn it! He was breathing just fine, excuse me, five counts both ways *and* a hold: one, two, three, four, five, inhale, hold, exhale. Muscles taut, jaw clenched. Velvet and fur. The waning dizziness following an insufficient rest. Cologne? Oh, for fuck’s sake, since when did Tony wear—

“What do you want?” Loki muttered.

“I haven’t seen you in a while,” Tony said. “Almost no one has. I got worried.”

“It’s been three days.”

If there had ever been a body language equivalent of a record scratching, Tony’s wordless blink and head-cock was probably it. “Loki,” he said, “it’s been a week.”

“What? No. That’s... no. That can’t be right. Didn’t we speak recently?”

“Have you been eating?”

“Wh—yes! Yes, of course I’m eating. What do you take me for?”

“Seeing as you somehow lost track of four whole—”

“I had an apple for breakfast.”

“An apple.” Tony arched an eyebrow. “One apple.”

“It was a very nice apple. Nice variety, whatever it was. You wouldn’t know, would you?”

“Uh... no. Loki—”

“What?” he snapped. “I don’t need to eat that much. I’m not like humans. If you’re worried I’m starving or something, I’m not. Believe me, if I were hungry, I would eat. And I am not hungry.”

“You need air,” Tony said, “and interaction. You can’t just sit here.”

“Why not?”

“Why—I don’t know, because... jeez. What are you trying to accomplish?”

“I’m relaxing! I’m reading and not talking to anyone and it’s working very well on my current state of mind, thanks for your concern, and would you please leave me now? Why are you so worried about whether or not I just sit here?”

“That can’t be good for you.”

“And you care about what’s good for me?”

“Yeah, I do. Why don’t you come down and make yourself some lunch? Get some real food, don’t talk to anyone, whatever. I just want to see you out of this room for like three seconds.”

Loki, ashamed of the reply in his head but not ashamed enough to refrain from speaking it, shed his Allspeak long enough to say something that would have loosely translated to, “You don’t dictate my life, you arrogant worm. Kindly fuck off and let me damage my health as I please.”

“That sounded angry,” Tony said. “I don’t speak that language, by the way.”

“I’m aware.”

“Mm. I see. Okay, so at the moment I’m more or less the one in charge here and I guess that just makes me in charge of the wellbeing of everyone living here. I just feel responsible, y’know? And that includes you.”

“Did you forget what happened between us?”

“I thought we were over that.”

“We only wish we were. Isn’t that the case?”

“I mean... that attitude isn’t going to help. Look at you.” Tony motioned towards him. “You’re wearing clothes I got you and sitting in a room that I have very kindly lent to you pretty much indefinitely and you’ve got, uh, food and shelter and all this great... stuff, because—because I’m trying to work past that. Or something. I don’t know.”

“But you’re still afraid of me,” Loki said.

Tony pondered it in the doorway. “I’m afraid of a lot of people here,” he said. “The history is long and messy. And I do mean that. Lots has changed since you’ve been gone and none of it has been good. God, we almost killed each other a few years ago. Steve—Cap, Rogers? Who knows what I should call him these days—I still expect him to hurl a shield at me in my sleep. Um... Nat. She’s great. I love her. Same thing, though. It’s been this one-eye-open thing ever since we met up again.”

“That hair suits her,” Loki said.

“Right? I mean, it took me a while to get used to, but yeah, I’m with you on that. Uh, what else...” Tony leaned back. “Yeah, there are others. Place still feels like I’m going to get lynched if I breathe wrong. Or maybe that’s just me being paranoid. Don’t know, don’t care. Whatever. Anyway, my point is—my point is, uh, trusting you is no different than trusting anyone else here.”

“Except you don’t.”

“Yeah. But I don’t trust anyone. So... nothing personal I guess is what I’m trying to say. Just don’t kill me and I won’t kill you. Isn’t that what we agreed?”

“Something like that.”

“Yeah, keep working on it. Maybe we’ll get to call each other friends eventually.”

Loki squinted at him.

“I know,” Tony said. “Talk about a pipe dream.” He sighed and pulled out his glasses. “Anyway, I’m gonna go try and get some things done. Maybe you want to join me?”

“What kind of things?”

“Things. We could get lunch or something. There’s this sweet seafood place about a ten-minute drive from here. I think you’d like it.”

“No, thank you.”

“You’re not hungry or you don’t want to be in my presence for that long?”

“Both.”

“Ow. I’m kidding. I’m guessing you don’t want to come see Asgard-Wakanda, either.”

“You’d be right.”

“You sure? It’s not too late there.”

“Positive.”

Tony seemed to stop for a while, indistinctly looking at him from behind those glasses, thinking, calculating something, and Loki felt the oddest and maybe not entirely irrational suspicion that he was using them to observe his climbing heart rate. The sour glint in his eyes lent some credibility to the theory.

“Well, make sure you stretch,” Tony said, stepping away from the doorframe to leave. “I’ve spent hours in one place like that and trust me, you will regret it.”

“Thanks for your concern.”

“Also, I see you’re a lot keener on technology than some of the people here so did you want a phone or something? Also on me. Honest question, we have a group chat and everything.”

“I don’t need one.”

“But communication! No?”

“Mm... no.”

“Okay.” Tony turned and walked out the door, saying, “Stretch. And come down to dinner tonight.” Then he closed it and continued down the hall.

Loki did not stretch. He did, though, try to go get a glass of water because talking made him realize how dehydrated he was. He got a cup. He held it under the faucet. He... couldn’t turn it on. He wondered if he was imagining this. He realized he wasn’t and tried not to cry. His trembling hand wouldn’t move and he felt like something horrible would happen if he forced it. He stared into the empty cup. He stared into the sink. He managed to turn the water on, but it was slow and unnatural and he felt himself waiting for more while he filled the cup. He tried not to get it on him. He turned the water back off and drank it all and left the cup on the counter.

He did remember. And he tried not to.

Dinner was awkward.

“Can I forfeit?” Loki finally said, looking up at Tony on the other end of the chessboard.

At this point there was a crowd in various places on and around the couches in the far end of the room and live commentary. Tony leaned into his armrest with a solemn hand on his beard. His other hand held another mug of coffee; he and Loki were the only ones to touch it at this hour and he had almost planned for it, brewing only enough for a few cups and not more. He looked like a

king who had begun to go mad. “Interesting word you use,” he said, taking a hearty sip of his coffee. “Forfeit. I’ve never heard it. What does it mean?”

Loki considered lighting both the board and table on fire.

“I thought you were good at this,” Tony said.

“I am.”

“I must be better.”

“No.”

“Yep. Face it.”

“You’re not better than me.”

“I’m four moves away from putting you in check.”

“You are not.”

“Bet.”

Loki moved a rook.

“And now I’m two moves away,” Tony said.

“I hate you.”

“Most people do.”

Loki rescinded his move.

“Hey, you can’t do that,” Tony said.

“I can and I will.”

“You’re still losing either way.”

Loki made a different move, which Tony fatally countered. He smacked a hand to his forehead and wished for swift death.

“Don’t take it personally,” Natasha said. “I don’t think anyone has ever won against him.”

“Is this supposed to be fun?”

Sam chuckled. “To watch? Yeah.”

Loki sighed and went to the main table with his coffee. He wondered why he had bothered coming down and whether he should have just skipped dinner entirely. He also wondered what was wrong with him because he *was* pretty good at these things and his mind had felt like soup for most of it; not that he was out of practice or that Tony was better but that he couldn’t think straight. Between the consistent lack of food and the fact that he was having coffee at nine in the evening he wasn’t sure where to start. It sure wasn’t magical exhaustion anymore.

“Are you mad at me now?” Tony called.

“Yes,” Loki said. “I’m never playing you ever again.”

The room looked empty somehow without the many dozens of different feeds and files spread throughout the thin air; the table was just a table. Loki tried to read one of the stray printouts but gave up after the first text wall of legalese. The coffee wasn’t working and as everyone filtered back in from the side area, he began to seriously consider passing out in his chair. Despite everything, he missed the place when it was full. Tony, Sam, Steve, and Natasha were not a pleasing selection. It felt like someone would shoot him if he stepped an inch out of line, although Sam at least was not acquainted enough with him to care.

“This is a disappointing Friday night,” Sam said.

“Don’t complain to me,” Tony said, already on his phone again.

“Yeah, you get to go on dates, huh? Lucky bastard.”

“I would be going on more of them if I didn’t have to be the backbone of this place.”

Loki thought about following everyone to Norway or wherever else they would be but realized he didn’t want to deal with Asgard either. He didn’t even want to deal with himself.

“If everything goes well,” Tony said, “then hopefully we’ll be done soon and then we can all get out of each other’s hair.”

“Just like old times,” Steve said, trying to laugh.

“Yep. I will leave and I will be happy. I can feel my clean streak crumbling and I genuinely do not know if I can take this much longer.”

Tony seemed to have a plan in mind. Did anyone else? What had they been doing before they got dragged here?

“Loki.”

He looked over his shoulder.

“Gosh, I called you like five times,” Tony said. “Can you check if there’s still coffee because you’re closer? Uh, please.”

Loki got up and went to look.

“There is no way this is healthy,” Sam said.

“Healthier than other things.”

“It’s out,” Loki said.

“All of it?”

Loki lifted the pot to show him across the room. It would cover the bottom of a mug with an inch of unfiltered grime if one were truly desperate.

“I want it,” Tony said.

“This looks like mud,” Loki said.

“Don’t care. You better not dump that.”

Loki put the pot back.

“How much coffee have you had today?” Sam said.

“Hey, leave me alone.”

“I’m worried.”

“If you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything.”

Loki considered dumping the pot despite the warning.

“Step away from the mud,” Tony said.

Loki stepped away from the mud.

“See, that wasn’t so hard, was it?”

He didn’t know why he suddenly felt like throwing up when Tony said that, only that he did. A knife turned inside him and he thought about spilling the coffee while it had still been hot and whether it would burn. It was quiet in the room; he wondered if anyone noticed. If something in him looked wrong. Maybe someone did. Maybe they all did. He turned the holograms back on and pretended he was doing something.

Are we home yet?

Home is gone. Don’t worry—we’ll find a new home. I’ll protect you on the way.

They had bought almond creamer for him, but the pale coffee still looked like a void.

I don’t want a new home. I want the old home.

Sometimes things change even when we don’t want them to. It’s not always easy or good. It might even be painful. But that’s the universe’s way of helping you grow. Remember, chaos isn’t evil; it just might be showing you the path to something better.

Chapter End Notes



Face Your Fears...

Chapter Summary

Loki is asked to step out of his comfort zone.

In the overwhelming absence of news or things to do while they passed the hump, they began to drift apart. Many of them weren't around at all: Thor and Bucky oscillating between Wakanda and Norway in the coming days, Sam and Steve back to other things out in the field, and Peter in the last of his classes for the season. Natasha was perhaps the busiest of all of them at this point and on the few times anyone saw her she was scurrying in for something only to disappear a minute later. Tony and Bruce continued on some small and assorted research tasks together and Loki helped where possible, but for the most part they seemed to have reached an impasse. The highlight of the day was someone getting peer pressured into an impromptu game night.

Many times Loki pretended he was away if someone came looking for him. He startled badly at the knocks and fell back into his book like he was dodging a blow. He avoided them until they left. He did a lot of avoiding.

This of course extended to their meals, which he increasingly did not attend, and for a while he ended up not leaving his room at all while he dug through a stack of books. The hoard of pantry goods and preserves he had accumulated was small, but that suited him. On a bad day, though, everything but the jam ran out and he was forced to take his rare appetite on a journey elsewhere. He sincerely thought about making himself invisible on the way but realized that was ridiculous and did not. It came as no surprise, then, that he was intercepted while waiting on a toasting slice of bread in the common space.

"Aren't you gluten intolerant?" Tony asked.

"Yep."

"Don't care?"

"Don't care."

Tony joined him by the counter. "*Jordbær og ripsbær*," he read, lifting the jam. "*Syltetøy med frø*. Cool. I have absolutely no idea what that means."

"Strawberry and redcurrant. Jam with seeds."

"*Laget med kjærlighet!*"

Loki tried to be mad at him but was too caught off guard by the perfect pronunciation. "Made with love," he sighed.

"Aw! From that market, right? I hope it's good."

Loki took the jam from him and put it back on the counter.

“Where have you been?” Tony said.

“Not your concern.”

Tony did not seem to take the hint. “You don’t speak Norwegian, do you?”

“Not exactly.”

“Yes, the... universal translation spell!”

“Fascinating, I know.”

“Can I get a rundown?”

The toast popped up with a loud ding. Loki flinched.

“Please?”

Please stop talking, Loki thought, and for a good second or two he was ready to say it. Then he just resigned to his fate, plucked the hot bread out and dropped it on a plate, and said, “I understand you and you understand me. There’s not much more to it. Really, I’m not even sure if I can call it a spell. It’s more of a... permanent blessing that gets passed down from generation to generation. The Allspeak, that is. That’s what it is.”

“Who made it?”

“Do you want a history lesson too? Go ask someone else. It’s a long story and I’ve forgotten most of it anyway.”

“Okay, so how does it work?”

“If you know what you’re doing, you can manipulate it at will, but to the average person it just is and you won’t even notice it. I do; I’ve experimented with it enough over the years to see between it and I can even turn it off completely if I feel the need. To anyone else it’s simply perfect fluency in a language. I know you’re speaking English and I know what words you’re using and what they mean and if you were using a dialect, for example, I’d be able to tell. It’s the same thing when I’m speaking to someone else.”

“I’m sensing a but.”

Loki found a butter knife and scooped out a big glob of jam onto the toast. “What language am I speaking to you?”

“Trick question?”

“Clever. It may sound like it”—Loki spread the jam—“but it’s not English. I know what I’m saying to you and I know what it means, but I’m letting magic dictate most of it. As far as I’m concerned, this conversation is in Asgardian.”

“So you’ve been speaking Asgardian this whole time?”

“Yes. Technically, anyway. Don’t worry about that.”

“I’m asking you to explain this and you’re telling me not to worry about the explanation.”

“Alright, the spell is full of convolutions and contradictions that even I can’t fully grasp most of the time and I honestly have no idea why it works. How’s that for an answer?”

Tony looked like he understood the pain. “This works for writing, too?”

“The same magic applies, yes. If I’m writing something myself then I generally have to choose a language, but it’s no different.”

“Can you understand animals?”

“Sometimes.”

“Huh.”

Loki willed the knife clean with a flash of light and then put it away. Behind him, he could almost feel Tony’s curious gaze. He ignored it and picked up his toast.

“You know they make gluten-free bread, right?”

“I know.”

“Don’t care?”

“Don’t care.” Loki took a bite.

“Was that the last slice?”

Was it? Loki took another bite and tried to remember the bag’s condition. Tony reached into one of the drawers for a pad and pen and then went about digging through various cupboards.

“Yeah, last slice,” Tony said after searching each of them.

“Sorry.”

Tony scribbled something on the paper and then checked the fridge. He frowned. “Can I ask a huge favour?”

“No.”

“Would you be okay with some grocery shopping? Just you?”

Loki looked at him like he’d just grown a second head.

“I’m busy all day today,” Tony said. “That’s why I’m asking. You’re the only person I know is free.”

“What gave you that impression?”

“Reading books and messing with your digestive system isn’t busy.”

Loki sniffed and continued nibbling his toast.

“Come on,” Tony practically whined. “It’ll take, like, thirty minutes. Probably less.”

“You just want to get me outside.”

“Uh... possibly.” Tony pulled out a carton of milk and shook it. “We do need more food in here, though.”

“I’m not your servant.”

“Nah.” Tony returned the milk and stood. “Servants are obligated to do things,” he said, closing the fridge. “This isn’t an obligation. It would be nice of you, but if you *really* don’t want to, I can find someone else.” He wrote another few points, tore the sheet loose, and then placed it an inch from where Loki was leaning on the counter. “Seriously, whatever.”

“You’re not being very subtle,” Loki said.

“Nope. Go get some air.” Tony set a credit card on top of the list. “PIN’s in the margin. Don’t do anything crazy.”

They stared each other down.

“What is wrong with you?” Loki said.

Tony sighed heavily. “So, so much,” he said. “You know, most people would be excited if I gave them access to my bank account.”

“If I wanted it that badly I would have just taken it.”

They went back to staring each other down. Then Tony shrugged and left.

“Hey!” Loki called after him. Tony did not return, though, and the credit card and shopping list remained on the counter like some bizarre fever dream. He almost wasn’t sure it was real until he finished his toast and read the card: Anthony Stark, it said, sure enough. What an asshole! A reckless, stupid asshole. What happened to not trusting each other?

Loki took the jam and glared at the shopping list. He should have left everything here and then gone right back to his room. He also could have taken everything with him and thrown it at Tony’s door and then gone right back to his room. He also could have conveniently forgotten—and then gone right back to his room. The possibilities were endless. He loathed this planet and its miserable stores and the thought of existing today made him want to curl into a ball on the floor and yell. But between what would happen if he let Tony down like that and the fact that, alright, he did feel somewhat in need of exercise, he didn’t have the heart. Too bad Tony knew he had the necessary experience regarding Earth: otherwise, he would have just claimed ignorance the likes of Thor and called it a day. “Sorry,” he could see himself saying, “but I’ve never set foot in a Midgardian shop in my life! Also, what’s this mysterious piece of plastic you’ve bestowed upon me?”

Gross. He should have pretended to be stupid when he had the chance.

Knowing he had set this fate upon himself and determined to ride it to the bitter end, Loki returned the jam to his room and then headed out with the card and shopping list in his coat pocket. He spent a long part of the walk downtown cursing everything and everyone that ever was, but at least it was

nice outside. The nearest market wasn't far but there were many streets to cross and turns to make and he did begin to feel like he was forgetting. The city was too loud. The people were too loud. All the smells combined into a disgusting humid sludge and someone didn't know how to drive and wouldn't stop making out with their car's horn and on top of everything he was overheating. Amazing! He wanted off of this planet now.

So far so good, though, and the store was air-conditioned. And very bright. And white. Like a little dreamy box. Cold and sterile and warded against escape. Fit to die in.

Tony, you fucker. Loki grabbed a pair of sunglasses and put them on so he wouldn't have to look at anyone. He took a basket and threw the tag in. This was a mistake, he decided. He wanted to go home (home?) and fall asleep on the couch and not have to see or hear anything until the next day, not run someone's errands in a building that sent the alarms in his head blaring. They didn't even want him around but he was otherwise useful to torment, wasn't he? Tony! He thought of all the ways he would hurt him while he stopped to read the shopping list. Bread, eggs, butter, milk, milk alternatives with a question mark, cream, cream alternatives also with a question mark, spinach, whole lettuce, kale, carrots, radishes, zucchini, sausages ("chicken please I'm watching my fat"), and at the bottom, "treat yourself!!" in bold, double-underlined script. Of course, Loki would have treated himself anyway whether or not he had permission as compensation for being dragged out of his sanctum, but he appreciated the gesture. He assumed it meant Tony realized he was a terrible person.

Loki stuck the paper back in his pocket and went to the closest relevant location, which was the produce aisle. He found the spinach, grabbed a pack, and nudged his glasses up to read the expiry. Then he realized he had no idea what the current date was and spent another several minutes digging through the packs trying to figure out what the farthest one out was. When he located a sufficiently distant set of digits, he lowered his glasses, threw the pack in the basket, and trudged onwards to the next item while thinking about how much he loathed the universe and everything in it. Okay, cool. Only many more items to go. This was fine. (It was not. Fuck Tony and fuck the Avengers.)

It was also very convenient that, while picking through some other vegetables, Loki noticed a kid in a Captain America shirt staring at him from behind a row of fruit. Actively staring, wide eyes and slack jaw and everything. Not even blinking. Loki stared back over the sunglasses. He didn't want to be mean to a kid but was getting a little uncomfortable, so he pressed a shushing finger to his lips and watched the kid nod and run off. Thanks, kid.

There weren't any other intrepid onlookers, thankfully, but as Loki went down the list, he couldn't shake the nagging urge to shift into a generic nobody and be done. With that who-knows-how-expensive coat and a proud pair of indoor sunglasses, he must have come across as any other spoiled New Yorker—not a danger, just a nuisance. But he did still find himself looking over his shoulder often, trying to remember how many enemies he had and if any of them would want to kill him while he was buying eggs. And he did try not to look at the bright ceiling even with the glasses. He heard many conversations that made him pause and one of the faces reminded him of someone from many years ago. He spent a long part of his time inside wanting to kneel and take cover. He spent a longer time wondering if he had always been like this.

The bread was last. Loki got the same twelve-grain blend that had ran out, considered a gluten-free loaf as well for about half a second, and then decided yes, he really didn't care: he'd had minimal side effects since breakfast and he didn't eat bread that often to begin with. He made sure he had everything on the list and then went to find a box of chamomile tea, which they had been sorely

lacking, and some gluten- and dairy-free hazelnut chocolate, which was definitely worth the effort—all ten minutes of it. Once he had those, he dragged himself to the only till without a line and started setting things down. There was no self-checkout. It was nightmarish.

“Hi,” said the cashier, a young, roundish girl.

Small talk! How awful.

“Hi,” Loki said with a smile.

“How are you?”

Terrible. Like death had pissed on him and then kicked him into the dirt. His heart was racing, his head felt like it was full of sand, and he couldn't help but wonder if he'd misread the list and forgotten something after all. He still wanted to go home and fall asleep on his couch.

“Good,” he said. “You?”

“Good. Would you like a bag?”

“I... brought my own? Hold on.” Loki pulled a folded tote from his pocket that had not been there a second ago. He hoped no one was staring at him again.

Her name was Rose; he knew this because he was watching her nametag the entire time and wondering if she had any better idea of what she was doing with her life than he did. He wondered if her day was going any better than his was. He hoped she didn't have to deal with the kinds of things he was dealing with. She looked too young and happy for it.

Loki emptied the rest of the basket and slid her the disembodied tag. “Sunglasses,” he politely informed. “I'm fighting a migraine, so it was a little urgent. Sorry.”

“That's okay,” Rose said, scanning the cardboard slip. “Migraines suck. Do you have any Advil or something?”

He opened his mouth, stopped, and then panicked and said, “There's some in my car!”

AAAAAAAAAAAAHHHH GET HIM OUT OF HERE.

“Alright, that's forty-seven dollars and eight-two cents. How are you paying?”

“Credit.”

Tony was going to die for this. Rose typed something into the computer and then angled the reader towards him. Loki wondered if anyone would notice the name on the card and think that he was a thief. He was, but that wasn't the point.

“Would you like your receipt?” Rose asked as he read the number on the shopping list and typed it in.

“No, thank you.”

“Okay. Have a nice day, sir.”

“You too.”

Someone else lined up before she could continue talking to him. Loki took his things, stacked the empty basket atop the others, and left. Inside his head he heard the sound of a crowd roaring as he made Tony kneel and beg through tears for forgiveness. Or maybe that was him; it felt familiar somehow. The door shut on that, though, and he made his way back down the hot and noisy city with the bag of food and tried not to go insane. There were more important things to worry about.

It was empty in the compound, so no one bothered him while he recovered from the heat and unpacked all of the food. The fridge was a mess and he ended up having to reorganize everything, which was a little annoying, but it didn't take too long. As for the pantries... he shoved the bread in somewhere and tried not to look at them for even another second. Then he went to see if he could make the tea he got. The kettle was also empty. He dipped it under the tap and turned it on. Nothing bad happened. He turned it off, docked the kettle, and waited for it to boil beside a mug with one of the bags.

That part took a long time.

No one came to bug him, though, and he was able to take the mug to his room without spilling it. After closing and locking the door, he all but collapsed on the couch. He wished he fell asleep immediately as he had been planning. He wished many things, among those that he could have come right back here after his toast instead of taking such an obnoxious detour. None of that was the case and he just sat there in the fur, both hands around the hot mug, and tried to calm down. He didn't know why he was nervous. He tried to pinpoint it but couldn't. White room. They must have been laughing.

The chamomile became his centre of gravity. In and out. One, two, three, four, five. One, two, three, four, five. It was alright here. This room could be a haven if he made it. It was fine. He leaned back in the fur and, for a long and quiet while, he counted over the tea. One, two, three, four, five, hold, one, two, three, four, five, hold, one, two, three...

The fires had died. Loki stared back at the empty ship.

No smoke; there was only hazy, purple light and a cold wind dusting his nape. He couldn't smell it, but he knew it was there. His lungs were heavy and his throat was raw. Ash and broken bits of the starship littered the floor, but as he walked he saw nothing else. No bodies, no blood, no discarded weapons, no signs that there had ever been a fight of any kind. No memories of the life they'd made here. It was only a ship. A plain, ruined ship.

He walked to the captain's deck, where the sprawling glass wall had caved and opened wide to the stormy draw of deep space, and looked around. Nothing: only the lone clattering of some too-tightly bolted furniture struggling in the tempest betrayed any motion. He walked out and continued down the ship, searching for something, anything, but there was still nothing. There was the dining room, game room, rooms for files and books and archives, controls, and everything in between. It was barren.

He would come to find out there was dry blood soaked into his hands, maybe the only proof of anything. Whose blood, he couldn't tell; for all he knew, it was his own. Nothing else. So he kept walking, trying to understand what was, with the wind behind him and the purple smog illuminating his path. Somehow it reminded him of a lonely city stroll in the middle of the night:

streetlights buzzing, the cool evening scent, the sense that there wasn't a single other person, alive or dead, in the entire world—that maybe the world didn't even exist.

Nothing could hurt here. They weren't laughing because they were already gone. They didn't know he was safe on his own, hidden away from everyone. He let the universe pour over him, his wounded feet at home in the failure, and kept walking.

Loki wasn't sure when he woke, or how, or if he had woken at all. His hip ached from where he had unconsciously slunk onto his side, the mug was digging into his crotch, he was thirsty, and he was exhausted. However long he'd slept, it hadn't done a thing.

He wished he had more tea.

He staggered upright and squinted at the windows. The sky outside was a pale blue-grey, sunless and marred with wispy clouds, the kind of sky that, to his disappointment, could not garner any estimate of time. Since his quaint little not-quite-a-guest-room was so neglected in its design that it didn't have a clock (which he had never needed until now) and since he didn't have anything in storage, that meant leaving to find the nearest working clock he knew, which was right around the dorm hall's corner. Twenty seconds, in and out, although he still wanted more tea and even if that weren't the case then something else might delay him. Hopefully not.

Twenty seconds. Loki took the empty mug and left on his toes, right down to the end of the hall without a sound, only to see that it was twelve fifty-six and not a minute later and feel his very soul drop. What was he supposed to do until evening? Sit and stare at the wall? There wasn't a thing he felt like doing today.

This was not twenty. Back to his room before someone started hassling him again. Agh.

Loki peered around the corner, saw there was no one in the kitchen, and went to switch the kettle on because he still wished he had more tea and intended to do something about it. His room lacked that too. One of these days, he decided, he would sneak an extra from somewhere. They wouldn't notice and if they did, what, he wasn't entitled to an electric kettle? Excuse me. If he was going to be on this stupid planet then he wanted the conveniences. Less time out of his room, less commotion. There was no way anyone would argue against

Bang!

He snapped around with a dagger in hand.

No. Nothing. The dagger vanished and he exhaled slowly. Tea. Tea. Tea.

Once the water was boiled and the tea was steeped (five minutes, always) he tiptoed downstairs, cautiously stabilizing the mug with both hands, and went to the library. He wondered as he closed the door if he was allowed liquids there and decided he didn't care, but he took a little off the top, just in case, before going to examine each of the shelves and the words and numbers inscribed on the side.

He did not want to read. He especially did not want to read more nonfiction: he sure loved it all, lived and breathed knowledge, but there was only so much he could learn and it didn't always do the trick for distraction. It would have been nice if he had a novel or several dozen. After the

destruction of both Asgard and the ship he had a feeling that some books without copies elsewhere had ceased to exist, which was a strange and bittersweet realization. He would have liked to read one of them right now but never would again. Encyclopedias couldn't replace them. If he had any more willpower, he would have gone back down the route to the market and bought some fiction from one of the many bookstores dotting the way just to pretend, but to tell the truth he was too tired to bother. So he searched for something tolerable, which didn't really work.

Many times it seemed like someone was about to come in and Loki struggled to keep from instinctively drawing a weapon in his occupied hands and spilling the tea on himself and the books. He thought he smelled something burning. He thought maybe *he* was burning. He thought he was having a stroke and dying. But it was only him, alone in a cold and sterile room with neither smoke nor good books. Eventually he settled for a huge non-summary of some politics somewhere that he didn't even feel like reading (though he recognized the author, at least, for heavy wit and comedy) and returned to his room, where he flopped face-down onto his couch like it was the greatest thing in the universe and began, with no enthusiasm whatsoever, to read. Next to him, the mug tumbled into the space between the end cushion and the arm, forlorn but not forgotten.

The book was okay. There was no new information, but it was entertaining enough. After many hundreds of skimmed pages, though, the already poor focus started dying and his head began to hurt. A point came where the words became a garble of meaningless symbols, and, still very exhausted and knowing he was just delaying the inevitable, he pushed the book aside, rolled onto his back, and closed his eyes.

Somewhere, the dreamy echoes of the Statesman took hold again and Loki began to wonder if it was a good idea. Maybe it wasn't. He opened his eyes and rolled off the couch.

... What did he usually do for fun?

Part of him, for no particular reason, longed for a hot shower. The stall in the corner of the bathroom looked lovely. It had frosted glass walls and space for maybe four, five people—and for just him? Plenty. He could lie down if he wanted to. Last he'd seen something like that was in Asgard, in his private suite, and it was one of those things he never realized he could miss until it was gone. And he didn't realize how long it had been. He had never actually showered here, only skirted around the problem with cleaning spells that he had no right using when there was running water right there. It *was* convenient; no prep, no drying his hair for six hours, nothing. To be honest, it was probably better than doing it by hand, but it had been weeks now and it was getting a bit strange. He should take a shower.

Eh. It wasn't that bad. No shower today.

Despite how much he didn't want to, Loki found the strength to continue distractedly skimming the book splayed on his couch, which he did for quite some time. That was when he closed it, sighed, and left the room. It was four thirty-seven. Maybe dinner would be more entertaining. He stewed around for a while and considered going to yell at Tony, but Tony was probably out. He kind of wanted to ask about that movie and see for himself how much his hair looked like the main character's when he wasn't trying to tame it. They could have even watched it together. He did none of that, though, and went right back to his room and daydreamed his way through the rest of the book.

Dinner, generally, was just after six—sometimes earlier, sometimes later. Loki finished the book at around quarter to. He didn't have a scrap of hunger in him, but he still had a credit card in his

pocket and a mug jammed in the couch grooves and his brain was slowly melting from forcing himself to read, so he took both and walked down.

Sam was working on something at one of the far tables; through the glass, Loki recognized the back of Natasha's head off in another room as she dug through some files. In the kitchen was Tony, who somehow detected him entering the room and looked up a few seconds later with the most obnoxiously smug grin imaginable.

"I hate you," Loki said, stopping beside him.

"I hate me too," Tony said. "Did you survive?"

"No. You're currently communicating with my yet undeparted spirit."

Tony's eyes widened. "I'm so sorry," he said, his voice grave. "I did this to you, didn't I? I can see it now: 'Here lies Loki. Killed in cold blood by a grocery store.' I never should have sent you."

"Yes! And you have that on your conscience now. I hope it was worth it."

"It was not. I'm going to think about it for the rest of my life." Tony paused, and then, without a single break in character, he asked, "Does the apparition wish to help me with dinner?"

Dinner consisted of what looked like some rich vegetable stew, featuring the last of the boneless-skinless chicken thighs Loki had seen in the fridge the day before. It looked... delicious, actually. "I can't cook," he said, which was a lie, in fact, but no one needed to know.

"I can't cook either. That's why you're helping."

Loki didn't respond. He cleaned the mug, slid it into the cupboard, and pressed himself to the island and began tapping out a nervous rhythm on the back of his hand. Sure, he could help: he had no issues there. But he also thought about whether he would somehow splash the boiling broth on himself because his hand slipped. Or the pot. Dumping the entire pot full of boiling broth on himself! Not only would it be horrific but dinner would be ruined. And yes, he could heal it if he did, but that wasn't the problem. All of it. Slipping and dumping all of the

"No, huh?" Tony said.

Loki stared at the pot. "I... really can't cook."

"Well, I'm going to do something stupid like burn the carrots and then Pepper's going to yell at me and it'll be your fault but yeah, if you don't want to help me"—Tony gave it a quick stir—"then sure. I hope you like the taste of burnt carrot."

"You'll be fine," Loki said.

"Eh. No promises." Tony scraped a lone chunk of meat off the spoon and into the pot and then stepped back. "You didn't steal my identity or anything, did you?"

"I didn't."

"Cool."

Loki fished the card out of his pocket and handed it to him.

“Uh, just put it down somewhere.”

Loki placed it on the counter.

“Sorry,” Tony said.

“What for?”

“Never mind. Hey, you’re not allergic to corn, right?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Oh, good. I didn’t want to use flour because... you. Yeah. Anyway, this should be another twenty minutes. Go run around the building or something. Get your appetite up.”

“My appetite is right where it’s supposed to be.”

“Uh-huh. What have you eaten since this morning?”

“Food.”

“What kind?”

“Edible.”

“You know what—don’t even run,” Tony said. “Just walk around the building. One lap.” He raised a finger. “I won’t harass you for any more exercise for, like, two days. Maybe even three.”

“Whatever,” Loki said, and then he left the kitchen.

He didn’t walk around the building, but he did retrieve the book from his room and then go to the library and determine its exact location on the shelves. Then he took something else at random, not even looking at the title, and returned to set it on his couch’s side table. He wasn’t hungry and Tony, quite frankly, needed to keep his concern to himself. Honestly, he dropped and did several dozen push-ups just out of spite. Was he any more hungry than before? No. Was he dizzy and covered in cold sweat and even more in need of a week-long nap?

He struggled back up and sat on the floor for a long time while the breath returned to his lungs.

They were treating him like a child; he didn’t need someone giving him instructions. If he didn’t want to eat then he wouldn’t eat. If he didn’t want to talk to anyone then he wouldn’t. If he didn’t want to help then he wouldn’t. They needed to learn their place. He told himself he’d force something down just to shut them up, though, and dragged himself to one of the tables and waited. At some point, he began braiding small sections of his hair to keep his hands busy and wondered, half-serious, if that would somehow make him feel like eating. It didn’t.

The room was a little less deserted by the time Tony announced the food was done (and, he added, definitely edible) but not by much. Him, Natasha, Sam, Bruce, and Pepper. Well... Bruce was nice. Loki wondered if living together for months meant anything anymore. Another explosive argument? Maybe not. It was pretty light this time, if uninteresting.

Something dropped.

Loki whipped around in his seat. “Hey!” he yelled. “Do you mind?”

Tony looked innocently back at him with a spoon in hand. “Sorry,” he stammered. “I have buttery fingers. I didn’t mean to startle you.”

Loki realized how loud he’d yelled and tried to untense. The entire table was staring at him.

“... Anyway,” Tony muttered to himself, wiping off his spoon.

Bruce somehow looked even more worried than usual.

“Wow, for someone who doesn’t know how to cook you’ve really outdone yourself!” Loki said.

“Agreed,” Sam said. There were a few nods.

Tony coughed out a nervous laugh. “Ha. I, uh, followed a recipe.”

“Not everyone can follow recipes,” Natasha said.

“True. Lucky me.”

Loki got up and speed-walked to the kitchen for seconds. This awful miserable place and its people and its sounds and its smells. Like smoke. Tony must have burned something after all. Where was the ladle? This stupid place. The bowl went on the counter, but it could have dribbled there so Loki held it over the pot instead. But it could have gotten on his hands there. Back to the counter? Back to the counter. Steady. Nothing was burning now. Thanos Thanos Thanos Thanos Thanos

FUCK

he spilled it

oh my god everyone saw that

—he slammed a dish rag on the counter and tried not to vomit. He burned his fingers. Someone was holding him down. Nothing nothing nothing he cleaned the spill, threw the rag into the sink, and locked himself in the tiny bathroom right by the common area and began to cry hysterically on the floor. They were holding him down. Their hands were digging into his back. Blood and sweat. Why was he so damn hard to break when he was already broken?

Thanos. Loki felt his skin crawling with them but couldn’t reach to claw them out. They hurt him but it wasn’t enough. They killed everyone too.

He spent a long time on the floor. The stew in his bowl was cold by the time he got out, but maybe that was better. No one dropped any spoons again.

“You should tell me more about the Allspeak,” Tony said.

Loki wondered how to stomach anything after sobbing for twenty minutes straight. “I’ll get around to it sometime,” he said.

They didn’t mention his red eyes. They didn’t mention anything. The rest of dinner was stiff, like they were expecting more, but there wasn’t more. Loki spent a long time struggling to finish his food.

...And Discard Them

Chapter Summary

Loki examines his fears.

Chapter Notes

me, someone who naturally prefers long chapters, finding the necessary flow in the story for more long chapters: (☉☽☉)

The ship was still empty. The smoke was thin and wispy. In the captain's deck, the glassless viewport had settled and the air was stagnant and safe to cross—no vacuum tug of deep space. No rattling lights and furniture. Around his neck was the ghostly touch of a chafing rope, but his bloody hands felt nothing. The ghost rope passed through its fingers. Maybe a noose. Maybe a leash. It was hard to breathe around. Loki, painfully lucid, limped to the empty frame and looked up at the universe outside. It was beautiful. The stars were close enough to touch and the colours wrapped around him like a veil, and, weightless beneath unreality, he almost wanted to step out and see what would happen, but he never did. He saw Thanos beside him reflected where the glass had been. He saw him holding the bloody noose leash.

“Look around,” the air whispered as Loki turned and limped back down the stairs. “You’re a lot like me, aren’t you?”

Not at all. But those bloody footsteps behind him didn’t lie. He kept rubbing at his neck trying to catch the rope and kept feeling only skin.

He missed the noise. The silence felt empty and forlorn. It was just him here, trailed in spirit by those that did this. Even the most consistent dreams were never exactly alike and there was a lot to explore: rooms that shouldn’t exist, halls that led somewhere off-ship like a portal, bizarre artifacts strewn in bizarre places. He liked the weed-covered library with the biomes in its books. Tangled vines and flowers climbing out of the shelves and insects crawling across the soggy pages. It was so strange and peaceful there that he wished he could stay, but the smoke was beginning to creep in and flames were popping through the corners. They trapped him in the room. They were on him as soon as he turned his back. And they burned just like the real thing.

Loki whipped the blanket off and sat straight up and took a choking breath.

Thanos. Thanos. Of course that bastard wouldn’t die so easy; he had to live on elsewhere. Was this a pattern now? Loki tried to feel where the rope had been. Checked his hands for blood. It better not be. He wiped the sweat from his face. He felt... violated.

He shifted onto his side and then, many minutes later, rolled the rest of the way off the bed, only to absolutely botch what should have been a graceful toe-landing and stub an entire foot on his boot: he winced and kicked the pair closer towards the side table. Then he stopped again, lost. Violated and dirty. Now was a good time for an hour-long shower with a lot of scrubbing. Eugh. But the idea made him nauseous. Over a shower?

Stubbornly, maybe stupidly, he padded in his socks to the bathroom and looked at the shower.

It was a nice one. He slid the door open and stepped inside, clothes and all, to check if it worked at all; he had plenty of room to avoid drenching his shirt. So he tried nudging the water on to a slight drizzle, nothing that would catch him as he was, but his hand refused to move. It felt like he was standing on the edge of a cliff—one wrong step and a breath away from falling. Paralyzed. What was the problem? He was only going to turn it on a little to psyche himself, not take a full shower in his clothes. And he would be forced to take his clothes off and take the stupid shower already because he might as well at that point. But the knob stayed motionless under his fingers.

Thanos?

Loki went to the sink, took a deep breath, and eased both taps on. Then, slowly, he slid his hand under the water. Not a problem at all. He should wash his hands while he was it; that was a much smaller task than his whole body and there was no excuse. Did he have soap in here? Oh! He did. It smelled nice. Simple enough. There was no reason for him to be avoiding

(he was screaming on the bloody floor)

THERE WAS EVERY REASON TO BE AVOIDING THIS

He turned the tap off and frantically dried his hands on his shirt and tried to stop thinking about it why couldn't he stop thinking about it stop—it was okay—they were dead it was fine he wasn't there anymore get out get out get out get out get out get out get out get out get out get out get out get out get out get out get out get out get out

The mirror shattered under his fist. It didn't bleed, but it hurt. And it startled him out of it. He sucked in a breath and hunched on the counter with his limp hand. He sat down. He decided he didn't need to wash his hands or take a shower ever again.

On the eve of the Statesman attack—or maybe the morning; was it the morning?—he had given himself a proper running-water cleaning with no issue. It was such an ordinary thing that no one would ever think twice; he savoured the warmth as it poured over him, blissfully unaware of himself, not knowing what was coming. And then Thanos appeared and all the buried memories came rushing and nothing had been the same since. Loki hadn't even made the connection. It struck him now as painfully obvious, this avoidance of any sort of free-flowing liquids or even getting himself wet and he almost wanted to laugh. But he didn't feel anything. Cleaning himself with magic for the rest of his life was an awkward fate but not the worst. He could get used to it. A fear of—

No. Not at all. He wasn't afraid of anything. He stared at the bed from the bathroom floor and then got up and fixed the mirror. Then he left to clear his head.

It was empty.

There wasn't much on the table. Someone had forgotten a plate with crumbs and there was a little handbook by some papers. The kitchen didn't look very exciting either; there was stale coffee sitting in the pot and the fruit bowl was underfilled and unhappy. Loki decided he hadn't missed much and went downstairs, but there wasn't much more. He went all the way to the other wing with the supplies and ships and survivors and found it cleaned of everything. There were no makeshift beds or kitchens or food and drink out or any sign that anyone had ever made it home for a time. It only smelled like some kind of spice, as if its last known meal was still around in spirit. Now it was just an industrial workshop and garage again.

Tony was in the far end running around poking and experimenting on the most destroyed of the escape crafts and didn't seem to notice anyone had come in. Loki, determined to keep it that way, slowly backed out of the room and returned to the kitchen upstairs in the other wing. Well, at least some people were having fun.

It was clear this was going to happen eventually: people would find their homes and work would be completed and they would all part ways again, never to see each other if they could help it until another mess needed to be cleaned up and no one else on the entire planet was available. Tony was right that this place was a breeding ground of vitriol and grief. None of them *chose* to be here, even if it was a state-of-the-art facility with trillions in equipment and resources. Not even the researchers and reporters who had flocked when it first opened. Not worth the drama. Still, Loki was beginning to doubt if he should leave. All the concern about him seemed to have died down which left it a pretty convenient arrangement aside from not knowing how often he should be going outside; he assumed Natasha would get in touch with him when and if it mattered. He didn't even really want to go outside anymore. Outside was exhausting. After a life like his, he just wanted to sleep.

On another day he would be roaring through the city until sunrise laughing with strangers, at home in the madness like only he could be. New York was noisy and filthy and all of the worst things of Earth at the best of times but there was no denying how much fun it could be if one searched. And he sure would be searching. He was happy on his own and content to keep reading in his room but felt like he was missing out not crowning himself king of the local crowds. Give him excitement! Action! Make him feel alive in the danger. But he was unusually tired for going anywhere and somehow didn't know how to handle himself around people like he once had. Like all the silver would drain from his tongue and he would just stand there, stiff as a stone, and compare escape routes. Maybe he wasn't as powerful as he thought: his latest brush with gruesome death at the low cost of a magical flu and everyone he had ever known and loved sounded like a wake-up call. Anything would kill him given the chance. It often tried.

So in the end Loki just grabbed the stale coffee and what remained in the fruit bowl and went back to his room for another menial day of nothing. Most of the good books were gone. If he cared a little more, he might have convinced himself to stop stalling, journey to one of the more peculiar bookstores in the vicinity, and exchange a handful of perfectly normal currency for some novels. Forget that: he could forge an identity and set himself up with an actual entertainment-based library, which would hold him for years—decades!—until he somehow exhausted its collection and then returned to an even worse bout of boredom. Was that possible? Personally exhausting an entire library's worth of literature? Sure; he had time to spare. If only he'd go try instead of wasting the day considering it, but alas: just the thought of dragging himself all the way there and risking who knows what for some—

It certainly wasn't worth it for some books.

Loki flipped the banana peel by the coffee and incinerated it into pure energy for not much reason other than he wanted to see what would happen. It was underwhelming, but it was also kind of hilarious and it solved getting up to throw it out. Then he was bored again, and, finally deciding to do something productive, he closed his eyes, reached into his holding space, and searched. It was a mess in there; dull weapons weren't his only problem, but they were a big one. Feeling around the magic for a while, each particular size and shape and how it swam in his mind, he found what he knew for sure was a dull dagger and placed it on the table.

The whole length was about equal to his forearm, with a dark, wooden handle moulded to his fingers and a curved and etched blade tapering to a needle-like point. Or so it should have been, anyway. He raised the dagger to eye-level between a furtive drink from the mug: there were chips along the edge and the would-be needle had rounded to a stub. No wonder it could barely stick a throw. A dull blade had never stopped him, but it was a liability better avoided. So he finished his coffee, set the mug aside, and cautiously ran a thumb across the blade. The metal glided harmlessly against his skin. He pushed harder, but there was only an unbroken divot in the flesh where he made contact. Not even a scratch. Who would this hurt if it needed to? His chances of survival? It was appalling that he had let so many of these pile up without so much as a polish.

Turning the dull dagger the other way, Loki formed a thin, burning crackle of magic at his fingertips and dragged them over the flat of the blade. There was a strange and distant vibration as he moved his hand and a rain of green sparks that floated off the side like phosphorescent ash, wandering in the air for a moment before fizzling away. He slid past the tip in a single swift motion and cleared the spell. It looked much better now: the chips were gone, as was the roundness at the end, and at its thinnest point the edge was no thicker than a sheet of paper. Ordinarily a very sharp weapon was not only tedious to maintain but inefficient, struggling to cut deep because its thin edge couldn't open a wide enough wound, and that would explain why they were all so dull, but these were powerful metals and many of them had been enchanted for further strength and durability so he could afford it. He flipped to a reverse grip and then back again and then tried to break the blade in case he had botched the spell and destroyed its structural integrity but couldn't, and, satisfied, he lowered it.

He realized now that even though it seemed fine, even though he recognized a sharp blade just by looking, he didn't actually know how well it would cut. Wooden targets didn't offer much for accuracy and there were little opportunities for a field test. That left...

Well.

He lifted his shirt.

The blade found its mark almost automatically: a spot just off-centre, off to his right side and nestled in the dip of his abdominals, that had, in all awkward honesty, been used to test weapons before where his hands didn't do the trick. It was comfortable and convenient and not very veiny or close to anything dangerous, maybe as safe as a test cut to the stomach could be, and there was no pain, only a feathery tickle as a hairline of red bubbled up and rolled sluggishly towards his hipbone. The cut was almost surgical. This would kill someone for sure—they would never feel it coming.

Loki put the dagger away and wondered what to do about the blood.

Self-healing took a different kind of energy than healing others and self-healing, any healing, especially without material assistance, took practice, lest the treatment turn out subpar or even fail.

This came easy, though: he'd had practice enough, even if he wasn't all that much of a healer, and it was a small injury. When the heat was gone and the tug of closing tissues had ceased, there was nothing but smooth, porcelain skin, unscarred and smeared with a faint line of drying blood. He cleaned it magically and let his shirt fall. So much for conserving magic, but he had no plans to travel soon and probably could have harassed Thor to ferry him across the universe if he did. It was ugly outside. The sky was a dead, ashen grey, its measly spattering of blue allowing only a thread of sunlight, and it looked like it was going to rain. This wasn't a day for travelling anywhere. Nope. Another hot drink or two and

Loki summoned another dagger, a short, slim, plain-looking sticker, and numbly held it up.

His air was going. Something was weighing on his body. Heaving. Pinning him down. If he went out now he'd be caught in a storm and soaking wet by the time he found cover. Alright, then; he wouldn't go out today. This was one of the most secure places in the area and a little rain wouldn't stop it. He tilted the dagger so he could see his reflection, almost flawlessly captured in the polished surface, and looked deep into its eyes. This was one of the safest places he could be. This was real. There was no reason to be afraid.

One, two, three, four, five.

You're losing it.

Ha! Losing what? His dignity? Loki muttered a swear and sharpened that one the same way, thin magic smoothing and refreshing the edge, and stuck it straight into his side not expecting it to go in and yelled. Okay, idiot. This was exactly why he kept almost dying. He grit his teeth and pulled the dagger out and healed himself.

Why wasn't he with Asgard anyway? It would be more entertaining than this. And he trusted them a lot more than the Avengers, even if not by much; he wouldn't have to worry about when his welcome would expire. But was that really true? They must have known by now that what happened was his fault. There was no reason to offer him any hospitality when he was why everyone was dead and chances were they were glad he was gone. He'd never been particularly good to keep around. It was only a matter of time before Tony and the others realized that too.

Loki conjured a dirk and stared it down. Thanos was right. He was nothing without him.

No matter, though. Thanos was dead and his pawns would scatter with no leader. They didn't have to worry about him anymore. But there *were* better places to be and better things to do than sort weapons. It didn't need to be another galaxy. Earth was big enough to disappear in. There was just no use sitting in a room all day searching for things to do. Recovering from battle injuries and magical exhaustion was different; it was good to limit commotion and a bit of boredom was healthy, but plenty of time had passed since then. Why not go out and find something nicer?

Well, maybe it was too risky at this point, Loki decided, fixing some holes and scratches in the dirk's handle. Healed or not, there was a lot out here that would like to kill him. He just might find the next Thanos if he was lucky. So there was nothing wrong with doing nothing for a while and, content to take the day for some simple chores, he made himself comfortable and kept working. He polished the blades and renewed some enchantments that had weakened over time. He cleaned the gems and beads on the fancy ceremonials. He even dragged himself out of his room in search of some kind of oil for the wooden handles.

There wasn't anything in the supply closets down the hall. There wasn't anything in the kitchen, which had a few drawers of miscellaneous items: surely there should have been something for the knives and cutting boards, but the only notable find was cleaning supplies. There wasn't anything with all the weapons downstairs either. He suspected he would have luck in the big industrial area where Tony was but was hesitant to deal with him just for some prettier handles.

Of course they bumped into each other anyway because it was a small world and they shared a route, which was awkward but hopefully not all bad. "Hey, how's it going?" Tony said above a pile of junk in his arms.

"Oh... just running some errands," Loki said. "Do you have anything for treating wood?"

"Like mineral oil or something? Yeah, I've got some somewhere if I just, uh"—Tony hoisted the pile higher up against his chest with a grunt—"lemme go drop this off and I'll find it for you."

Loki followed him to his workshop and waited for the pile to explode everywhere.

"Errands, huh?" Tony said, somehow unlocking the door around everything in his arms. He kicked it open and went to drop the pile on the nearest table. "What kind of errands?"

"Weapon maintenance."

Tony looked back at him like he'd suddenly remembered that any one wrong move could end with a knife in his neck. "Yeah, that's important! You can't always fix the damage if you don't take care of your tools right. Okay, where did the—hold on a second." He scurried behind the tables. "Wow, they must look good," he said as he bent to dig through all sorts of cabinets and crates. "I wish I was that diligent with some of my stuff. Do I even label these? Nope. I swear I saw a full bottle somewhere though if I remember where I put it."

Loki wondered if Tony was about to have a heart attack.

"Ah! There it is." A hand appeared from behind the tables holding up a bottle. "Is this enough?"

"That'll do," Loki said. "Thank you."

Tony brought him the bottle. "I think I borrowed this from the kitchen a while ago and forgot to put it back," he said, "if you want to find a spot for it when you're done with it."

Loki suspected he would forget too but smiled and said, "I'll remember."

"Do you need anything else? I've got a lot of stuff lying around."

"Just this."

"Okay, hope it works."

Loki went back to his room with the oil and continued fixing knives at the table.

Many hours passed like that. Sharpen, clean, polish. It was slow and precise, even with magic, but that was fine. Tony never came to ask about him or call him down for dinner, which probably wasn't happening tonight anyway. This was nice. Very peaceful, even though he hadn't learned his lesson and was continuing to test the sharpness on himself. He went to the couch at one point and then back to the table and made something to drink and something to eat and kept working on his

own while the orange-violet dusk crept in and the lights peeking under his door went dark. Illuminated only by the pale blue glow of the moon, the blood he forgot to clean was easy to miss.

The rain didn't break, but the clouds dragged on into the morning, shrouding much of the dawning sunlight: if it didn't rain now, it would rain soon. First thing after waking Loki went outside to check and he was disappointed to find the thick, humid chill he had come to know by heart through growing up with a brother like his. At best it would only rain a little, but it would. And he didn't know what he would do if he got caught in it.

He couldn't say why he left in spite of all this. Maybe just that he was slowly going insane sharpening weapons alone in a silent room with stale coffee and questionable breakfasts. Was it worth the risk? Debatable. He told himself it would only be for a few minutes but ended up overstaying for a trip into the city. It was nice, but it was a hectic series of hasty sidesteps and cut corners and glancing up at the bleached sky so often and so abruptly he worried he would give himself a neck injury. Out here wasn't one of the safest places to be. Out here was everything that could have gone wrong. He still didn't know for sure that Strange wouldn't show up out of nowhere and strike him down for even daring to leave the designated area. Natasha hadn't said anything about that.

But it was nice. The cold was pleasant and it felt good to stretch his legs like this.

Along the way he spotted a bookstore and popped in for a look. It was too old, too tiny, and filled with dusty knick-knacks, the kind of place that wouldn't even flinch at an offering of undisguised gold and silver from Asgard's coffers if needed because he sure could have gone back to bully the Avengers' resident source of money, teleport for maximum efficiency, but it was a hassle—and he sure could have glamourised a pebble or similar and tricked them into thinking he'd paid, which he had done before, but it was a cheap trick and there was no reason to do that to someone over some books. If anyone noticed him coming in, he couldn't tell. He slipped into the very back of the store and found the novels, found a genre, and began picking out books and stacking them in the crook of his elbow. They were tame reads, mostly, like all the classics he'd never gotten around to and whatever else happened to catch his eye because he didn't know what would interest him. His collection on the ship wasn't coming back. This would have to suffice.

When the amount became too ridiculous to carry, Loki returned to the front and set the books on the counter.

The clerk flicked her eyes lazily up at him and then rose from her seat, like a corpse. She pulled each book from the pile to scan, one by one, and pushed them aside. Not a single word sounded from her. Loki didn't complain.

“Incidentally,” he asked, “and I know this must be such a funny question: would you accept gold as payment?”

She halted mid-movement, drew her languid gaze away from the book in her hand, and cocked her head. The mauve curls attached to it seemed to ignore the motion. “How pure?” she asked, and finished scanning the book.

“As pure as possible,” Loki said. “Coins must be strengthened if they're to withstand more than a few transactions, I'm sure you know, but these are relatively untouched. As relatively as possible.”

She scanned the last book. “Fifty dollars and seventy cents.”

Somewhere, something metal clattered to the floor. Loki stifled a reaction.

“What’s the going rate these days?”

“Whatever.”

Loki formed a small palmful of coins, semi-discreetly, and slid them across the counter. She pocketed them and reset the number on the register, as if the purchase had actually gone through, and printed the titles for inventory purposes. Ah, the wonders of living in this city. Nothing was a shock.

“Bag?” she asked, emotionless.

Loki shrugged and brought out the same tote he had used the last time. She either didn’t see or didn’t care about the glint of green behind the counter. She continued to not speak as he arranged the books inside the bag. He continued to not complain.

“You look troubled,” she flatly stated, just as he was thinking how gracious the silence was. His jaw tightened on its own accord.

“We’re all troubled,” he said, and he lifted the bag into one hand, making sure the angle was straight. He looked up. “You look troubled too,” he told her, only partially in jest.

“I try.” She paused. “Nice coat.”

“Thank you. Nice hair.”

“Thanks.”

Loki turned to leave.

“Feel better,” she called as the door closed on him. He raised his other hand in a slight, acknowledging wave and then trudged off.

Knowing the fear was obvious only made it worse. He was afraid it would rain, afraid someone would recognize him—why hadn’t he shifted?—and he wouldn’t even remember the clerk or what she’d said come tomorrow. This wasn’t too bad, though: the bag was absolutely full to overflowing with dozens of books and he’d been looking forward to a few of them for nigh on centuries. He held on to that.

It did not rain.

The main doors were locked and Loki had somehow forgotten the override code and he had the suspicion that no one would buzz him in, so, after some long and nonchalant scrutiny of his surroundings, he sighed and warped straight to his room. No fear, he thought as he placed the bag by the couch and toed his boots to rest beside it. He realized he hadn’t breakfast but wasn’t very hungry, so he didn’t bother. He pulled out the top book, nestled himself under the fur blanket, and flipped to the first page.

Reconciliation, Continued

Chapter Summary

The days are getting longer. Truths are remembered and questions are answered.

Chapter Notes

what's this? three updates in a row that have all been exactly two weeks apart each? hey, I think we're onto something. (this was a lie —the author, 2021)

ALSO I FORGOT TO SAY THIS LAST UPDATE BUT LOKI: WHERE MISCHIEF LIES BY MACKENZI LEE IS A REALLY GOOD BOOK I LITERALLY CRIED GO READ IT. THERE'S CANON GENDERFLUID AND PAN REP + OTHER GAY STUFF AND A WHOLE BUNCH OF SHIT ABOUT LOVING YOURSELF AND CHOOSING YOUR OWN DESTINY AND IT'S THE PUREST THING EVER AND IT HAD ME SOBBING HAPPY TEARS I JUST LOVE IT S O M U C H (this is still true —the author, slightly later in 2021)

The rain showed sometime during the night, and it was there when Loki awoke: a soft, thin sprinkle, just light enough that it couldn't be heard through the windows. Beneath the mist-like curtain, and perhaps still lost behind a dream, the morning's slaty glow was wondrously ethereal; any more lost and it might vanish altogether. And, perhaps too lost himself, he could only watch the droplets running along the glass, starry-eyed and half-upright in his bed, with all sleepy innocence. But his mind would drift elsewhere. Calmly. Sharply.

He was almost certain for a moment that he had never awoken, that the little scratches he remembered in the underbrush of his thoughts were very well nothing more than a dream, but he knew better:

Obedience. Desire. Revenge.

—and what his problem was, anyway: I do want this, but why would I ever work for you? This couldn't be worth it. Not at all; rather he should die and get it over with. Ah. Not so simple. Water on his back. Burning without burning. He rolled over and buried his face in the pillow. Not so simple, was it?

“You want this,” screamed another knife. “You want revenge. This is your legacy.”

No, it wasn't. He wasn't there anymore. This wasn't real. This wasn't real.

“Fight it!” they roared. “See through the pain. See the glory that was kept from you. See what you can do for us.”

Stop talking stop talking stop talking stop talking stop talking stop talking stop talking. He counted his breaths and tried to go back to sleep. Not this again. Not like this. It hadn't even been five minutes yet—what did he do this time?

In any case, he couldn't fall asleep. He heaved himself off the bed and out of the room without a single glance at the windows.

There was no one today, nor any sign of them: looked like he'd either slept through the excitement or they hadn't bothered. Not that he was complaining—he felt close to tears and suspected he would start sobbing if someone even acknowledged his existence, let alone spoke to him. So this, as disquietingly lonely as it was, was better. Most importantly he could not see the rain from here. He could find other ways to busy himself. There was a box of blueberries on the kitchen island, which didn't appeal to him, and a box of what looked like some terribly delicious muffins beside them, which all at once only made him want to cry even harder: right when things couldn't get any more unfair, he had a faulty, tell-riddled glamour to deal with. Why couldn't he just go back to ignoring it? When did he become so careful?

He was almost tempted to try one anyway just to spite himself. To hell with his digestive system; he could risk it. It was hardly ever that bad regardless.

But better not.

Instead he semi-forced himself to have a handful of blueberries and a single fried egg, the entire bottom of which he somehow burnt despite ample experience and precautions. (Following this, he newly understood and empathized with Tony's plight.) Coffee in this state would be tantamount to suicide and the kettle was too empty for tea, and, although he tried, he couldn't find the courage to fill it. He convinced himself it was laziness, but to be very honest it was anything but: he did feel like a hot drink and it was incredibly upsetting not knowing how he would handle it. He could close his eyes, keep the water at whatever peculiar angle and strength might not bother him, and pretend. He could stop overreacting. But none of that, either.

He (magically) cleaned whatever utensils he'd used, put them away, and returned to his room just long enough to realize he absolutely could not handle this at all: even with his back to the windows, even under the massive pile of fur, he was still thinking about what he was doing and why he was avoiding it and what would happen if he didn't and, quite inevitably, he was remembering the worst. So he didn't do that, either, and gave up and went right back to the lounge. The empty lounge, which he was not usually in because he must not have given a single shit about his friends, his home, and whatever else he ought to give a shit about. The one where they probably mocked him when he wasn't around. Yeah, that one.

Alright, well, not today: he turned himself invisible just in case someone wanted to bug him and then immediately wondered how anyone had ever deemed him worthy of glory. Him, with all the tears and panic. With the invisibility. With the cowering. So he went to a farther table, to a farther chair, and opened one of many unread novels and shoved every word of that right out of his mind, which worked until something like a door or otherwise clicked somewhere and he practically dropped the book and jumped, at which point he really couldn't fool himself anymore: he was a damn coward after all, and he had no idea what they could have seen in him.

But he desperately shoved that out of his mind too and, for the rest of that day, read.

He didn't notice himself skipping lunch, nor dinner; his appetite never showed and no one came that evening and by that time he was already in his room, grateful that it had stopped raining. The

next day passed similarly: he jolted awake, cleaned himself of all the cold sweat and what-have-you (and thought about how much he'd rather have a hot shower than use magic), changed his clothes for once even though they were definitely clean given the obsessive use of cleaning spells only because he felt like a different look, picked the coat off the bed's footboard and put it on, and sank into the mountain of fur on his couch, where he alternated for hours between novels, daydreaming, and fiddling with his knives. No appetite. Some weak semblance of hunger finally graced him the following morning, but it was just his luck that he couldn't find the willpower to go get food and so he did what he always did: he kept reading and distracted himself. This worked until he lost track of the words and also the ability to read and decided that maybe he ought to eat after all. He spent an hour or so convincing himself of that and another hour convincing himself to leave and find something before the industrious, spoiled prince side of his mind suggested he have Tony bring him something instead because Tony definitely cared more about his diet than he did—perhaps enough to agree.

Absolutely not.

Wouldn't it be hilarious if it worked, though?

Loki sat at the table with a pen and paper and proceeded to have a harassing contest with his inner monologue. This was a terrible idea. If Tony happened to be outside, busy, what then? How ridiculous would it look for such a mundane request to appear in the middle of nowhere? This was, in fact, more than terrible. What the hell was his problem? Was he insane or just stupid?

He should have accepted the phone.

Hi, Tony! Are you busy? (Answer below.)

Somehow he got a response less than a minute later:

Not particularly. Why?

Well.

Can you get me something to eat?

Twenty seconds.

I'm not your servant.

Oh, Tony. How very tragic. Loki paused to mourn the failed attempt and then decided he wasn't that hungry anyway: if he were truly starving, he would go and make something himself. A few days of not eating never killed anyone, anyway. He did kind of hope Tony would show regardless—expected it, even. But there was nothing.

In a fairly even-more-desperate attempt to forget what a colossal idiot he was, he found a raggedy pack of playing cards in his holding space and tried to see how long he could shuffle before his brain melted. He went slowly and meticulously, thumbing the soft edges longer than he needed to and trying every possible technique to pass the time while he decided on a game. Some kind of solitaire might have sufficed, but honestly, this was alright; why not spend an hour or two obsessively shuffling cards more than would ever be necessary?

There was still no knock on the door, though.

When *was* the last time he'd eaten?

He stopped.

Just as he was resigning to his fate, the door snapped open. He looked up, quite startled by the timing, and locked eyes with a very unamused-looking Tony holding a small bowl in one hand. "Half-finished salad," Tony said. "It's all I have. Take it or leave it."

Loki's mouth twitched. "I didn't think you'd bother."

"Neither did I," Tony said. "Then I realized you never eat and I should probably get you something while your appetite's making an appearance."

"I eat," Loki insisted.

"Right, yeah. My bad. So is that a yes on the salad?"

"What sort of salad?"

"It's, like, leaves and stuff. Very salady."

"Ah, that sounds delicious. I love leaves."

Tony looked nervous beneath whatever annoyance he was trying to project, like he still didn't trust the two of them to be in a room together—or else that was how it seemed to Loki; he could hardly say what in the world was ever going Tony's head when they were alone. But he managed a smile at the comment and probably also at this entire situation and then came over, set the salad on one end of the table, and pulled up a chair. "Why did I do that?"

"I don't know," Loki said, "but thank you."

Tony sighed.

"So how are things?" Loki asked, resuming his shuffling.

"They're okay. I was just messing with some tech in my workshop. Nothing much."

"How exciting?"

Tony crossed his arms and reclined in the chair. "You know," he said, "the kid's asking about you. Svala. What do I tell her?"

"I'm well. Is she?"

"All things considered, she's doing pretty good. Kinda wants to see you, though. You up for a visit?"

"I'm busy."

"With what?"

"Oh, very important matters."

"Like?"

“Self-loathing and existentialism?”

Tony looked back in horror.

“I’m joking!” Loki said, setting the cards down. “Goodness, don’t look so worried. It doesn’t suit you.”

“Your sarcasm isn’t the easiest to detect,” Tony confessed. “After all that—”

“All what?”

“The... uh.”

Loki waited. Then, hearing no answer, he slid them both five cards.

Tony squinted. “What?”

“Unless you’d like to spend hours learning a game you’ve never heard of,” Loki said, taking his cards. “I assumed not.”

“Are we betting anything?”

“Are we? I don’t know.”

Tony dubiously picked up his cards.

“Come to think of it,” Loki said, ordering the cards by value, “ever played for truths?”

“Do I dare?”

“Oh, you do. It’s fun.”

“Maybe if you have nothing to hide.”

Loki glanced at him above the cards. “Well, now I’m curious.”

“How does this go?” Tony asked with the smile of someone who wasn’t worried a bit.

“Best hand gets to ask something,” Loki said. “and the other person, assuming they have any concept of honour, answers as authentically as possible. If you’re really up for this”—he straightened out his cards—“we can play how I play: save your questions and you can ask something bigger. If you don’t end up losing them first.”

“Anything?”

“Anything. Ask me my favourite colour if you want.”

“What makes a question big?”

“Use your judgment.”

Tony considered this. “Alright,” he said, and then he pulled out two cards and pushed them aside, face-down. Then he hesitated very conspicuously before saying, “So... Thor’s worried too.”

Loki placed a single card over Tony's. "That's not like him."

"I wouldn't know."

"Is he still in Wakanda?"

"Yeah. So"—Tony cleared his throat—"he's kinda relying on us to tell him where you're at."

Too bad; that wasn't anyone's business. Loki, already dreading being nagged for an answer, replaced what they'd discarded, briefly examined his hand, and then revealed two kings.

Tony flashed him three aces and asked, "What's your favourite colour?"

"Really?"

"What? You told me I could."

Loki paused. "It's... blue. It doesn't seem like it, does it? Green is *my* colour, but my favourite is blue."

"Neat," Tony said. "My favourite colour is purple."

Tony had no idea what he was getting into.

"Well, since you're so confident," Loki muttered, nothing short of an eye-roll, as he smoothly reshuffled and dealt. He slapped two pairs on the table without a word. "Most people you've ever slept with at the same time."

Tony wheezed. "That is not a small question," he said.

"I was under the impression you had nothing to hide," Loki calmly responded, shuffling everything again as usual: Tony watched him with a half-stifled laugh "Ah. My mistake."

The next round was rightfully tense.

"I dare you to ask something normal," Tony said as he lost a second time in a row.

"No," Loki said, and then he set everything down and asked, "What do you think of me?"

Maybe the previous question was alright. Tony stopped with his cards and, with a look like he almost wished it had been that—and probably also like he had been expecting the deadpan bait and switch—said, "Um... I don't know." For a while that was all he said, and he thought it over in silence as Loki took everything and cut the deck the slow and showy way: cards showering from one palm to the other, fluidly and lightly, like a spell to be manipulated. It was mesmerizing. "You... did a lot for us. And... I know you've changed, but..."

"You don't trust me," Loki said.

"I want to. You're a fascinating person and a joy to be around, but every time I look at you, I think—" Tony snapped still and rubbed his eyes. Breathed in. "I remember... your fingers around my throat," he softly said, laying a hand on his Adam's apple. "I could be remembering anything else. But it's always that. Every time. And it's so weird, isn't it, because I think Thor did that to me too

and I don't feel anything like that around him. Maybe it's just that we've had the chance to re-establish that trust. I don't know. I really don't. I'm just..."

"You're afraid," Loki said. "I know. You don't need to explain."

"I shouldn't be afraid of you."

"You'd be a fool if you weren't."

Tony made no response to that, but as Loki tidied everything and he picked up his cards he did suddenly say, "So back on Titan, Strange used the Time Stone to look into all the possible outcomes of the fight."

"Did he, now?"

"Yeah. And so when that happened, uh, he came at me with this massive number—like, several million or something—and obviously I asked how many of those outcomes were good."

Loki placed three cards on the table. "What did he say?"

"I don't remember exactly." Tony paused to think and add two of his own to the pile. "About a hundred, I think."

"Only?"

"Yeah. It was depressing. He looked so surprised, too. Probably because you showed up. I mean, no one was expecting it. I sure wasn't."

Loki refilled their hands. "Why are you telling me this?"

"I got this suspicion later that all of those victories were because of you," Tony said. "He never mentioned this outright, but I think it's possible. That if you weren't in the picture, the number would have been, I don't know, one, or even zero. We would have been screwed if you didn't show up when you did."

That made two of them, then.

"That would explain why he's been so docile," Loki said. "Last time we met... well, I won't bore you with the details."

(Falling. Panicking. Wanting to retaliate, wanting to say why he'd been so upset and being unable to on the basis of his own pride—the weight that had settled in his stomach at the mere thought. Tony didn't need to know any of that.)

"He's a prick," Tony said.

"The worst."

"Anyway... the more I think about this, the more I realize just how much I owe you. I knew I did. I didn't know how far it went. I don't care why you did what you did or if you gave a shit about anyone here for even a fraction of a second, but we wouldn't have made it out without you. It did change things. Even just a little bit. Even if I'm afraid. I owe you the world and above everything else I'm grateful."

Loki said nothing. He breathed in and revealed two pairs: six and eight.

Tony flipped his cards. Three fives, two queens. “I guess I should ask the same,” he said.

“I appreciate what you’ve done,” Loki said, sliding everything over and shuffling it into the rest of the deck. “You’ve been very hospitable, and while I must admit your constant concern can feel a little patronizing—and please don’t take that the wrong way—it’s nice to have someone care. Other than that... I’m not sure.”

“Do you trust me?”

“No. I don’t. I’m sorry. I’m trying as much as you, but it’s not that easy. You understand.”

Tony nodded.

Loki did win the next one, but he made what he would immediately decide was the worst mistake and banked it. He stared at the cards. He discarded a single four. He pulled another card. “Oh.”

“That’s not good,” Tony said.

“It *was* a calculated risk,” Loki said, showing what would have been a straight.

Tony didn’t bother turning his cards as he slid them over. “What was all that on Titan?”

“You’ll need to be more specific.”

“The ice. I didn’t know you could do that.”

“I can do a lot of things. You’ve just never seen me do them.”

“So that was magic, I’m guessing.”

This was not a small question. Still, trying not to seem suspicious about it, Loki decided to answer anyway and wondered. Was it? Did something like that count as magic, or was it something else? Freezing the moisture in and around him certainly seemed like a spell, and he certainly believed it was, but it also hadn’t felt like one: it had been a physical sensation from the very depths of his body, familiar the way breathing or walking was and requiring almost no energy. It felt as it did the last time he touched that corner of himself: plain. No sparks, no rush of power through his veins, none of the things he’d come to know. Plain nothingness. He realized he’d never allotted the time to examine his natal skills—why would he ever want to?—and now that the topic was up, he realized he wasn’t sure where to file them.

Tony waited, eyes bright.

“Yes,” Loki ventured, deciding that it probably didn’t matter anyway: divides between such things were so fickle that the entire universe could be considered some kind of magic. No point struggling to draw distinctions. “Elemental and kinetic.” He took the cards, shuffled them almost in a second, and then placed them back on the table. “Not my preferred element, mind you; I’m far more of a fire person. But I needed something Thanos wouldn’t expect and I figured impalement by ice wasn’t on his list.”

“And the blue skin?”

Not a small question at all and also why did Tony remember that.

“Oh, that just happens,” Loki confidently said.

Tony didn't buy it. “That's not an answer.”

“Really. I don't know what to tell you; it's a strange spell and sometimes strange spells have strange side effects. Like changing your appearance.”

It wasn't like he was lying: invoking Jötunn magic had cancelled his glamour, as he'd known it would, and that was a side effect if he ever saw one. But he also wondered why he didn't tell Tony outright. Fighting like that had felt so freeing; he had only cared about victory, not about letting the monster shine through—not about betraying everything he ever was. He'd felt as liberated as he had when he denied his Asgardian heritage on the Statesman. But now...

“Well, I thought it was pretty cool,” Tony said. “No pun intended. You looked amazing.”

“Thank you,” Loki said, unsure how else to respond. He'd heard many descriptors, but amazing? That was new.

They both exchanged two cards. Tony had three of a kind; Loki, four.

“Why haven't I been locked up yet?” Loki asked.

“Small?” Tony said, although he answered regardless: “It wouldn't be right. At all. Not after everything. Besides, Thor would kill me.”

“He wouldn't. He knows what I've done. He wouldn't like it, but I doubt he would fight it.”

The look that followed was... worrying. And so was the silence. Loki nervously dealt. Was that not the case? After everything he'd done, he deserved nothing short of an execution: anything less was fair game. Either way, Thor did kind of hate his guts and want him dead more often than not. Didn't he? He would agree if it came down to that.

“It still wouldn't be right,” Tony said, quite adamant.

“Has that stopped you before?” Loki said, and then he realized that was a terrible thing to insinuate and he should probably shut up forever.

“It has,” Tony said. “It would stop me now. Even if I did have a reason, it would be miserably cheap to come after you while you're off guard. Which you aren't! I mean—look at you. I bet you could break my spine just by thinking it. You get my point, though.”

“I do,” Loki said, hoping it wasn't apparent how much he didn't believe that either. He could almost make out the concern in Tony's eyes: do you really think you're going to die here? But it was gone just as soon as he looked and he realized he was staring trying to find it again.

He took a single glance at his hand and then rested it face-down in front of him with a barely stifled sigh of relief.

Tony did take some time with this one, and Loki decided he should probably do something about the half-finished salad while waiting. He pulled the bowl closer, lifted the fork, and then abruptly realized he wasn't hungry at all. Or at least he stopped being hungry. But obtaining it had been such

an ordeal and Tony would probably be upset if he didn't even try, so he stuck a reluctant piece of kale in his mouth and prayed it would stay down. It did.

"See, look at us bonding," Tony said as he otherwise quite dejectedly pushed one card aside, took one from the top of the deck, and frowned: he flipped his cards to reveal four hearts, almost in sequence but spoiled by a second three. "My mouth germs are all over that fork."

Despite everything, Loki managed a smile. "I feel closer to you already," he said, and then he turned his cards too. Royal flush.

"On the first try?" Tony exclaimed. "No way."

"I'm as shocked as you are," Loki said as he took everything. He paused to think. "Did you ever know it was me writing?"

"You were on the list," Tony said. "The very long list. At the very bottom. I considered it. Jeez, though. I wasn't expecting you. There was definitely some stuff that tipped me off, but not by much."

Loki took another bite.

"To be honest," Tony continued above a laugh, "I was actually so zoned out on Titan between all of the chaos that I didn't even realize until we got back. I can't believe it took me that long. You have very nice handwriting, by the way."

"Thank you," Loki said, and then he returned the fork to the bowl and dealt.

Tony won that one.

He also won the next one.

Loki, a little uneasy at this point and hoping on some level somewhere that statistical probability had his back, proceeded to do a spectacular job at poorly restraining a thin chuckle as he drew a few new and equally horrendous cards. He wasn't sure what else to do aside from maybe lay himself on the floor and once again question his ideas of fun. Scream? Cry? Nah. Actually, he even forced some blush. He knew how this went.

Tony looked very cool with his losing cards, though. "I used to have a gambling addiction," he announced, quite proud of himself in some kind of darkly humorous way. "You can't fool me."

"Well, I'm an exceptional liar," Loki said, although Tony had clearly lost all faith in his bluff.

Tony was still smiling. "Well, *I'm* not folding."

"I can wait."

"Can you, now?"

"I can."

"You don't seem like the patient type."

"The stakes are dire."

Tony, of course, did not fold, although he very well could have: it would have done nothing by these rules except give away a question free of charge. Or maybe it would do nothing at all—just an honest sort of “fuck this round, let’s move on” depending on how Loki felt; in fact, unless he decided to be a little less generous than he had been so far with the improvisation and pulled out the obscure modification of his modification of his modification where Tony would drop from two banked questions to one were he to fold, it probably would have benefited them both. Tony did not fold, though. They were like that for a solid minute, staring each other down with an equally unshakable smile, before Loki gave in and, with an exasperated sigh, lowered his cards to reveal the saddest pair of twos in the universe.

“Ouch,” Tony said, setting a full house before him.

“I suppose I walked into that,” Loki said. “What have you got for me?”

All that confidence melted in an instant; Tony was clearly second-guessing the question. Spoil the mood, would he? Oh, Loki knew this look. Tucking the cards back into the deck (not thinking he shouldn’t have risked himself for boredom not thinking not thinking not thinking) while the silence turned stifling, he began to rank worse and worse truths in his head. Tried to decide if he gave enough of a damn to find an honest answer. Tried to remember how many times he had flat out lied. A lot? At least once? It wasn’t like he had sealed the rules: no one could stop him but his conscience.

“Are you really well?” Tony softly asked.

Shit.

It felt a bit like someone had ripped his chest open and yanked his soul out, which was to say this absolutely definitely wasn’t in the plan and he couldn’t do it at all: the air went and the room went and for a moment it was just him and the chair begging to know why he thought this would be fun. Of course he wasn’t well. The exhaustion was killing him. The constant daze was turning blinding. Was it coming to every single meeting smothered with guilt over the attack? Wondering when the Avengers would grow sick of his shit and ambush him? Everything poring to the surface from the moment they saw each other again? Asgard, by the way—and lest anyone ignore the centuries of nightmares preceding it; all of his father’s shit and all of the and all of the pain he put himself through trying and failing to make it all worthwhile. All the terror coming back. All the shame. All this that ought to be fully out in a please, please, please please please just tell someone already way—and there it was: what a fantastic chance he had right now.

But he couldn’t do it.

“I don’t think I can answer that,” he quietly said, burying his restless hands in his lap. Trying to breathe. Knowing this was just as incriminating as if he had told Tony everything. But perhaps it was true: the words wouldn’t come no matter how he ordered them. He felt tongue-tied with fear.

“I’m sorry,” Tony said. “I shouldn’t have asked.”

“No, it’s alright.” Loki gathered the cards and shuffled them. “Thanks.”

Tony looked at the salad. “You’ll finish that, right?”

“Goodbye.”

“Okay,” Tony said, nodding. He stood, pushed in his chair, and made for the door.

“Good luck with whatever you’re working on,” Loki said.

Tony stopped and spared an acknowledging smile, but that was it. He shut the door behind him and then there was nothing. Nothing at all. The room was quiet and the unoccupied chair sat alone and the day went right back to how the last few days had been: horrifyingly, crushingly empty.

This couldn’t have gone worse.

What was the point of kicking Tony out like that? They could have played for less stressful questions or done something else together. They could have just talked; the company was nice. Hardly any thanks for the food and on top of that it was now obvious that things were not alright and he would only be even more concerned—and, as the minutes turned into several and it became clear he wasn’t coming back, Loki could not help but feel terrible. Why was he always like this?

Well, at least it wasn’t raining this time. He pulled up the salad with a painful hand and tiredly arranged the cards into an old, complex solitaire from Asgard’s backwaters. This would hold him for now.

Suddenly Sinking

Chapter Summary

The walls are collapsing.

Chapter Notes

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

In the days that followed, Loki developed something of a routine. It went like this: he would wake a little late in the morning, long after everyone had left the building, and stay bundled in bed for another twenty to forty minutes before finally getting up because he was exhausted to his bones. Once up, he would slide into the bathroom and stare at himself in the mirror, disapproving of the shadows under his eyes and the new and startlingly apparent worry lines between his brows and the scar by his left one and then look at the sink and think it can't be that bad: surely I'm imagining everything? How could this scare me so much?

But when he tried to turn the taps, his hand always froze and he always pretended not to notice the shame and anger boiling in his heart and he always cleaned himself magically instead. And then that killed him for the day and he did nothing else.

Nothing: he either read, sharpened his knives as slowly as possible, or struggled through a random self-imposed challenge in a random card game. He certainly didn't see anyone regarding new developments around Asgard—no one at all, in fact. In those three or four or however many days, he remembered eating exactly twice: he lived off tea for the most part, grateful that pouring an already-filled kettle out into a mug was a little more tolerable than turning on the sink, and, somewhat more unconsciously, he lived off of his backup magic reserves, which were a blessing in long-term situations and perfectly sufficient in short-term situations. As unhealthy as he knew it was, he felt fine, and he didn't care, anyway.

This bothered him as much as it usually did: it didn't.

He was on the Statesman.

The halls were dim and flooded with debris—piles of scrap metal and furnishings stretching from the floor to halfway up the sides. Crackling with the echoes of distant flames. Shifting with every step he took. In front of him, the ship's gutted lights dangled from the ceiling and flickered at random with a low, monotone buzz. Behind, smoke and muffled screaming: no end to the corridor. They were dead. They

A support beam keeled and Loki jumped, narrowly avoiding the steel as it split down the middle and yawned to a sharp angle between the two walls. The grinding screech burned his ears. The floor was tilting. He stood there, poised to run, and then slowly continued down the ship with a racing heart like it wasn't trying its best to kill him.

What was he even looking for?

He was careful, skirting corpses (his friends) and dropped weapons on the toes of his boots. The crashing walls gave way to eerie silence: even his footsteps were too soft. The library was usually around here, but there was only ash and solid wall this time. Nothing else of interest, and, moving towards the dorms, he found himself in his bedroom and closed the door. Breathed in. He didn't turn on the lights; they were probably broken and the nebulae's moonlike glow was sufficient anyway. The fire's roar was inaudible here and he couldn't smell smoke, but there was still a violet haze curling through the air and—he looked down—blood on his hands. Always blood.

Outside the window, motionless against the red-and-blue clouds, was a fleet of ghostly starships he vaguely recognized as the Black Order's: he couldn't see the mothership.

On the bed, glistening under the starlight and resting in the centre of the dark, generic sheets, was the runed sword.

Loki went to the other side of the bed and sat before the stars. He laid a second hand under the blade's tip and raised it high, eyeing his distorted reflection while the silence sank deeper. Trying not to think. The room felt small beneath an air of cold, clear reality, like he was back in the ship after all and only a few doors from the endless universe. Lost and hurt but more so—like only the faint wrongness of lucidity could do. Existence was bearing down on him.

Something crashed outside the door. He hunched by reflex and looked over his shoulder. Flames were leaking through the metal frame. The screams had stopped. Someone's footsteps reverberated in the hall.

Clack. Clack. Clack.

Don't look

Loki stood and went to the corner opposite the door, bracing the sword with both hands, and pressed himself into the two edges.

Don't look don't look don't look

Thor was waiting for him. He needed to kill whoever was patrolling and get back, check if there were any escape pods left—

they're gone they're all gone there's noth(~~you're going to die~~)

He held the sword in front of him. Shaky arms. Shaky breaths. Part of him wanted to crawl under the bed and stay there until everything around the room burned to dust, safe, hidden from any danger, but they'd know. No. No, he had to get back to Thor.

Run, dog!

No no no no no—

He took a huge, heavy breath and drove the sword into his throat.

The world snapped away and he was suddenly in bed, his real bed in the Avengers compound, buried in a cocoon of sheets that he was squeezing for dear life. His heart was beating so fast he couldn't tell the individual thumps apart and his mind was on fire and for that brief not-there

intersecting sleep and awakesness he could still feel the cold, smoke-tinged air. The phantom touch of a blade lodged between the cartilage and bone in his neck that felt first like acid and then a bit more like an impact from a table's edge and then like nothing: only blind comfort as the spinal cord gave out. The realness. It should have been true. It must feel just like that to plunge a sword into his throat. Where did cowards like that go? Choosing to die at the first dead end instead of running headlong into what may come was a cheap move. But it all was. Thanos should have killed him.

Loki pushed the sheets off him and sat up.

Why hadn't he cast any wards yet? If his room here felt so unsafe and so like he was treading on enemy ground (he was) then all he had to do was add some protection. In his fear that someone would cast something such against him, either locking his magic inside his body or locking him inside the premises, it had slipped his mind that there were other subsets and that he could use any one of them to his advantage. Well, he was forgetting a lot lately. But it seemed paranoid somehow. This wasn't suppressing FRIDAY: this was actively guarding himself from danger. Certainly it would be a very smart move, but he had never been one for unnecessary precaution and warding his room would be just that. There was no danger. He was being paranoid. Very, very paranoid. Just paranoid.

That wasn't him.

But back to the routine: he stepped off the bed one foot at a time, landing cautiously on his toes, and tried to prepare himself for another day of nothing. The books were running low and he couldn't remember which knives he'd sharpened and which he hadn't and everything else felt like a pain in the ass and he still didn't want to see anyone, either, which left... nothing. Not a thing appealed, and this was particularly painful to realize because there were so many things he could have done right now and so many he once had. He was a carver, singer, poet; he adored feasts and festivals of all sorts, even though he tended towards excessive introversion at them; he explored and sowed chaos for the sake of chaos and did absolutely everything and anything and it was always enough for him. But now? He really only wanted to keep sleeping and dream the hours away, and if he knew he wouldn't have another nightmare he would have. This—something popped somewhere (the building settling?)—was wrong. This wasn't how things were supposed to be.

But anyway, back to the routine.

Back to trying to breathe, because he could still feel the smoke singed into his clothes. Eyes closed—picturing a field, and then a deep, mossy forest, and then, realizing none of those calmed him as they usually did, his old palace bedroom. Soundless. Motionless. Only him and the sprawling blue sky beyond his window until the muscles he didn't know he was tensing loosened and his heart eased its rhythm and he released a long, final breath and left the room because he needed to do *something*, although he didn't test the waters in any other way: not this time.

He wasn't hungry, and coupled with the fear burning in his throat and the knowledge that, yes, he did have at least a few books that had not yet been read, there was no good reason to do this. Why he wasn't busy warding the room instead (like an absolute lunatic, by the way) was a mystery, and perhaps even more so when he saw that the lounge wasn't empty: Natasha was seated in a corner with what seemed like a late breakfast. She looked up as he slunk in and he responded with a curt, tight-lipped smile and hoped she wouldn't insist on a conversation. She didn't. Good.

Go back. Ward it. Stay there.

Well... there was nothing in the kettle and it was a hassle to fill and nothing small that he could have or felt like eating and to be very honest, he had no ideas of his own, so shouldn't he? But he did sort of want to make it worth his while and Natasha would think him odd if he walked out with no clearly fulfilled goal. She was probably already staring. She could see him here. She must have been.

Loki pulled away from the counter and tried to get his mind together.

Oh, Natasha. Cold, calculating Natasha. So concerned about him and Asgard. So dedicated to remaining neutral. Would she ever go back on her promises and throw him to the wolves? Had she been lying when she offered a second chance? She didn't set off any of his usual alarms and their interactions felt reasonably authentic. But that was no way of knowing; could he really say for sure she wasn't waiting for him to muck something up so she could justify it? Waiting on her debt to him to expire?

Something somewhere snapped and he jumped.

Ah. No doubt she was watching him now. He grabbed the kettle, flipped the lid up, and stuck it under a hard stream of cold water. Icy, pressured water. Solid water from a—why was this taking so long?—solid water from a tap. The—

He switched the tap off and docked the kettle.

“There are some extras in the back,” Natasha said, “if you need one for your room.”

No. Please stop. No no no. No conversation. Loki pretended he hadn't heard and found a random mug, *two* bags of his usual over-strong calming tea which wasn't even enough for a placebo, and set them beside the kettle. Then he panicked because that was probably worse and poked his head around the wall and said, “Sorry, did you say something?”

“The kettle,” Natasha said, not looking up. “There are extras if you need one for your room.”

He realized that for once he had no idea how to respond and panicked even more. “Oh,” he stammered, and then he tidied everything and double-checked the kettle was actually on before flopping onto the couch in a breathless daze. “I'll... get around to it.”

Natasha said nothing to that, and for a short while, there was only the scrape of her fork and the kettle's soft whir. Then she said, “Thor's asking about you.”

“I know.”

More silence. Loki picked at his hand while the first bubbles appeared in the water. He could see them from here if he squinted; he wondered what the exact temperature was.

“Was I ever rude to you?” he asked. “Before?”

“A little,” Natasha said. “You were rude to everyone, though, so I'm not taking it personally.”

“I'm sorry.”

Her turn: “I know.”

Loki didn't know what else to say, so he didn't, and Natasha didn't prod. He was certainly relieved, but he also found that as tiring as it was to hold a conversation, there was something soothing in her voice. If she could have kept talking without expecting a reply, that would have been perfect. She only continued eating, though.

He got his tea and returned to his room.

Not much else happened: he finished two novels, stopping only once in the middle to partake in the communal dinner because he did, eventually, feel hungry enough. He ate a small portion and Tony noticed, but no comments were made. He slept tolerably. Although it was tempting, he didn't warp to the bookstore the next day: he walked, cool and cozy in the same dark tee and sweatpants he'd slept in topped with the coat. They looked nice enough; what did he care?

There was still that fear as he weaved through the streets that he was being followed and someone would catch him off guard (he always was) but he survived.

“Here you go, sir,” the mauve-haired clerk had said, and then she stopped and added, “You are a sir, right?”

To which Loki had replied: “It's all the same to me.”

And the clerk smiled and said, “Hell yeah. Break those gender norms.”

Earth and past experiences considered, that exchange had not been high on his list of things that could happen. It hadn't been there at all, in fact. Well, there were firsts for everything.

He read into the evening and did nothing else. Everyone was out the next day and he had the whole building to himself but really only kept blurring the hours in his room—the book was good and he picked up where he left off first thing in the morning. It was fine like that. Sure, he still couldn't shower and he still wasn't hungry. Those were small problems, though. There were worse ones out there.

No one checked on him.

One night the universe was all stars. It was a long fall down the glittering ocean; the lights and colours that looked close enough to touch were eons away and only drifting farther out of reach every blink. Snow speckles wrapped in painted clouds and curling glows on the horizon twinkled in and out as the rifts between the ruined bridge opened to the wild and unforgiving expanse of true space. No chill. No fear. Only stars.

The empty air pressing on him felt like a cold and heavy hug. His blood didn't boil and his lungs didn't burst. He was compact enough to weather the dense vacuum, never fully noticing its weight, and on his icy skin absolute zero's bite was about the same as morning frost's on the grass. It was the first time he felt... peace.

Deep space smelled a bit like an empty street on an autumn evening, cool and fresh and tinged with something metallic. It was quiet enough that the ringing in his ears seemed deafening in comparison. Even the quietest places were never silent; there was always the flit of an insect somewhere or the rustle of wind on leaves or just a steady heartbeat's echo coming from inside, but this place was its own. Nothing meant the same here. And for a while he was thankful for his nomad's blood, the frozen shelter keeping him alive long enough to witness it. The comfortably

frostbitten hands and crackling ice around his clothes. It was like he had been sweltering his whole life and only now understood how his body was meant to function: cold and weightless and alone.

Then the stars died.

The cool silence became a hall of noise and the weightless air turned to murky sludge. His skin disappeared and his voice burned up. His bones shattered. He was dust in the flames, selfish and stupid and stubborn beneath the exploding agony.

F ight it! S ee your glory, see through the pain, don't be selfish, kill them, kill them, kill them!

No—put him back in the stars. There was no home for him to return to. The stars were his home. Put him back. Stop

!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! STOP!

no one saw him sobbing through his own blood; he sure wanted to go back but he was too disgusting for anyone. (He couldn't breathe.) That wasn't family. Screaming himself to death until he could finally prove them all wrong—oh! How glorious. (He couldn't breathe.) Much better than those fools who acted like they had ever wanted to share a palace with his ilk. It was beyond repair. This wasn't going to end. He was never going to see daylight again. He (would die here) couldn't breathe couldn't breathe couldn't breathe (breathe!) couldn't

SLAM

his face into the pillow with another yell and keep sobbing. Sobbing until his throat hurt and the smothering air was gone. The sheets were soaked and he couldn't breathe. They were going to kill him for sure this time. One two three—shit; Loki tried to escape a violent choking fit—one, two, three, four, five, one, two, three, four, five, one, two, three, four, five—breathe breathe breathe breathe breathe they were gone now—he sat up and kept coughing-crying into the cold morning air.

Why did this still hurt? He had been happily joking about it not even months ago; it wasn't supposed to hurt like this. It was old. It shouldn't be hurting again.

Was this karma?

It was light out, but it was cool and quiet and he was likely the only one awake; no food to eat or caffeine to try and curb the pick in his head. It must not have been even six yet. Or even five. He wished he could keep sleeping. He curled into the blanket and hoped he would, but all he got in response was his trembling heart and a dark and bloody room. No matter how many times he looked away it came back. That place again. Those people. Maybe a few hours of ragged sleep wasn't so bad.

Tired but awake, Loki dragged himself out and tried to make the best of the morning. He stretched under the dusty lavender sun and fixed the piling sheets running away from the bed. He untangled his hair in front of the mirror and didn't ruin the curls with grease: everyone said they looked nice like that. He even dressed up a bit, formal shirt and slacks beneath the velvet coat and an old but homely pair of black loafers that had been hidden in storage. Brushed the dry salt from his cheeks and checked his eyes weren't still red. That ward would be good now; he had the time to cast a few. It would make things simpler. But he didn't need to ward this room. No one would be fighting him here and it was humiliating that he felt otherwise.

He left for the common space.

It was six twenty-two by the time he thought to look for a clock. Somehow it felt like he was trespassing, but no one came to stop him. He

—the building snapped and he spun around. Pop: a light bulb lit up for an instant and then fizzled out forever.

How powerful you are! Do you see?

The smoking light bulb stared back at him; he wondered if he should do something about it. He wondered if anything else had reacted. He wondered if they would notice a light bulb had blown out because of him and decide he was too dangerous and lock him up and throw away the key and let him starve to death alone. He... sat in the kitchen and tried not to breathe the burnt electricity smell. It smelled a lot like the ship had.

Many minutes passed in the collapsing halls, drawing similarities between this and the first time they had met. Both were on a ship. How many more were there?

Close to seven Loki got up and decided to make coffee, which was a surprise because he didn't really remember how to work such machines and didn't know how to tolerate any kind of water around him and was tremendously nervous as a result. It seemed a productive thing to do, though, and if no one else was going to come deal with his sleep deprivation then he might as well do it himself. The tin of grounds in the cupboard had instructions taped to it and an angry note taped to that: WRONG. FULL POT = FULL BASKET. TO THE TOP. TWO CUPS IS NOT FULL. IF YOU MAKE WEAK COFFEE I WILL FIND YOU AND DESTROY YOU. There was no name but Loki was certain beyond any doubt that was Tony, and he liked his coffee strong too and didn't want a caffeine war so he followed those instructions instead. He dumped the used grounds in the compost, which he found under the sink, and filled the fancy mesh basket neatly to the top but not quite: there was a visual cutoff where it would leak if he added any more. He checked that the pot was clean and then looked to see where the water was supposed to go and checked how much he was supposed to fill the pot to match and then flipped the lid up and stuck it under the tap and turned the water on. Cold water. Cool running water from a faucet. Controlled and safe water. Oh—

right to the top line right to the top line right to the top line

Off! He pulled the full pot away and tried not to spill it on himself. Cold water? He snapped the reservoir open and slowly poured it all in. Careful. It was almost silent at this angle; he didn't have to listen to it draining. But it took eternity and a day to go. By the time it was done his heart was racing and he had lost most of the feeling in his body. The pot went back. Floor. Sunlight. Coat. They weren't here and this wasn't there. Nothing was happening—nothing—nothing nothing absolutely nothing except he did feel it: it felt like something crawling on him. Like pinpricks inside his skin. It may not have been happening now but it felt like it. And it felt like it would happen again. And he felt horrified and disgusted and ashamed that he had let it happen at all and let them touch him like that and talk to him like that and he didn't want to remember and he kept remembering and he couldn't stop thinking about it and it just wouldn't !!!!!!!!!!!!! Stop!!! Shut up shut up shut up shut up shut up shut up shut up

Loki started the coffee maker and sat on the floor.

Tears welled in his eyes. The machine's soft pittering above him felt mocking. Good; this must have looked pathetic. Might as well lie down in a heap and start bawling. Thanos should have just killed him.

The coffee took a long time. It was loud, but it never fully blocked out the drip of boiling hot liquid into the pot. No one came in to see him struggling to breathe over his sobs. He didn't try to stop the tears. He didn't try to stop any of it. He couldn't pretend away breaking down on the kitchen floor because the water was too scary; he almost wished someone would come in just to laugh at him. They should have. Eventually it was done and he stopped crying long enough to find a mug and shakily fill it, but the thought of spilling the scalding coffee on his hands made him start crying all over again and it was through sobs that he found sugar and some kind of cream substitute in the fridge to dull the flavour of death. Then he took the mug, sat at the couch, and kept crying while he magically cooled it because he didn't want to wait. There was a security camera right there. He didn't know who if anyone was manning it, but he hoped they weren't watching. This looked ridiculous. What a shitty god he was.

He remembered the dead light bulb and looked over his shoulder.

Yep. Awful.

It would have been wise to leave before anyone else awoke, but he couldn't bring himself to move and he did stop crying for good somehow after enough coffee. Between the phantom stings of memory, the numbers in his mind kept going: one, two, three, four, five, one, two, three, four, five.

Natasha came in at some point and must have seen that sleepy nothingness, the way he was probably staring a thousand yards into the distance (he was, wasn't he?), because he could hear the worry in her voice when she said, "Good morning."

"Good morning," he replied, not looking up.

Natasha didn't ask how he was or some variation thereof, for which he was grateful; she seemed to have more tact than the rest of them. She grabbed something from the fridge, warmed it, and left, all without a word.

It was a slow morning. Steve came up the stairs at some point looking like he'd been in the gym for hours and said good morning too before disappearing into the far hall. Bruce came up for some files and then went right back down; he waved but didn't linger. No one else seemed to be in. They had other business.

The main doors were loud and sudden; Loki winced over the coffee. "Hey bud," Tony said as he climbed the stairs with some books. "Good coffee?"

"It works," Loki said, still not looking: he stared into the mug.

Tony did not notice the dead light bulb. No one did; there wasn't any visual evidence other than perhaps some burn marks on the glass from blazing too brightly. The other lights in the room—the long rows on the ceiling and the LEDs and other sorts—didn't seem harmed. He dumped the books on the table and went to judge the coffee for himself.

“Bucky sent me this really cool recipe,” Tony said as he got a mugful, “that’s some kind of combination of Wakandan and Asgardian cuisine that came out of the last week and I want to try it tonight, if you want to come down for dinner. Or I can save you a plate.”

“I’ll try to make it,” Loki said.

Despite the caffeine addiction and important reading material, Tony did not have that loud frenetic haste he usually did: he was gentle and soft-spoken and overall pretty calm as he picked through the cabinets with the hand not holding a mug of black coffee. It was strange but somehow familiar. It felt like the debate and brawl the first day. It felt like that time they had held each other on Titan trying to talk through a crisis. Loki wondered how obvious it really was and if every single person in the building could tell.

Tony unplugged the toaster and plugged it back in. He pressed all the buttons and turned all the dials but it did not toast. He removed his untoasted bagel with a pout. “You know this building is worth trillions but some of the appliances in here sell for like ten dollars on a coupon?” he said, unplugging it again and tucking it under his arm. “Can’t believe it.”

Loki wondered how many other appliances in the kitchen had exploded because of him.

“Eh. Easy fix,” Tony said, taking the toaster and the bagel and his coffee and the books on the table all back to, presumably, his workshop. How he carried everything was a mystery.

This was the state of things now, wasn’t it? Not only dodging responsibilities and community expectations but wrecking the building too. It wouldn’t slide forever. Loki wondered when they would decide they’d had enough and cut the free housing. Now was the time to start stockpiling contingencies. Cast those wards. Enchant the door so only he could open it, even. He didn’t want to get dragged out kicking and screaming in the middle of the night.

He did not cast the wards, though, nor did he find the strength to get up and go to his room at all even if this one was worse; it didn’t look like anyone would be staying long enough to bother him. He got more coffee and pulled out some books to skim and lost himself in their worlds.

Many hours disappeared with no trace.

He certainly wasn’t excited for whatever semi-regular debriefing he could expect along with dinner tonight, but he suspected they were starting to get sick of him shrugging off entirely reasonable duties—or at least someone must have been: he sure wouldn’t be happy. And maybe the food would be okay. It sounded like it would be, but it was mostly a daze and he spent more time thinking about why his room was unwarded than trying to phase into his body long enough to eat. Still more coffee, which Tony seemed to have made knowing they would both want some. Loki sat beside him. Or maybe Tony did. Well, they sat together; it felt a bit safer and was something of a mutual show of gratitude for the life-saving stimulants.

They were all staring while Natasha recounted something.

It wasn’t true that he didn’t eat—he definitely ate a little bit—but the empty plate felt like an uncomfortable talking piece. They weren’t really staring, either, although Natasha chanced a worried frown in his general direction more than a few times and Tony was very unsubtle stealing looks beside him. There wasn’t much to discuss, but it felt sort of important to be here and so Loki

endured long past his usual limit in hopes that he could be useful: they wouldn't get rid of an asset. This was a problem for multiple reasons including his mind was blaring static on repeat and the caffeine wasn't working, although he did actually try this time; better than sitting and doing nothing, right?

To be fair, he lasted a few hours.

He snapped awake with a dagger raised.

"I... didn't mean to wake you," said Steve, very innocent and very startled with his empty hands up.

Still, the dagger stayed, and Loki, realizing the entirety of what had happened, was understandably mortified.

It would occur to at least one person in the room at this moment that it was a defensive grip, that he hadn't meant to attack anyone and wouldn't want to. Given the circumstances—given, quite notably, that he was nothing near the defensive type on a normal day—it was alarming and he was thinking just the same. But it was all still too loud too quick too hard and he was so certain he must be in some kind of danger that he didn't even care. The blush that ought to be melting his face right now never showed. The panicked nausea squeezing his throat shut didn't go any higher. All he wanted to do was cry, and maybe if he could actually think that much he would have: he was frozen. He vanished the dagger, breathless, and didn't speak. Didn't move. Didn't do anything.

Steve, in any case, had already given up on retrieving whatever he was trying to retrieve from the other end of the table.

"I'm sorry," Loki softly said, knowing that if they weren't staring before they were now.

The rest of the night was very, very quiet.

Chapter End Notes

me, closing in on the angst I've had pre-written for literal months: finally, some good fucking food

Calm

Chapter Summary

Peter comes to visit, and the waters slow.

Chapter Notes

remembering myself circa several years ago frantically squatting with a shit laptop on trash wif at a music festival in a bougie concert hall venue after somehow getting free backstage access with no further elaboration beyond "friends with camera crew" and trying my absolute damndest to post an update on time back when there was some kind of vague schedule for new chapters

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

No one ever mentioned it, but they must have been thinking about it. No one ever said they were thinking about it; they must have been too afraid to act like anything was wrong. They weren't supposed to be thinking about these things. But that wasn't true: of course *everyone* must have been thinking about it. They must have been thinking about everything else too. Everything!

"If you pool the right resources in," Tony had been saying as everyone stared at the other, "you can build a village for a few hundred in about a month. Get good equipment and enough people to share the load and streamline any delays and it's actually fully doable. It's just hard to coordinate in most cases."

A few hundred? Loki shared a thin, sleep-deprived glance with Bruce.

No one changed the lightbulb and the toaster was later seen with other junk for scrapping. They went back to waiting. On a foggy morning the next day Loki wondered if he should fake his death again and leave the galaxy, but he never did. He just stared at the white ceiling and tried to figure out what time it was. His head hurt. His stomach was inverting. Still, it was slow and he didn't remember any painful dreams, only that he had somehow gone to bed less tired than he was now. And that he had been not angry but visibly distressed defending—*defending*, note—with a knife. Oh. He pushed the sheets away and tumbled off the side, landing a little heavily on his heels, and then paused, wondered why he was awake at all, and sat and slumped there on the edge of the mattress. Nothing left to do but wait.

He was sure he'd left a pocket watch somewhere in his storage space and if he searched, his hunch might have proved right. It would be better than making the entire trek down the hall just to check the wall clock. Between his absurd number of knives, however, and not much fewer blunt weapons, useless artifacts, and more, he found no such device. Well... what time it was wouldn't change much.

Where did he go from here? Why was he waiting for news on Asgard if he wanted nothing to do with them? Now was as good a day as any to turn and run. But he did not turn and run. Maybe he just needed more time to prepare—get his affairs in order and pack some supplies and plan a route to minimize his chances of death, torture, or both. He decided he would wait a bit longer instead of making a bad move and getting himself killed. Oh, Norns. They would. So he dragged himself to the couch with all of the books, where he hoped to come up with a plan.

At least it was a quiet day. The books were close to running out and it might have been better to obtain an advance stockpile while he wasn't panicking, but it was too much of a hassle. He mostly just wanted to forget he was stuck on this planet and that all of his books had burned in the fire and and and and flipped open a novel to the first page. Take that, [REDACTED]! These were a much better read than those stupid war epics anyway. The words were fuzzy at times and he had to reread paragraphs often, but that was fine: he was in no rush and taking so long meant longer before he had to worry about refilling the collection. After a while, the stutter in his focus wasn't even noticeable.

Many hours passed in a daze before there was a knock on the door—one two three in quick succession and then two more, in case the first three hadn't been heard, and following that, silence.

Loki looked up and wondered if the universe was going to be testing him again. "Who is it?"

The answer was hesitant. "Peter Parker? Can I come in?"

Clearly the universe was taking a break; Loki, having prepared to explain himself to someone at gunpoint again, breathed out and closed the book. "What for?"

"I don't have anything to do today so I figured I'd visit. That's okay, right? I can leave if you want."

"What? No. No, come in. It should be unlocked."

It was. Peter opened the door, slowly closed it, looked around the room, and then looked to where he was lying on the couch. "Hi."

"Hello," Loki said. He put the book on the side table. "What's up?"

"Nothing. Boring Saturday." Peter shrugged. It was Saturday? "Normally I would do homework but I don't have any. And my friends are busy. I'll probably go check if anyone needs help with something. Fight crime, y'know. Oh! Do you ever go to movies?"

"Here? No. It's been years."

"Do you want to? There's this neat comedy that just came out and maybe we can go together. I feel weird going to movies alone."

Absolutely! What a great idea. Leave it to this kid to make the best of a disaster. They should have; it would be a nice change of pace and Loki had been meaning to get back into the local arts. But should have was never enough. They did not and would not. He thought long about it only to shake his head and conclude, "Maybe some other time."

"Okay. I don't really want to go anyway. I was just wondering."

Peter looked crestfallen. Loki pretended not to notice while he came over to hop into the couch and knock the pelt down onto them both in the process. Not much; it only slid off the backrest where the extra length had been hanging.

“Wow, this is nice,” Peter said as he tried to fix it. “Is this real fur?”

“As real as can be,” Loki said.

“That’s so cool. Where did you get it?”

“Oh... somewhere. A hunting trip when I was young.”

“You killed this yourself?”

“I did. I had a bow and enchanted arrows. It was the only thing that would take down something that big. It fed everyone for months.”

Peter spent a long time running his hands through the thick, silken fur. “I heard a lot of good news about everything,” he said. “They probably don’t need any help.”

“Maybe not,” Loki said, trying not to think about it at all.

“But I’ll go check just in case.”

“And I’m sure they’ll be very happy to see you.”

The look on Peter’s face seemed to say otherwise, as if there had been many unwelcome encounters before. He didn’t explain it, though, only slid his backpack off beside him and started rummaging through pockets. A vast chorus of zippers filled the room. “I don’t know if you would,” he said as he clunked some items around, “but I bought a bunch of nail polish for something if you wanted to try it out before I dump it for, uh, science. You’ve never painted your nails, have you?”

“Sure I have,” Loki said. “I did for years.”

“Really? Why’d you stop?”

It was a mystery at best. Time had stolen it like the rest: there were too many things to worry about now to sit and toy with appearances. Those had been simpler days.

“Yeah, I do have a lot, though,” Peter said, setting almost a dozen little bottles of every colour in the fur one by one. “If you want. I don’t want to pressure you.”

“Who’s pressuring?” Loki said, spotting a metallic green in the pile like a hawk: he picked it up.

“I guess not.” Peter ranked his favourite colours in a hand. “I’m... just going to do my toes,” he said as he set aside a blue. “I’m not that brave.”

“Do fingers call for bravery?”

“If you’re a guy, yeah.”

“Ah.”

“It’s not like that in Asgard?”

“Not often.”

“Oh. It’s not good here. Earth.”

“I know. I’m sorry. It’s all so very backwards.”

Peter stared down the tiny blue bottle.

“I have faith,” Loki wisely said. “The people I’ve met here now aren’t like the people I met in other eras. It may not take as long as you think.”

“I think you’re being too positive,” Peter said, unscrewing the bottle with a wince.

“It’s good to be positive sometimes. Don’t let it get to you; if anyone mocks you then there’s a good chance it’s because they lack the courage themselves.”

“Well, I’m still going to do my toenails. Maybe next time I’ll do my hands.”

This wasn’t how Loki thought he would spend his morning, but somehow it made sense—a bit like browsing ice cream parlours together as an excuse to hide from the world. So... painting their toenails it was. They didn’t say much, which was fine. He wasn’t Peter, so he did the hands too; he most certainly had the confidence for it and if anyone had any untoward opinions then that was their fault. It wasn’t like he had anything better to do. The green was metallic, glittering at a specific angle in a way that was reminiscent of a jewel. Or maybe more a jewel beetle. He set the bottle aside and wiggled his fingers to catch the light and felt for an instant, in a cruel and familiar turn of fate, that this must have been why: it looked too close to the deep midnight black of royal blood. It looked too much like what a particular complexion did. Time had stolen this too. And this had stolen everything.

“I like it,” Peter said, and so Loki tried not to think too hard. These were old wounds.

“Let me see,” Loki said, hoping to distract them both, and Peter stuck his leg out with a wide grin.

“What do you think?” he asked.

“Flawless,” Loki said. “And a wonderful colour; it makes me think of a summer sky.”

“Oh, thanks! Yours is good too. Green suits you.”

“I’ve heard.”

Peter made to return the bottles but fumbled and knocked them all to the floor. “Shit!”

They didn’t break. None of them did. They could have, but they didn’t. But Loki didn’t notice because he didn’t notice anything: he was elsewhere, shoulders hitched and hands on fire bracing himself against what had seemed so loud from there. It could have been nothing. It could have been everything. Shoot first—find out later. And it was nothing after all and, breathless and cold and struggling to land any danger in his pinhole line of sight, he managed to untense and pass Peter the green with a smile like it hadn’t even happened. How lucky that this wasn’t Tony; the façade wouldn’t have held for even a second. Had Peter, smarter-than-he-seems Peter, who while not so good at reading between a god of lies’ lines was still just as well-versed in visual cues, looked in

that one instant that it took to realize there was no danger, he would have caught everything. Eyes an ocean of terror. Braced arms, legs, body screaming this is not okay, I need to run, I need to run now, I'm going to die here—

But he didn't, and he did not mention it. And somehow it wasn't much of a relief. It was a lie by proxy, by omission, that would likely prove fatal someday. If Peter didn't know then who did?

“Okay, painted nails,” Peter said. “Now what?”

Sit and do nothing. Read a book. Sharpen the rest of all those stupid daggers. Same old.

“What do you want to do?” Loki asked.

Peter shrugged.

Many minutes passed. They both tried to think of something but couldn't. Loki wondered if the room would explode and immolate them in lethal flame, but it didn't. He sat there with his acetone-scented fingers and toes and considered the possibility. As a door slammed down the hall, he decided it was inevitable. He scrambled for options in the meantime. “Do you want to see a magic trick?” he offered.

“Ooo. What kind?”

“Nothing big. A small illusion. It's popular at parties.”

“Sure.”

This was the worst idea; the sensation of everything about to be destroyed was only getting louder and Loki had the weird feeling he wouldn't be able to pull this off even though he had done it no less than a million times before, but he tried it anyway. He summoned all his energy into a hand and visualized what he wanted to make and twisted his freshly decorated fingertips and formed a perfect little ethereal snake with a wispy emerald body and beady eyes. It blinked up at them and stuck its smoky tongue out and slithered into the fur.

“Oh!” Peter said with a gasp. “I love him.” He scooped the snake up in his hands. “That is definitely a magic trick.”

“Never fails,” Loki said, trying not to notice that he increasingly could not feel his body and his heartbeat was roaring in his ears. Drowning. His lungs disappeared and he wondered who he was going to have to kill. Ah.

The magic snake vanished earlier than expected in a cloud of green smoke and sparkles.

“I can make it last longer if you give me a material to work with!” Loki hopefully suggested as they mourned the snake together, although he had a feeling that might not work either.

“Like a base for it? Uhh.” Peter dug through his backpack. “I have paper. Tin foil!” He pulled out a wad of crumpled metal and offered it. “Does that work?”

“That would be perfect,” Loki said, taking the foil. “Here. Watch my hands.”

He was shaping it with the magic, not too different from how he liked to sharpen his blades: melting the foil into a living object and gesturing where he wanted it to go but letting intuition take

care of the details. A binding sigil or two to keep it together without his help and then it flickered to life. It was quick and easy and the snake popped right back into the fur momentarily, its body now smooth and shiny silver, and blinked its beady eyes again and returned to Peter as if it had never left.

“Hey! Awesome.” Peter held the metal snake up. “How long will this last?”

“Hard to say. I think I could make it self-sustaining if I try. May I see?”

Peter passed him the snake.

There was another spell to make it draw energy from its surroundings to keep itself animate indefinitely, perhaps forever if there were no accidents. That was simple too, but somehow Loki struggled to get it going. The magic fizzled out and the snake stared at him with a cocked head. After several tries he managed to land the spell and the snake, already seeming to perk up, slipped from his fingers and resumed its burrowing in the fur blanket. He wondered what was wrong with him but probably knew. Peter attempted to retrieve the snake: it twisted around his clothes and up his shoulders and coiled in his hair and they both laughed. See? This wasn't so bad.

The backpack slid off the couch and crashed to the floor with a bang and Loki immediately lost his grip on reality. He slammed a hand to his mouth and sucked in a breath and tried not to break down screaming.

No problems here. No problems at all. His arms felt like lead, wrists asleep under chains so tight for so long that the skin was raw. His whole body. Everything was collapsing burning bleeding out, *his* blood and *his* tears and sweat on the blades while they absolutely swore they didn't really want to hurt him and they were only doing this to help him understand and

“Hey,” Peter said. “You okay?”

Loki didn't know how to respond or how to even open his mouth without sobbing instead. He said nothing. He pretended nothing was wrong but was failing. Fuck! Why couldn't he hide it? “That just... startled me,” he softly said over another slow breath. “I'm fine.”

“You don't look fine.”

For someone who had felt bad about not opening up he sure felt absolutely disgusting now that it was getting forced out of him. Back to the god thing, thank you: if he started crying again now he might as well kill himself while he still had some honour.

“Is it another flashback?”

Definitely not!

“Just keep breathing, okay? It won't last forever. I don't know if you need to cry but it'll help. Is there anything I can do?”

Get out of the room and stop talking about it! Ignore him and go away. There was no way this was happening now—what about the nail polish? Everything! What had gone wrong? He tucked himself under the fur and pulled the cushion to his chest and somehow kept breathing despite the fact that it felt like gunshots were exploding in his head. They weren't here. The silver snake, not really aware of much but perhaps understanding anyway, climbed down from its perch and

slithered gently into his lap and stared up at him. He stared back. The snake blinked. He also blinked.

Eventually it all seemed to settle, and, a little calmer now but bitter and exhausted, Loki scooped the snake in his hands and slid it into the fur to return to Peter. "I think you should leave," he said, a slight quiver to his voice. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I love your company. I just... need to be alone."

"Okay," Peter said with a nod, and then the snake escaped into the open backpack and he got up and slung it onto one shoulder. "I hope you feel better soon. That was fun."

Watching him go was perhaps the most awkward string of seconds in the universe. The door closed and then there was nothing but silence. Many minutes passed. Twenty, thirty. Loki lied down for a while and wondered why he was alive. But he managed to get up at some point and, with nothing better to do, he summoned all the necessary materials and got to work warding the room.

Chapter End Notes

Pete is a good bro

The Storm

Chapter Summary

This dam will not hold forever. Loki knows this, and so does Tony.

Chapter Notes

You would think that, given this was among the first bits I ever added to this story and that I've written and rewritten and imagined and read it so many times at this point I could probably recite at least 50% from memory, I would feel a little more confident in the quality, and that I'm not thinking about all the parts I still need to fix.

You would think that. Perfectionism is a thing, though.

Anyway: I'm sorry, I regret nothing, and it's only going to get worse from here.

Every so often, in the small hours of the morning when everyone else was sound asleep, Tony would find himself wandering that building. Sometimes this meant a short walk from one end of a hallway to the other, just enough to exhaust himself, but many more he'd give up and go work on some sundry new device in his lab because that was all he knew how to do. And it worked for him: although the constant insomnia was frustrating those sleepless nights were his most productive. Despite the early alarms he was a night owl at heart, and, despite how much he ached for proper rest sometimes, he cherished those nights he spent huddled alone at a desk with coffee and music sorting through mechanical bits and pieces. Whether whatever he made was useless wasn't important. It was the process that mattered.

Still, lack of sleep was harsh on one's cognitive ability and there were those nights where he only knew he could not bear another second glaring at the ceiling, and, as the clock struck three, he quietly snuck out from the bed, mindful of Pepper's blissfully easy rest in the opposite end, and left the room just for the sake of leaving. Maybe he would watch a movie. He would! Better than making himself have a panic attack tossing and turning for another four hours, wasn't it? Dear lord. Lying there and calculating how many minutes of sleep he could theoretically get while the alarm drew ever nearer was excruciating. So he dragged his tired head down to the largest television in the compound, larger even than the one he had personally installed in their bedroom upon arrival, which was in one of the many rooms attached to the main common area. It was intended for video conferences, but they never had video conferences and if they did then tough luck because wiping the firmware and replacing it with something capable of running Netflix had wrecked its connection to the private networks. No one seemed to mind, though; hell, Tony had seen people binging shows on-duty, which... well, he did the same. Sorry, not sorry, he would say, and he usually made up for the work anyway. He found a pair of headphones so he didn't wake everyone in the building and started a random action flick he had never heard of and then—

Something large and heavy shattered.

Tony sat straight up and removed the headphones. He wished he could ignore it but was afraid something had exploded, so he paused the movie and listened for any evidence of such: nothing other than what sounded a lot like Loki profusely swearing to himself in the other room. He wished he could have found it funny; what were the odds of them running into each other at this hour? He wished his stomach wasn't doing flips trying to decide what had broken and why. Worried someone was bleeding to death while he continued ignoring everything, he left his things and went to check.

"Sorry," Loki muttered from the kitchen floor, where he was bent with a towel and the broken remains of a mug. "Why are you awake?"

"Couldn't sleep," Tony said.

"Why aren't you in your room?"

"Why aren't you?"

"I'm sorry! It was an accident. I didn't—*why* are you awake?"

Tony sat awkwardly on the couch. "I... couldn't sleep. I didn't mean to bother."

"No, keep going! Bother away. You'll just sit there and watch me make a fool of myself, will you? Great. Keep going. Go wake everyone else while you're at it."

"I just wanted to see if you're okay."

"You mean you wanted to watch me spill tea everywhere? Sorry, you missed it."

"Was it hot?"

"Yes, it was hot!" Loki yelled. "Get out."

"Did you burn yourself or—"

"Get out!"

Tony did not get out, though. Loki backed away from the wet towel and ceramic shards and bunched himself against the cabinet doors and visibly tried not to start sobbing. His glittering hands illuminated the stray puddles green.

"Please leave," Loki said, but they still both just sat there in separate corners of the room making up excuses while the building's faint electrical buzz filled the silence.

"Do you want me to help clean everything?"

"Don't touch me."

"I meant the floor."

"No. Don't touch me."

"I'm not touching you."

“I said don’t touch me!”

Tony removed himself from the spill with his hands up. “Not touching.”

“Are you leaving now?” Loki muttered, standing to lean painfully on the counter.

They were very close all of a sudden; Tony considered leaving instead of continuing to be a nuisance but mostly forgot how as he recognized the acidic bite of alcohol between them. “Are you drunk?”

Loki stared back at him. “No.”

Tony... didn’t argue.

“Look, it’s fine,” Loki said, bending to pick the wet towel off the floor with a sigh. “I’ll”—he coughed—“I’ll just clean this and fix everything and you’ll never even know it happened.” He threw the towel into the sink. “See? Good as new.”

“I could get a broom for the—”

“The mug? No, I’ll fix it. I just—I just need a minute. I can fix it. It’s simple magic.”

“Loki.”

“I said I’m sorry!”

“It’s okay, man. It’s just a mug.”

He shoved out of reach into the corner. “Don’t,” he hissed above a shaky breath. “Put your hands on me and I’ll kill you.”

It was a long moment. Somehow the room became bigger and the low light became lower and the nervous green flicker in the back of the kitchen drowned everything out. Everything became a haze and the haze became something else. Cold and dark and alone with an uncertain future. The concept of other people lost its meaning. When did this end? Don’t, don’t, don’t. He was good this time. He kept doing the wrong thing.

“I don’t understand,” he whispered into his glittering hands. “I did everything I was supposed to do. It doesn’t stop.”

“Hey,” Tony gently said from the other end of the kitchen.

“Sorry’s not enough! I *said* sorry! You apologize but it doesn’t do anything. If I say I’m sorry then it doesn’t make it any less, it doesn’t mean that I’ve learned, it doesn’t mean I’ve been good but I’m trying! I swear I’ve been good. I swear—” Loki coughed again. Dry throat, probably; he swallowed. “*Verið góður*,” he muttered, picking himself out of the corner and trying to pull his wet shirt away from him. “... *Ég’f verið góður*.”

“Forget the mug,” Tony said, “and take a deep breath. You’re hyperventilating.”

“I’m not.”

“You look like you’re about to fall over. Why don’t you, um... sit down somewhere and—”

“I’m not!”

“I can hear you gasping from over here. Look at me.”

Loki ignored him and went to pick up the rest of the stupid mug. “I’m very glad you’re worried about me but you can stop now,” he said, not hyperventilating any less than before. “And you can go right back to what you were doing and I’ll go back to what I was doing and we’ll forget this ever happened and—”

and but oh, great, the pieces kept falling out of his hands with loud knife clanks and it kept happening every time he tried to scoop them back up because he was too anxious to coordinate himself and probably too drunk to begin with but he should try anyway. And then he realized it was pointless and sat on the floor again and pressed his knees to his chest and took those stupid deep breaths while the stupid mug glistened before him. Tried to forget everything including the mug but couldn’t. Of course not. This would keep happening, both of them like this. Everything was falling apart. Not even a god’s lies could hold this much in. It was all coming down too fast. Years and years of it. He felt like the mug at his feet, raw and wasting with no hope of going back to the way things were. If he died now knowing that not a single realm would take him in death it would still be preferable to slowly bleeding out like this.

Tony stood quietly by him and the broken pieces. “Will you calm down if I leave?”

“*Ég mun ekki líða svo niðurlægð,*” Loki answered, which in fact answered nothing.

“English?” Tony meekly requested.

“No,” Loki said, “but I’d like you to.”

“Oh.”

That still did not happen, though. Loki pushed himself off the floor and tried to come to terms with his existence and Tony considered getting that broom. The rest was a blur. Something somewhere moved or made a noise that sounded like danger—reflexes!—and then before anyone could look

that

there it was: lifelong instincts making sure nothing slipped through the defenses, no telling how it happened or what was between point A and B other than Tony’s shirt was suddenly alight with a forest of tiny emerald flames and he was yanking it off with one clean, hasty pull like this wasn’t the first time something like that had happened. Then he was shirtless beside a burning lump of fabric on the counter. A bit startled but not very upset by the looks of it. But those looked like singe marks on his chest. And oh no oh no oh no oh shit Loki jerked away and realized that it had been his fault and tried to tuck his hands somewhere where they couldn’t hurt. Didn’t know what cracked or moved or who only that it could have been danger. And despite the low light those looked like singe marks. Bad bad bad bad bad bad bad bad bad bad you are in so much trouble now

Fuck!

Norns, I don’t deserve you, Loki made to say, I don’t deserve your kindness! Look what I did with it—but all the words came out wrong and they flooded right out of him and didn’t stop. “*Nornir, ég á ekki skilið þessa góðmennsku! Horfðu á mig. Sjáðu hvað ég’f gert við það.* I’m sorry! I’m sorry. I’m sorry, please—please look at me—I’m sorry! I’m—scared—look at me, you know that, I panic

so easily—don't hurt me for this, Tony, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to—why won't you look at me? I'm sorry. I'm"—an abrupt sob wracked him—"sorry. Please forgive me. It'll never happen again. Please. Please, Tony. I'm sorry."

Steve Rogers would have had a field day with this.

"I know," Tony quietly said. "It was an accident. I'm not mad."

"But I hurt you and—"

"I'm fine."

"No! Look at you! With the—"

"Really," Tony said, dusting himself off. "I'm not hurt."

"I just wanted some tea!" Loki hissed. "And I couldn't even—of course I can't! What did I expect?—and you must be thinking how did this happen, how do I just drop it? What happened?"

"Um... it was... too hot when you lifted it," Tony said, wondering if he should move the flaming shirt elsewhere. "Your hand slipped. I don't know. Does it matter?"

"Yes! I'm trying so hard and I can't even—and—you're not going to shut up about this in the morning, are you? Oh—"

"Why would I do that?"

"I don't know! Why do you do anything you do? You don't need a reason. It'll be just like every other time and—"

"Loki."

"I'm just—I'm just... so... tired," he softly finished, slinking to the floor again.

Tony stepped away from where his shirt's last threads were still smouldering, skirting the debris on the floor. "That was my fault. I shouldn't have... um..."

"Don't apologize," Loki muttered, crawling over to the broken mug. "Not to me. Please don't."

"Okay."

It was an easy fix—one of those basic, practical staples of a spell where a flick of the wrist gathered the pieces into their original shape and fused them back together with only some brief phosphorescence where the breaks had been to signify any damage. He watched the glow until it vanished completely, took the restored mug, and placed it on the counter.

"Impressive," Tony said.

"Don't patronize me, Stark."

"I wasn't trying to. I just... thought that was pretty cool."

"Are you going to leave now?" Loki asked, glancing sourly at him. "I'm calm. Get out."

“Your hands are still glowing,” Tony noted.

“Yes, they do that sometimes. Thanks for noticing.”

This was embarrassing. Tony almost wished a third person with dysfunctional sleep habits would come into the room just to take the load off. No one did, though. There was a box of tea by the kettle, mostly forgotten there in the chaos, and, with a shaky, glittery hand, Loki scooped out a new bag and dropped it in the unbroken mug.

“To be honest,” Loki muttered as he took the kettle with two hands, “I... lost the appetite after all that, but... I might as well. Do you want anything?”

“I’m okay,” Tony said. “Thanks.”

Pouring the hot water took a long time, but they did not discuss it. Returning the kettle to its dock also took a long time. Debating the likelihood of smashing the mug and its steaming contents everywhere yet again took even longer.

“If you tell Thor I’ve been drinking I’ll break your neck,” Loki said.

It was probably a bluff but knocked Tony off guard anyway. “I wasn’t planning on it,” he stammered, not wanting to test the theory.

“Not that it matters,” Loki said. “Never has. But I think he worries when I do it alone. It’s... different when it’s alone.” He stared down the burnt fabric scraps and ash on the counter. “Well, he doesn’t hate me anymore so I have to start worrying about him worrying about me about... again. You wouldn’t understand. You’re an only child, aren’t you?”

“I might have some illegitimate siblings I don’t know about,” Tony confessed.

“Oh! Me too.”

“But I know what you mean.”

They stared at the burnt fabric together.

“Sometimes it’s easier to lie,” Loki said above a long sigh. “Sometimes it’s too easy. And then you lose yourself in it and the truth hits you even harder. But that’s life.”

“Do you... need to talk?”

“Who doesn’t?”

Tony frowned. “I was watching a movie if you wanted to join me,” he said. “We could find something light, see if it takes your mind off things.”

“It might, but I really am tired. I’ll go back to my room. I’ll... I’ll do something. I might still be able to fit in a few hours of sleep.”

“Are you sure you don’t want anything? Sleeping pills?”

“I have wine and tea. I’ll be fine.”

“That’s not...”

“It most certainly is. Goodnight.”

Tony watched him take the mug with two hands, one tight around the handle and the other a careful ring around the cool unglazed base, and turn to leave. The moment began to slip away. The buzzing security lights were awkward and heavy. Loki, on slow and wavering but precise tiptoes, vanished in complete silence. And there went everything. Trying to act like some kind of cold business associates who would go right back to tearing each other apart once they closed the case. Maybe they weren’t so different. Tony looked at the charred specks of cotton on the counter, casually swept them into the sink, and hoped no one would notice. He dusted himself off. He wondered why they were like this.

“FRIDAY?” he said, a bit to himself, as he stupidly remembered in the middle of this that for whatever insane and absurd reason she continued to live part-time in the building’s walls. “You still dead in there?”

“I am,” came her tinny response from the ceiling speakers. “I’d check on him if I were you.”

The rest was silence, and Tony just turned and walked after him. He found the door, knocked thrice, and waited. Silence there too. There was a good chance he was unwelcome. “Can we talk some more? I... don’t actually want to watch that movie.”

Many minutes seemed to pass before a tired hand cracked open the door.

“I’m sorry,” Tony said.

Loki blinked slowly. He looked like he was remembering how to speak. “You’re the one without a shirt,” he said.

“Often.”

They stared at each other for a while.

“Come in, then,” Loki sighed, trudging back to the bed. The side table lamp was on. All his things were there: tea, a book, and a knife tucked beneath a cleaning rag and some oil. And an empty bottle. He took the mug.

Tony closed the door and sat beside him. “Are you okay?”

“In general?”

“Oh...” Tony looked at the bottle. He couldn’t see a number but supposed it hadn’t been strong enough. It looked expensive; perhaps at least it had tasted nice. “Why don’t you decorate this place a bit? You *are* allowed.”

“I’d love to,” Loki agreed with a wise nod, “but most of my belongings were completely obliterated on Asgard and the rest aboard a starship not too long ago.”

“But you could—I can buy you some things if you want them!” Tony stammered, trying and failing to backtrack. “Maybe a rug? Wall art?”

“You can stop pretending you like me.”

“I’m not.”

Loki placed the mug on the table.

“What do you do all day?” Tony asked.

“Whatever keeps me busy,” Loki said, taking the knife and the oil and rag.

“Are you okay with that?”

“Why are you trying to psychoanalyze me?”

“I’m not. I’m just asking. Do you have any plans? Move out, assimilate somewhere? Travel? I mean, the sky’s the limit. We’ve got the resources.”

“I’m happy here.”

“You don’t seem happy.”

Loki wiped down the knife’s handle with the oil and otherwise did not respond.

“I just want the best for everyone,” Tony said.

“How touching. What book did you drag that out of?”

Tony watched the knife.

“Here, let me show you something,” Loki said, vanishing the knife. He left the rag on the table and drew a different one: a tiny little dagger, easily concealable in a sleeve or pocket, with a scuffed shine and dull point. Then, turning it the other way, he cast the same spell he always did and slid his fingers from end to end with a mirage-like rain of green sparks. Held it up to show a visibly sharper and shinier edge. “I sharpen all my weapons magically,” he explained. “The results are finer and last longer.”

“Cool,” Tony said, but he wished they could have kept discussing it. “Do you still have that sword?”

“I do,” Loki said. “It’s not my best weapon, but it’s all I have at this point that isn’t just another knife. I’ll keep it for now.”

“Armour?”

“I have a few sets.”

“Do you have the one with the horns?”

“Oh... not that one. It was mostly ceremonial so there was no reason to keep it on hand. I left it at the palace. I couldn’t have known.”

“Aw. I liked them.”

“I have these,” Loki said, forming the circlet he’d worn to Ragnarök. He tilted his head back so the golden curves caught the light. “Not quite as impressive, but they *do* work well in close combat.”

Tony laughed. “Yeah, I can imagine.”

Loki vanished the piece. “What do you want from me?”

“I’m worried.”

“Why?”

“Well... you leave a lot to worry about.”

Loki shot him a dismal look.

“I’m sorry,” Tony said. “I don’t mean it in a bad way. You look like you’re handling yourself alright but I know it’s not exactly a walk in the park. I want to know if there’s anything I can do to make it easier.”

“Apologies don’t suit you,” Loki said.

“They don’t suit you either.”

“Here.” Loki presented the dagger hilt-first. “I know you want to get a better look.”

It was a bit disappointing how well they kept deflecting each other but there wasn’t much that could be done about it; unable to deny the observation, Tony took the dagger. “You don’t think I’ll stab you?” he said, bringing it close.

“Do you know how?”

“Uh, yeah?”

“I don’t believe you.”

How rude. In his hands, the dagger seemed unwieldy, but sure he knew; he was no stranger to close combat and he’d had more than enough practice with a blade. He tried flipping into a reverse grip and gracelessly fumbled it.

“Not like that,” Loki said.

“Okay, but—”

“Tony. Your name’s Anthony, isn’t it? Anthony. That’s a nice name. Listen, I’m a little tipsy right now. I’m a lot tipsy, actually.” He stopped to rub an eye. “And I’m fighting tears. Could you live with that? Honestly?”

No. Not really.

“Tipsy?” Tony said.

“Ha. Yes, unfortunately. Asgardian wine’s strong, but it’s not that strong. Maybe if I had something else.”

“... Like?”

Loki stared into his tea.

“Maybe not,” Tony said, offering the dagger.

“Wait,” Loki said: he returned the dagger to his lap but held the look. Squinted, grappling at focus that wasn’t there. “I... think I had something.”

“You might have miscounted.”

A small bottle blinked into his hand and he shook it: there was some left. “I suppose not.” Loki laughed. “Maybe I can forget this night yet.”

Tony watched him pour what remained into the tea. There was a single splash.

“Oh,” Loki said as he nested the bottle in the bedsheets, “you don’t drink anymore, do you? Am I making you uncomfortable?”

“A little,” Tony admitted.

“I’m sorry. I should have realized. But... if the insomnia doesn’t keep me up all night then the nightmares will. This”—Loki raised the mug—“is the least I can do. I’m... very, very tired, Anthony.”

Tired was an understatement, but that much was obvious. Tony said nothing. Loki also said nothing. He tipped the mug back with a wince.

“You know,” Tony said, “my friends call me, uh. Tony.”

Loki nearly choked with laughter. “A friend!” he said, breathless, as he tore the mug away and dropped it beside the bottle, and then he kept laughing and didn’t stop. He laughed so hard he started wheezing. He curled up and continued wheeze-laughing until his stomach hurt and his eyes were watering and then he still did not stop laughing.

“I’m serious,” Tony insisted.

“Oh, you are?” Loki said, glancing at him through the tears. “Hey, that was the best joke I’ve ever heard from you! Come on; tell it again. I loved it. A friend! Hell of a friend I am. How far underground did you bury your bar for friendship?”

“What’d you dump in your tea?”

“I don’t know, but it tasted vile. Ogh.” Loki plucked the bottle out of the sheets and squinted at the label. “Oh, this! Right. It’s like absinthe but worse. Tastes like gasoline, works like gasoline. I’ve used it in emergencies. We could try it someday if you have any vehicles you don’t mind destroying.”

“Uh... no, thanks.”

Now this was hitting; Loki tucked the bottle somewhere with the mug and visibly tried to shake himself out of it. “Maybe it wouldn’t *destroy* them,” he coughed, “buuut... I suppose if you’ve got nothing to lose. Tell me if you change your mind. I want to see.”

“I’ll think about it,” Tony said, but he did not think about it.

The silence was long and cold, even under the warm lamplight, and for a while they seemed to forget about each other; Tony checked the time on his phone and Loki drew another dull knife and not much else happened. Maybe no news was good news after an encounter like that, but it felt empty and unfamiliar. Was anything really better or was it just better hidden now? What would the morning be like?

Hoping to lighten the mood, Tony cleared his throat and said, “This is the part where you flirt.”

Almost a minute passed before Loki processed it suddenly and looked up, knife in hand, with blushy cheeks and a baffled stare that didn’t quite match, and laughed a bit and put the knife down and said, “Pardon?”

“That... came out wrong,” Tony said. “I mean you usually make some weird flirty joke right about now and I’m hearing nothing. Should I be worried?”

“Oh, I see. Oh... um. I *do* find you beautiful.”

Tony blushed and laughed himself. “Okay, not worried anymore.”

“Wait! I’m *not* done. Your eyes are like... a magpie’s. I love your curls and the lines you get when you laugh. Everything is so well-framed! The hair and your beard and your eyebrows *and* your eyelashes. You’re very beautiful. But surely you must know that already.”

Tony wondered what this meant or if it meant anything at all. Was it only material or more? He could never tell; truth was they both threw flattery around like nobody’s business and it was sometimes difficult to pick out shallow compliments from something deeper. And he had collected many shallow compliments in his life already—false flags everywhere! No one could say for sure. The experience was probably mutual.

Tony hoped that, whatever the case, this would be forgotten come morning. He didn’t know how to take it.

“You know,” Loki said, “I’d have done this on myself—won’t that’ve made things so much easier?—but it won’t work on the caster, l-l-lod—logistical reasons and all that, so I was going to ask, since you must be tired too: would you let me help you to sleep?”

“Um... I don’t think that’s a good idea. You’re a little too...”

“Oh. Oh, I see. Yes, you’re right. Sorry. That’s... risky, yes.”

“Rain check?”

They must have both spoken at the wrong time. “That sounds smart,” Loki coughed, hunching painfully to try and keep the tea and worse-than-absinthe down.

“Hang in there, bud,” Tony said with a hand on his shoulder. “Did you eat anything first?”

“I think I need to...”

“Bathroom’s right there. You’ll feel better.”

Of course that was a stupid solution and a giant waste of everything that hadn’t soaked in yet and he tried his very damndest to wait it out, but the waiting didn’t work and it was probably coming

up anyway. So he stumbled off the bed and limped to the bathroom somehow and collapsed in front of the toilet and spent the next ten minutes dying there and decided above all else that this was empiric evidence he did not have Asgardian ancestry. But they already knew that.

“Please don’t tell anyone about this,” he sobbed from the bathroom floor.

“Been there,” Tony said. “Don’t worry about it.”

It was a load off but not better, and, somewhat more alive than before but not by much, Loki eventually returned to where he had been sitting before and slumped with a miserable sigh and continued working on the knife. His pale hands trembled like the wind and his teary eyes caught the blade’s emerald glitter like an aurora dancing beneath the northern sky. Not a word. Just a quiet and menial chore to fill the time. He tested the edge on his thumb and healed it before it could bleed and then dealt with the faded handle as well. It was gorgeous work; whether useful tools and weapons or just something else to hoard each one looked fit for royalty, some wrapped inside gems and charms, others covered with inscriptions and designs. They deserved the care.

But nothing about the rest was really good, and, sitting there together at an increasingly light hour, it became clear it wouldn’t be improving soon. Everything that could have had gone wrong: failing to fall asleep, spilling hot tea everywhere, falling sick on top of not even being drunk enough—oh, Tony knew that expression anywhere. Not drunk enough to forget. Only drunk enough to remember. It was a hellish limbo.

“*Ég’r svo heimskur,*” Loki muttered as he pulled out another knife. “*Ekkert’r skarpt... ég held þessu áfram. Aftur og aftur og aftur...*”

“What was that?” Tony asked, trying his best not to sound demanding.

Loki looked up like he had forgotten anyone else was in the room and his teary eyes got wide and he hissed, “I’m doing it again, aren’t I? Can’t speak right, this is why—you don’t go digging around in spells, ad-d-d—*adjusting!*—fuck—adjusting things like disabling it at will and all that because then it gets too”—he gestured with the knife—“too—Norns, I can’t speak—it loosens and then *al-right*, you can turn it off at will, but then it’s too flexible and it does things like this, you know, you get drunk or you’re sleeping or whatever and look, you’re speaking discount Norse! I’m sorry. I’m really sorry. I don’t mean to—”

“Hey,” Tony said, “I was just asking. I’m not, like, offended that you’re talking in another language around me. You don’t need to apologize for everything. And maybe, uh...” He glanced at the knife, which was dangerously close to Loki’s face. “Maybe—”

“What?” Loki snapped. “Put this away? Stop d-d—gesticulating? It’s too dull anyway! There, that’s what I was grumbling about—it needs to be sharper and I *can’t*, I guess—alcohol and lack of sleep, that’s it, of course it’s not working, but—” He set the knife on the bed, hard, so hard it bounced under his hand. “What else am I supposed to do? What, read? I can’t read like this.”

“The offer’s still on for a movie,” Tony said.

“Fuck your movie,” Loki retorted, and Tony shrank in his seat, unable to fire back.

“Okay,” Tony said after too long, and he folded his hands in his lap and acted as peaceable as he could, which wasn’t very peaceable at all, and quietly added, “Have you tried sleeping again? Maybe after the... that, maybe it’ll work now.”

“No,” Loki said, “no, it won’t work, you know what’ll happen? My mind’ll start wandering and then it’s all—get out.”

“What?”

“Get out of my room, Tony. Please. I just want to be alone.”

He missed that charming, flattering Loki from so recently ago.

“Okay,” Tony said, standing. “I’m...” Sorry? No; they’d had too many apologies. “I’m gonna go sit in my workshop or... something. Pass out on the floor, maybe.” He looked at the knife on the bed, at Loki. “Stay safe.”

“Thank you,” Loki said. “I’m sorry I snapped at you.” So much for limits. “Goodnight; I hope you can sleep.”

“I’ll try. You try, too. Goodnight.”

So after a long minute of convincing himself to go, Tony left the room. He closed the door and went to retrieve a shirt, shadow-like, unnoticed, and then he went to his workshop as promised. But neither of them attempted any rest.

Unforgiving

Chapter Summary

The fear is beginning to overflow.

Chapter Notes

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

If Loki said his hangover that morning was one of the worst he'd ever experienced in his life it would be an understatement. Though he did lie down a few times through the night, he could never fall asleep, and it was a frustrating paradox given how badly he was struggling to keep consciousness: the starvation, dehydration, and general drunkenness on top of averaging three hours of sleep a week. He expected to at the very least pass out and wake up on the floor the next day, half-alive in a pool of his own vomit with no memory of any of the preceding events. He wished he did. But he only spent the hours curled in a spinning haze as the cold sweat washed the alcohol from his system and remained, unfortunately, alive, and as close to mortal as one could get.

Sometime shortly after dawn, for reasons unknown, he refrained from summoning another dagger to replace the one he had put away, cleaned the little section of skin under his shirt which had slowly but surely accumulated a crusty layer of dry blood once Tony had left, and dragged himself off the bed. The dizziness hit. The nausea hit. He was certain his legs would suddenly stop working and he *would* come to several hours later in a pool of his own vomit on the floor, but, after a long and agonizing minute—maybe less? Maybe it was less—the feeling passed and he decided it wasn't a problem at all. Definitely not *his* problem.

He should have eaten, but he wasn't hungry. He should have had at least a glass of water to drink, or two, or three, or twenty, but he wasn't thirsty, either. He wanted to sleep, but he knew he wouldn't be able to. Last night's memories hadn't gone, and, as the weight of everything settled above the headache, he really wanted nothing at all.

There was already a good chance his final decision would be to simply curl up on the floor, let the feeling of death wash over him, and accept his fate: it was probably a suitable punishment for not only royally humiliating himself but also thinking that a few toddler-sized drinks on an empty stomach wouldn't only give him all the hangover and none of the "please, please, please just stop my brain for one second" it should have. He didn't want to go out there. He didn't want to look at anyone. He wanted to hide in a hole and burn. But he felt so miserable in that moment that he couldn't even consider self-sabotaging for a minute longer, and so, tying back his messy hair and trying his very best to make himself look as presentable as possible without an outright glamour, he decided to go do something about it. He couldn't face Tony again, he was too scared to face anyone else, and, as he disposed of the evidence and snatched the mug from his nightstand—as he stood there, questioningly clutching it with shaky and exhausted hands—it nagged him. Still, he managed to leave the room.

There was a decent trick he'd learned some years ago, but it involved coffee and since he had never bothered getting a machine in his room (or a kettle, for that matter; alas), what that meant for him

was, unfortunately, sneaking a cup from the lounge, and even though he knew it was stupid and that nothing would happen and that whatever happened would be caused by his own detrimentally excessive caution, he couldn't further stress to himself how much he didn't want to do that. He hated himself for even trying. He also suspected that if he saw Tony he would atomize under the pressure. But he ignored all of that or else zoned out so much it wasn't a concern and awkwardly shuffled down with the mug.

And it seemed like everyone was there! Tony but also Pepper and Peter and Sam and Steve and Bruce all just *there*, wrapped up in something over breakfast at the table. It was so bad that Loki almost turned around and dragged his half-alive hungover ass right back into bed just so no one would have to see him like this, but it was too late: Tony noticed him come in and, perhaps glad he hadn't died of alcohol poisoning, gave him a little smile and wave. Loki began to seriously consider attempting a glamour despite the likelihood of it failing. No glamour, though.

There was nearly a full pot of coffee out, which at least solved that part. Loki cleaned the mug he was carrying, set it down in front of the machine, and then... hesitated.

If it weren't for the pounding sickness in his head and the fact that, well, maybe it wasn't a good idea, he might have screamed and torn the room apart, but all he did was close his eyes and count out his breaths awhile until his mind felt a little clearer and his hands were a little steadier and then gently lift the pot and angle it into the mug. It was heavy and he struggled to keep the pour straight. Any worse luck and he'd spill everything, but, determined to keep that from happening again, he took the very best care: didn't look away, didn't hurry putting the pot back, didn't brush the mug off the counter with an unsuspecting elbow. Everyone was probably staring at him and he probably looked insane with the dishevelled rat hair and dark circles, but it wasn't anything new. Stare away.

Loki slid the pot into its dock and dared a small sip of coffee and then set it down and started rummaging through the spice cupboard.

"How are you feeling?" Tony said, joining him with a mug of his own.

"Lower your voice," Loki muttered.

"I guess that answers it."

Sure did. Determined to continue not dying as well, Loki took out the sugar and salt and placed them both on the counter and then started pouring the sugar.

Tony gave him a worried look. "That's, uh... a lot."

Loki stopped pouring. "What do you know?"

"That that's an uncomfortable amount of sugar?"

Loki pushed the sugar aside and then lifted the salt. "If you have a better idea," he said, "then by all means, tell me."

"What, like a reasonable hangover cure?"

Loki poured the salt in without breaking eye contact.

"Wanna add an aspirin while you're at it?"

He set the salt on the counter and wondered if it wouldn't be better to just hurl himself down the stairs face-first.

Tony opened one of the drawers, then another, and then he dug through it for a tiny bottle. "I'm not sure how much you should take," he said as he unscrewed it. "It *says* two, but that's for humans so I don't know if maybe you'd need more or—"

Loki swiped the bottle and shook out a few.

"Do you remember anything?"

Only everything. He took the pills and downed the coffee in one breath. It was bad and he coughed. It was worse than the extra shot he wished he could have had last night and he spent a long many seconds struggling to hold it down. Ack. His vitals would appreciate it later, though. Beside them, Pepper showed up to say something about some short-notice meeting somewhere, sorry, and then scuttled off; Tony waved her goodbye. Loki nervously tried to wash the taste from his mouth with more coffee.

"Nice nails," Tony said.

"Pardon?"

"The green. It's nice."

"Oh." Loki examined a hand as if he had not forgotten he had ever done that: there were large chips bordering the polish—how long had it been?—but it was still holding. "Thank you."

"What are you doing today?" Tony asked.

"Trying not to have a nervous breakdown. You?"

"Hopefully not the same. Do you want to talk?"

"No."

"Okay. I'm always here if you need me."

"I don't."

Tony nodded. "I have a thing with some friends," he said as he refilled his own mug. "Everyone was super busy after all that chaos and it's been a while, so..." He shrugged. "Phones only cut it for so long, y'know?"

"Mhm."

"Do you want me to leave?"

"Would you be offended if I said yes?"

"Not really. Stay hydrated."

Loki watched Tony return to the table and wondered if anyone had been eavesdropping. It sounded like they were talking about him. Or the goats in New Asgard. There were goats? Oh...

He dragged his hungover ass downstairs to sleep in the library.

It didn't work, of course, but it was a nice place to rest for a while. He liked this library. It felt safe here and he felt as at home as he could have given the circumstances, which weren't very good; above everything else his mind was still screaming at him to get himself together and get out of here instead of bollocking around until he wound up dead. And for a while he *did* seem to doze off in the plush armchair with a book between his chest and his knees, but every time he came close his heart began to race and he wondered if he should go visit Reykjavik again and see if they could still mutually understand each other without the Allspeak. And maybe also how many people wanted him dead. And if he had died on the starship after all and had in fact been trapped in his own special purgatory this entire time. The purgatory theory seemed reasonable given that at some point he started going around the room and checking how many of the many outlets didn't work (two, surprisingly) and how many screws and nails were loose (multiple) and where paint was chipping (a few places near the windows and furniture) to kill time. Maybe he should go see if there really were goats in New Asgard.

He opened a window and accidentally knocked part of the screen from its frame and panicked, which was more alarming than the panic itself, and spent longer than he should have checking he hadn't dented anything and working it back into the fasteners. The air was cold and clean and there were weeds visible at ground level. There must be someplace better than this; it was safer than most places, but it wasn't safe. Maybe safety wasn't worth the agony of doing nothing all day. He tried to figure out where he wanted to go but couldn't think of anything. He wanted to go to his palace room.

A few hours later he went back upstairs.

It felt awkwardly tense, as if he'd walked in at the wrong time, but no one said anything to him above the usual dinner charts. He got more coffee. He got more aspirin. He wondered how his stomach lining was faring. He wondered if he should steal a starship from somewhere and fly out blind. He wondered if Asgard would take him in after what he'd done. He wondered why everything was taking so long. He wondered if he should kill everyone and run. Tony was elsewhere, but that didn't stop them from making an enormous issue of whose wellbeing was at risk today.

"Mr. Stark said I need to stop worrying about superheroes and start worrying about doing my homework," Peter said over his food.

"You can do both," Sam said.

"Don't encourage him," Steve said. "Tony's right. You can be a hero after you graduate."

"No way," Peter said. "The city needs me."

"The city needs you to stay in school."

"That *is* true," Loki said.

"I am in school!" Peter said, indignant. "Of course I can do both."

"What does your heart tell you?"

"It tells me... I need more food."

“Ha. Here I thought that was my brother’s job.”

Peter took his plate and went to get more. Loki... didn’t. He felt Bruce staring at him and his tiny dinner from across the table where normally it would be Tony or Natasha. He stared back.

“You okay, man?” Sam said. “I swear you’ve had nothing but caffeine and painkillers today. I’m worried Tony’s rubbing off on you.”

“Only in private,” Loki assured.

Steve coughed mid-bite.

“You’re going to get ulcers,” Sam said.

“Never have,” Loki said, taking another bite nearly for show.

Bruce seemed to want to say something but didn’t. Enough time living together would teach you to mind your tongue about these things.

“I should go see the goats,” Peter said, which started the whole conversation on staying in school right back up again.

It was quiet for a while and no one brought it up again, but at one point Loki found himself alone at the table with Bruce and wondered what their relationship was like these days. It had been reasonably friendly on the ship, but it was never clear how much was true and how much was only necessity—the kind of awkward and insincere hospitality everyone in the compound maintained among each other to prevent any deaths. So he didn’t expect a whole lot of concern. They spent a long time staring each other down.

“I just... don’t think it’s healthy,” Bruce confessed, which would probably be the only comment he ever dared on the topic.

“You may be a doctor,” Loki said, “but you’re not *my* doctor.”

“Yeah. You don’t have to listen to me.”

“Indeed I don’t.”

Bruce leaned on a hand. “How do you feel about goats?”

“I have a hard time looking them in the eye ever since I caught my brother with one,” Loki said.

“Oh,” Bruce said with the face of someone who would never know if it was a joke or not.

“Back to work?”

“Back to work.”

“Have fun.”

Bruce tidied up and then disappeared somewhere. Loki opened the holograms and searched in vain for good news. There was no good news. There wasn’t even bad news. There was nothing. He kept searching the empty databases anyway.

It occurred to him a few times as he skimmed everything from immigration supports to today's economy updates that he could probably make use of these things, but the thought of taking up permanent residence on this planet made him itchy. Cramming himself into Asgard had been hard enough and they couldn't stand him. He couldn't imagine doing the same here. Still, he hopefully looked through all the different things they had saved as if it would make him like this place a little more in the event that he never left. It also seemed to creep up on him that the way Bruce had been looking at him had been quite a bit like whenever he got too drunk during a dinner on the starship and stopped being funny and started incoherently sobbing about how he was a terrible person and everyone hated him and nothing would ever get better only to forget most of it in the morning, but that was how Bruce always looked at him.

Tony appeared fairly late in the evening to grab what remained of the food and clean up.

"How many people did you tell?" Loki asked.

Tony closed the cupboard. "What?"

"About... everything."

Tony paused. "Last night? I didn't."

"Really? Everyone's been looking at me like some wounded animal today."

"You do look noticeably hungover."

Not at all. He looked tired, maybe a bit sick; no one *knew* unless they knew. And they wouldn't know unless Tony had been running his mouth about it. So much for trusting each other. If he looked hungover then he looked weak and if he looked weak he looked like an easy target and if he looked like an easy target he wasn't safe anymore. And Tony had flinched. Tony had hesitated. The words and the body language didn't match up.

"I think you're lying," Loki said.

"I'm not."

"Not even Pepper?"

Tony paused. "No."

"Why?"

"Why what? That you had a breakdown while drunk? Not my business. This place is enough of a gossip pit without me contributing."

"But you did, then."

"No! I didn't. Why do you care so much?"

"Why do you keep lying to me?"

"Dude."

They stared at each other across the room. Tony seemed to waver. Loki got up and joined him at the kitchen island.

“Well, I get you’re embarrassed,” Tony confessed with his hands up, “which is totally fair and I would be too which is why I did not say anything. Get off my ass.”

“Do you think if I ask someone else I’ll get the same answer?” Loki said with narrowed eyes.

“Do you think it doesn’t matter if I told anyone?”

“So you did?”

“No.”

“I trusted you!”

“Hey, trust means knowing when to be worried about someone.”

“So you did tell.”

“I didn’t.”

Loki slammed him into the fridge and pinned him there.

“Fuck, alright!” Tony shouted above a cough. “I told like three people because it came up in conversation somehow and it slipped out—”

“Because you can’t be trusted?”

“Because this building is supposed to be dry and I don’t want someone dying of alcohol poisoning, dipshit. I was worried about you.”

“I don’t want you to be worried about me.”

“Too bad. Can you let me go now?”

“Why should I?”

Tony seemed to realize his situation. “I’m sorry,” he softly said, shrinking beneath the arms weighing him down. “I didn’t know that... that, um... please let me go. We can talk about this, okay?”

But Tony didn’t understand why this was such a problem. Tony didn’t understand that vulnerability was weakness and that if people knew what made someone cry they could hurt them. Didn’t understand that this wasn’t supposed to happen at all. That they were supposed to ignore it away and pretend everything was fine. That fear wasn’t real. That grief and rage wasn’t real. If they talked about it then it was real.

“Let me go,” Tony quietly said—quiet, but firm; a careful, well-practiced bid for peace. He squared his shoulders and forced himself to maintain the eye contact. “I’m sorry. I know I should have kept my mouth shut and that’s my fault. I should have warned you and I’m very sorry I didn’t. It wasn’t supposed to be an attack on you.”

“But you know it is,” Loki growled.

“It’s not, man. No one thinks less of anyone for having a bad night. No one thinks less of you.”

“See, I knew it! I knew I should have left. I should have left the day I got here but then I figured I’d stick around for a bit because you all weren’t attacking me, right? Free roof over my head, free food, and then *this* starts happening and then people start noticing and then they start—”

Tony tried to squirm out of the grip.

“And then you barge in and you watch all this unfold and you start pitying me and I know where that leads! It means I’m weak. It means I’m a target. Stop this.” Loki tightened the grip. “I didn’t ask for your pity and I certainly didn’t ask for anyone else’s!”

“It’s not pity,” Tony said; his voice was shrill, close to tears. He straightened himself and then stopped, flinched, as Loki bore down even harder on his ribs. “I’m not going anywhere,” he added through grit teeth. “I told you I’m sorry.”

“What is it, then? What, if not pity?”

“I don’t know.” Tony inhaled sharply and looked up. “I don’t know what it is, but it’s not pity.”

But that was a lie too, and so of course there was still—fear?—fury?—no thoughts—there was

You can’t get me if I get you first.

— a hand on Tony’s neck. Thumb on the jugular. Gentle fingers on soft skin. Half-day stubble poking out between the ghost of a touch. Cold and ethereal; threatening, but never more. Loki didn’t know how it happened, but he didn’t fight it. Better not. Better listen to his instincts: it must have been for a good reason. Tony knew how this went, though, or it certainly looked like he did. He straightened his back where it met the fridge but otherwise didn’t move an inch. Didn’t speak. His breathing slowed to a crawl; his heart, as Loki could feel, didn’t. He was cool about it: he took a mental step away from the situation, let himself untense, and simply waited, gaze steady, for something to happen. But nothing ever did.

“You’re lying,” said Loki, who in that moment, numb beneath the familiar safety of power, could no longer tell the fear from the rage. Maybe it was something else entirely.

Tony swallowed: his Adam’s apple caught on the palm against it. “I call it pity sometimes,” he admitted, still staring straight into Loki’s eyes. From that distance one would find they were more of a pale blue-green, not ice-blue as it often seemed, nor mossy, ashen green as they appeared in good lighting, nor the exaggerated emerald they gained during certain spells; and so pale blue-green, he decided, was their basic, unaltered colour. Like an ocean as it breached the shore. “I call it that because it’s easier,” he said. “It’s close, but it’s not. I guess it’s just... semantics. Pity feels condescending. That’s not what this is. I think it’s awful that all this happened to you, but I don’t pity you. You’re too strong for pity.” He gulped again. “Kinship. That’s what it is. We both went through bad things and I empathized. You know that part. It made me feel this obligation towards you. Nothing more than that.”

Loki considered this, and then he removed his hands and stepped back.

There was nothing.

There was no shattered silence, no sudden screaming or running, nothing from either of them; it was like the universe itself had stopped. They just watched each other, equally silent, equally unmoving, and for the longest time, that was all there was. Then Tony sank to the floor, arms spread across the top of his knees, and closed his eyes—and that was when all of that professionally hidden terror finally hit him.

“Okay,” he whispered to himself, a tremble to his voice, “okay, that was—holy shit.” He leaned back against the fridge and began counting on his fingers, over and over, one, two, three, four, but it didn’t really work; the breaths were just as laboured, just as shallow, just as shaky. But he kept counting: he may not be here, but at least he ought not to pass out. “Were you serious?” Pause: one, two, three, four. “You weren’t going to—no. No way.” One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four. “Tell me you were bluffing. Tell me—” One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four; he pressed his hands to his cheeks and then forced a proper look upwards. “You were bluffing, right?”

For all the silver of his tongue, there wasn’t a single word that Loki could think of because he hadn’t been. Because he had meant every godforsaken second. Because even now his veins were swimming with mind-melting, agonizing rage and he wanted nothing more than to get it over with and kill the man. This man: the one trying to argue against a natural fear response because it must be irrational, it must be wrong, it must not be true while knowing better than both of them. That one. Because he was nothing but an unfixable hypocrite. A monster: the kind parents told their children about.

There wasn’t a lie in all of the universe that could heal this.

“You weren’t bluffing,” Tony deduced with a thin nod. “Great! Oh, that’s great. You didn’t need to do that. I know you didn’t. Not over this. That was”—his voice cracked—“too much. Did you know I’m still scared of you? And I’ve been trying so hard not to be because I really thought you were alright now, that—that there was no *threat*, but I guess I was wrong!” he yelled. “I was wrong, wasn’t I?”

“No,” Loki said, already feeling himself falling apart with the crumbling anger.

Tony shook his head. “You haven’t changed a bit.”

Wasn’t this a tale as old as time?

“I’m sorry,” Loki softly said. He tried to take another step back but it was only the kitchen island. They were still so very, very close and as the last sparks of emotion died and he tried to temper himself, it felt smothering: was this far enough? Was this a safe distance or was it just as easy to snap from here? Maybe Thanos was right; it had always only been him. Maybe they were all right. He never needed anyone: it was in his blood to kill. The stories already promised it.

“I don’t think sorry is enough,” Tony said.

No. No no no. No, it had to be. Please.

“Please,” Loki said. “I didn’t mean that. I just get so angry sometimes. I don’t know where it comes from. I don’t think and I do these... stupid things.”

Tony shifted, such that his legs were half-crossed and his arms were tucked against his chest, and took another long, slow breath. “Is that what you call it?” he said, glancing up at him; tears lined his eyes. “Talk about an understatement.”

In a way it was poetic how much they were mirroring each other: the excessive apologies, the overstepping. Trading panic. Never respecting the warnings. Trying and failing to grow. No wonder they kept coming back; there really was no better match.

“... I should leave,” Loki finally managed to say, the words small and hollow. “I don’t want this to happen again.”

In spite of everything, a fleeting shine of guilt appeared in Tony’s eyes, and even as the unshed tears continued to build, even with an unyielding shiver and a slight stammer, he protested: “No,” he said. “You can’t. Where are you gonna go?”

“Somewhere. Anywhere. I’m tired. I always do this.”

Tony sniffed and rubbed his eyes. “I’ll clear the footage.”

“What will that do?” Loki asked above a miserable half-smile. “This still happened. We’ll still know. Don’t kid yourself.”

Tony looked like he wanted to argue, but he didn’t. He breathed in once, and, between another tremor, told him, “Stay the night. Leave in the morning if you want. I don’t care. Just... rest up, will you? Please.”

He didn’t deserve this. Norms, he didn’t. What was wrong with them both?

Had Loki found the strength to raise an eyebrow, it would have been to his hairline. But he only turned, slowly, silently, reluctantly, and walked out, eyes on the floor and toes as precise as always. No glances over his shoulder: he couldn’t bear them. Just that eternally nervous tiptoe.

Not knowing what else to do, Tony stayed there on the floor.

The fingers around his neck seemed to linger: soft, deceptively careful, yet a little cold; they weren’t quite like ice, but they must have been at least several degrees below the normal temperature, as if, on an early winter night, they’d been darted in and out of the doorway and absorbed that second’s worth of the chill. It was... haunting. Maybe even serene. Perhaps it grounded him in that way, and, setting the panic aside, he could almost convince himself it wasn’t really so bad. Just another unlucky turn. Unstoppable force to the immovable object. This did always happen; he supposed he had expected it. He laid a hand where Loki’s had been, half-aware of his racing pulse, and let the tears fall. He tried not to think about 2012. He steadied his breathing. But he didn’t get up, and for a long time as the silence deepened and it all became less and less real, he could only wonder why.

I'm so sorry

The Fear of Drowning

Chapter Summary

Yesterday's consequences are too much for Loki to bear.

Chapter Notes

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

Of course it always happened like that and it never did stop feeling like a dream: all the fear and anger was familiar but baffling in a way, a kind of unforeseen wrench in the cog that could only answer itself with more questions. And all the questions fell apart under a sheet of burning static. Senseless—heartless—faithless; timelessly nothing and yet everything while the rest just kept

falling

and falling

and falling. And it didn't stop from here:

—one just kept sinking through the crevices of consciousness. Sinking like water. Wide beneath the soul's floodgates. Clawed apart by the knifelike waves until that was all there was: drowning, dreading, dying and maybe in a moment of clarity remembering you *are* a monster, you *are* worthless, you *are* horrid and a monster like you surely deserves to burn but until then, the anger was better; right? But that only lasted so long

(one two three four five one two three four five one two three four five one two three four five one two three four five one two three four five one two three four five one two three four five)

and the anger couldn't hold the fear back forever. The anguish and the very hopeless realization that he *should* just end it all; he should just stop and he should just stop trying and he should just die already because this always happened and he never changed and he never would change and that was what everyone always wanted of him anyway:

Get out. You are [evil/sick/disgusting/pathetic/worthless/heartless/thoughtless/disappointing/worthless/uncontrollable/un love able/unfixable/worthless/worthless/worthless] and I hope it finally works this time.

Was anyone ever surprised but him?

Was he even shocked—?

—that by the time he snapped out of it he was already nigh-smothering himself face-down in the pillow with those awful, ugly, chest-heaving sobs that never ended once they started, trying not to cave under the truth (that he was a monster after all) and thinking (not this again; he wasn't thinking anything) this wasn't real, right? But the feeling of coming undone from the inside out and

the agony melting his bones were real; the smell of cotton and the tears in his eyes and the raw bleeding hands squeezing the linens were real. How very very very real and yet he was still falling
still couldn't breathe

still expected to wake up and wouldn't

still couldn't understand why this happened, what he did, why he was like this—why why why why why why why why—

and it stayed like that for hours, although he would never know exactly how many. All he knew was that by the time his thoughts were coherent enough and he stopped crying so hard he was choking, his entire body ached, the pillow was cold and damp, and one of his arms was numb. And he was still, as much as he didn't want to be, Loki.

He struggled onto his side, and then his back, and stared at the ceiling.

It was well into the night by now, with the hazy, ever-present lights in the distance casting a moon-like glow over the room. There wasn't a single sound to be heard. He sat up and, a bit alarmed, shook his arm until the blood returned, prickles and all: he winced. Then he tiredly crawled out of bed and tried to understand how awake he was. His hands burned. His lungs burned. He wanted to keep crying but no longer could.

Not real. Not real, right?

He couldn't tell.

He was already expecting the worst, but he wasn't particularly afraid. He walked—drifted, unable to feel himself moving for how absent his mind was—to the window and, shakily, he raised his hands towards the light: from the tips of his fingers to where his wrists ended the outside skin had been scraped raw into flaking, pockmarked nail-lines. Maybe he did remember. Maybe he didn't. Maybe he hadn't even meant it. It didn't matter much: at least he got what was coming.

Tony.

Thoughtfully, loyally, and kindly... and for what? What was the point?

Loki stared at the window. The compound perimeter looked rather nice like this. The grass looked dewy; the trees seemed as if they were glowing. Off in the distance, the city skyline was an ocean of lights. If he moved he could almost see his reflection's mirage, too. There he was: violently visceral at all times without fail. More faithful than his trust. Never stopping to think. Of course this was always how it ended; it always had, so why would it change? Of course people said this about him: they knew from experience. Of course they were both stupid for believing this time would be different.

He would have stayed there forever, but the longer he stood the more he felt himself sinking into that sleepless nausea, frail on his feet and a little strained in his vision, and so, silent, he crept to the table and sat. His hand stung as he gripped the chair. His mouth went dry. Who knew how long it

had been, anyway? Counting the hours failed when he realized he knew neither the time nor the date, although after a defeated while he settled on three days of no sleep. Three days, or maybe more; maybe less. Three days was nothing at all. Didn't Tony regularly exceed that number?

Always the same. Always, always, always. Loki laid his head down on the table and tried not to remember that he had no more drinks in his holding space.

Always the same. No wonder everyone hated him.

Always this. He never learned.

He should have gone back and fought himself to sleep, but he had tried it like this before and it never worked. Maybe it was just desperation that made him do what he did next. Unsure if he could trust his spells now or ever again, he whispered the words aloud. Then he waved a hand and cleared one of the room's original wards.

"It only gets worse," he softly said, "doesn't it?"

Many seconds passed.

"No," FRIDAY finally answered, not at all shaken by her sudden presence here: Loki realized he had been wondering if he'd botched the details the first time around and broken something. "I don't believe it does."

He almost wanted to smile, but he didn't know how. "Is that what he programmed you to say?"

There was no response.

"That must be too presumptuous," Loki said. "I'm sorry."

"You're not the first person to ask," she said. "I don't mind."

"Is Tony alright?"

"He went to bed some time ago."

"But he's not sleeping."

There was no response again.

"What's wrong with me?" Loki muttered.

Had it been Tony she was talking to, FRIDAY's answer might have been crass or even mocking, but this wasn't him and she wasn't that obtuse. "You're going through a lot," she simply said. "It's not uncommon to act out when something's bothering you."

"Something is always bothering me!" Loki shouted, sitting up. "I know it's not that. No matter what I do or how hard I try, it always ends like this. I'm too rough. I anger too easily. My first reaction when someone crosses me is to fight them. I don't mean to. I don't want to. And yet it just keeps happening. I know what I mean to him! I know he's afraid of me and that didn't stop me. I looked at him terrified to death"—he took a choking breath—"and I felt nothing. I felt good. I wanted to kill him. Because that's what I am and that's all I know how to do and I *can't escape it*. I

never will.” He buried his face in his arms. “I don’t deserve this,” he sobbed. “I don’t deserve any of this. They should have let me rot on Titan like the beast I am.”

“I don’t think you’re a beast,” FRIDAY said.

“You don’t know me.”

She said nothing again. Not that she didn’t have an answer: he was sure she did. But sometimes it was better to refrain if all that would come out of it was another argument, so silence it was. Maybe it was true what she said. Maybe it wasn’t.

“Why can’t I hide anything anymore?” he softly asked, lifting his head.

“There’s a saying here,” she told him after a short pause, “about the straw that broke the camel’s back. Have you heard it?”

“Is that what you think this is?”

“It could be.”

He was still trying not to break down in tears. “I can’t be like this,” he said, falling back into the chair with crossed arms: his raw hands brushed his shirt and he flinched. “It’s humiliating. What kind of a god am I?”

“A powerful one,” FRIDAY said. “Tony would tell you this. You’re not any less of a god for having emotions.”

“That’s only what I want to hear. It’s not true; you know it’s not.”

“It is, but I can’t convince you otherwise, can I?”

Not in a million years, although, knowing it wouldn’t do a thing, Loki didn’t bother. He pulled his hands from under his arms and inspected them again, feeling the marks like they were a bruise waiting to be reaffirmed: yes, they were still there, and yes, they still hurt very, very much. “Why am I talking to you?” he muttered. “You’re just an AI.”

FRIDAY hesitated, like his comment had offended her. Then she sighed—actually sighed; Loki nearly chuckled—and said, “Sometimes it helps to talk. Even if I am just an AI.”

“You’re probably recording this,” he said, laying his hands on the table. He stared them down; he tried to quantify the damage. Then he got up and started pacing. “You are, aren’t you?”

“I am,” FRIDAY admitted. “That’s how I work. I’ll delete it.”

The window looked very inviting.

“You better,” he said, frozen for an instant. Staring at the glass. He scratched at the marks even though they weren’t even dry and his mind was screaming at him not to: the first leap from nothing to everything felt like peeling them with salt. “I’ll know,” he hissed above his choking lungs telling him to cry. “Don’t tell him. Don’t you dare.”

“I won’t.”

The pain turned to a numb heat.

He turned and resumed his anxious circling, breaths heavy and irregular. He was

slipping—

sinking, dragged into the water, burning—

in blood and sweat, cold chains, a cold room—

(like

how he deserved—)

“I shouldn’t have bothered,” he said to the table. “Every time. Every fucking time.” His fingers trailed to the back of his neck before he even knew it, where they continued clawing at the skin. “*Horfðu á þig,*” he hissed, “*þú helvíti hálfviti.*” A sudden sob wracked him and he pressed harder, pressed until he felt fresh blood slicking his nails. “*Þvílík svívirðing sem þú ert. Þvílík bilun.*”

The rest was incoherently mumbled into his arms (and even he couldn’t tell what he was saying for he was too out of it to notice) but FRIDAY heard enough. Self-aimed insults, a quick cross-reference and translation told her: idiot, disgrace, failure. The usual.

Seconds became minutes, and the words became more specific, more familiar, more painful.

Monster; always. Murderer. Disappointment.

Inferior. Weak.

Liar.

He should have burned on the ship. Better: he should have died as a babe, lost, left alone in the crumbling remains of a once magnificent temple.

He never should have made it this far.

“*Fyrirgefðu,*” Loki said, rubbing the blood away with a wince. “I’m—” Sorry. I’m sorry. “I shouldn’t have—” He sniffed and raised his other hand. “I just wanted to know if he’s alright. I didn’t mean to spill my guts like this.”

FRIDAY didn’t respond: she faded quietly, without complaint or conflict, as Loki recast the shielding spell around the room.

In the hazy, blueish light, the blood seemed less like blood and more like any other nameless substance: if he tried, he could almost forget what it was. He took another shaky breath and tilted his hand and the blood trickled between his fingers, along the grooves of his knuckles and veins, down to the wrist bones. Red blood. Warm blood. There it was. As he lowered his hand, he tried to wake himself, but nothing happened. Nothing ever did. Always nothing. He collapsed on the couch and heaved himself into a horizontal position: his neck lit with fresh pain as he shifted around. But he deserved that anyway; he choked down a long and breathless whine, pulled one of the throw pillows from under the fur blanket, and clutched it so tightly against his chest his fingertips began to ache.

The pillow was probably staining, but he didn't care much. The crying returned. He let it come.

He wept there, alone, until he fell asleep... and, though the fear followed him, this was with rare, merciful ease.

Hours later, after a dreamless, restless slumber—a blink: a sudden sling from one time to another—there were healing wounds, a mild headache, and a pale, partially-dawned morning sky. The fog was so bad Loki wondered if he was still sleeping, but he remained there on the couch his face pressed into the cushions, unable to wake any further. Thus: the pain was real; the regret was real; the screams in his mind, he was fairly certain, were a figment of his tired, terrified soul, but they felt just the same.

He rolled onto his back, sucking in a breath as something caught, and reluctantly sat up.

His hands had faded to a shiny, scabbing red; his neck probably looked the same. They stung when he moved and felt hot to the touch, hot even when he drew back, and he realized that he hadn't cleaned them, and, subsequently, he hoped they weren't infected; that was the last thing he needed. His neck—oh. He could have checked in a mirror, just to be certain, but he didn't even want to think about it. No evidence, in any case: although there was an overwhelming part of him that wanted to leave them, he filled both hands with magic and began to heal everything. It was a slow mend, but it worked well enough and there was no pain or anything like it: just a gracious chill across his skin as the heat faded. When the scrapes were gone, he killed the spell, stuck his hands in his pockets

(in a coat that Tony had gotten for him)

—out of sight and out of mind, and lied right back down in the fur and did nothing. The couch was good for that.

He did nothing for another hour before he heard a knock on the door.

Tony's voice was soft, and so, so tired. "If you're still here... um... I just want you to know it's okay. I forgive you."

One second turned into two, and then five, and then ten. The words wouldn't form.

"If you want to maybe... come down for breakfast or something..." Pause: Tony pacing by the door. An apology to no one under his breath. "Please don't feel like you can't."

"I'm not hungry," Loki said.

“Okay,” Tony said. Though he might have insisted some other day and it sounded like he wanted to, there were no attempts: he simply turned and left.

Loki sank a little deeper into the blanket and kept doing nothing.

He certainly thought about trying something else after enough nothing; he thought about reading or maybe finishing the rest of his weapons’ to-sharpen list, one by one, just killing time until the evening so he didn’t feel entirely useless. And he thought that maybe he was completely overreacting and he hadn’t fucked everything up *that* badly and maybe he could just pretend nothing had happened and they could go right back to splendid allies and he didn’t have to guilt himself over ruining the little cover he’d gained. And he could have gone down after all and forced a bite he neither wanted nor deserved. He sure could have, but he didn’t. He wanted to sit there until dark and cry, and, to be honest, after the weight of everything hit him, he did: he started sobbing. Just like that. Just like he always did, deep, trembling sobs that made his chest and eyes ache and curled him fetal under the blanket. And of course it only took a little more and he was suddenly drowning—bruising—horrible and disgusting and worthless cut apart in cold chains

—right: this again

but he definitely deserved this:

and he did want this: it was destiny. Gloriously *stop it* even though the cuffs were digging into his wrists and there was this pressure in his throat and the feeling of a scream that wouldn’t come out and a burning, stinging itch beneath his skin *stop it stop it stop it* and he wished they would just kill him already. But it must be glorious; he deserved power, didn’t he? Because he wanted death and destruction. Because he liked to hurt people: he already knew that. Because he liked watching the fear in their eyes.

But he

—————he

he deserved this one: wasn’t this exactly how Tony had felt with a hand around his throat? It wasn’t fair to fight these memories. He deserved all the pain — and all the grief — and all the ————— and everything in between; right? He

He’d been good. He’d obeyed. He hadn’t done one thing wrong. Why were they

STOP IT! STOP IT STOP IT STOP IT STOP IT STOP IT STOP IT — — —

The fall tore his already bloody back into shreds and he wailed: it was very certainly and terribly and miserably a wail and he couldn’t find the pride to shut up anymore. He couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t do anything. He blocked out the words and pushed everything to the edge of his mind, praying he could heal his wounds and they wouldn’t notice and the respite would last a little longer. Not looking — not hearing — not feeling himself dragged to his feet again and pinned by arms stronger and crueller than his.

“Do you understand?” they asked. “Do you see now?”

He couldn’t remember what he said, only that it was a cheap lie and easy to discern. And he probably said please. And maybe sorry. And maybe sorry again. Please stop. Please please please

please please please please stop I promise I understand now and I know what I need to do and I can't be powerful if you don't let me heal first please — please — please —

But it was still a cheap lie.

Even cheaper than: “This is your purpose, see how you'll be better, see what you can do.” In a way it was true; wasn't it always? But of course he would never know quite see the footnotes until his very existence was woven into a spider's web of grief: “He wants you, godling. He's using you. He'll never leave you. He doesn't care about you. He never cared.”

Always this. Always

he breathed in, hands face everything deep in the silken fur shrouding him and an empty void where his mind should be, and tried to keep himself together. What was he thinking? He couldn't do this again. He couldn't stay here. He ———— fuck ———— fuck fuck fuck fuck stop it stop it stop it stop it stop it stop it stop it stop it why did this happen why did this

One, two, three, four, five. One, two, three, four, five. One, two, three, four, five. One, two, three, four, five. Inhale. Exhale.

PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE STOP

Why would he—

“Loki!”

“No!” he yelled back. Breathlessly screamed it, lungs still falling apart beneath the fur. Then he sat up in a panic and realized that, too, wasn't real. But it sure felt like it. Same voice. Same ire. Same terror.

He was officially out of it, and, realizing this really was getting worse, he couldn't do anything but cry even harder.

“Please just let me rest,” he whispered into the thin air. Like a fool.

Well, maybe someone would hear him someday. He lied back down and stared at the wall. It did go eventually, or at least it came close: he still felt that agonizing hopelessness, still felt so much like he was dreaming that when he looked up for a split second he couldn't even recognize the room, and he still couldn't breathe right. He still wanted to die of shame even though it was only ever him here. He wanted to burn—burn for real, set everything and himself on fire like what should have happened on the Statesman and what would have happened if he wasn't such a coward. He wished he could return there and try. But there was nothing else. No cuffs. No screams. No blood.

This shit again.

He rolled off the couch and hauled himself to the bathroom to finally see how awful he looked.

He knew it was bad when he couldn't recognize his reflection, either: this was definitely him, and it looked a lot like him and he knew for sure it *was* him because there was no one else it could be, but if he didn't know that then he never would have guessed. He even touched the glass, and his copy's fingertips, just to be certain. The connection refused.

Tony was lying. It wasn't okay. None of it was okay.

Loki finger-picked the knots out of his hair, slowly, shakily, dreamily, and cleaned his hands of whatever residue the healing spell hadn't affected, and, resigning himself to the pink-cheeked, watery-eyed look of someone who had recently cried, he padded in his socks to the lounge. This was a bad idea, he thought as he drifted through the hallway; this was a mistake, he shouldn't be here, Tony was a fucking liar—

but there was no judgment when he came in, cat-like, no ambushes and no screaming, and Tony simply looked up from his seat at one of the tables, fork halfway to his mouth, and gave him a sombre, reluctant smile. "Hi, Lokes."

He felt too big, he wanted to hide, he wanted to run—

"Hi."

—and Natasha was in the other corner and Pepper was right by Tony and he was so sure that they either knew or they'd find out and his stomach turned just thinking about it—

"I made gluten-free waffles," Tony said, that same bittersweet smile on his face (how could anyone hurt such a gentle soul?), and then, with a look like he wanted to wink jokingly but couldn't bring himself to, he added, "They don't taste gluten-free. I promise."

"Oh," Loki said. "That's... impressive."

"I've had practice."

This entire conversation felt like standing on the edge of a cliff.

He wasn't even hungry; what was he doing here? He wasn't one bit hungry. He didn't have an appetite and if he did, he would have ignored it anyway: someone like him shouldn't be eating. What he really ought to do was leave—just turn and walk out the door. Never come back again. The stairs were right there and it wasn't like anyone would stop him. It seemed rude to decline Tony, though, so after what felt like such a dreadfully long time standing in the doorway he dragged himself into the kitchen. Maybe something for the road: he found a fork and plate, took a single lukewarm waffle, and poured a very precise amount of syrup into all of the grooves. Done. That was definitely a healthy breakfast.

Perhaps even more appalling was that his first thought was whether or not the healthy breakfast was poisoned, although, quite conveniently for him, he decided that he could not give less of a damn if that were the case. Unless he did, which he didn't know. And apparently he really did in fact give a damn because he was not only terrified of that but of even eating here, at one of the tables here, with everyone else here who would love to kill him if the non-poisoned food didn't. Very slowly. Very painfully. And so he decided he wasn't hungry at all and did not want this. He did not want to be in this room and he did not want to be in this building and he did not want to be on this planet: he was supposed to be gone the day he got here.

But he did still have a waffle staring him down. He kind of had to deal with that first.

His instincts told him to sit at the couch, but that might have only looked even worse. He could also act like nothing had happened, move on, and sit by Tony and Pepper, with whom he would discuss the weather or something similarly inane, or perhaps even by Natasha, with whom he might attempt the same. He'd already apologized and Tony had somehow forgiven him (or else was doing an above-average job at lying) so that would be the best option. Fair enough—except that his heart

was still telling him to run, damn it all, stop putting it off and just let it all burn and *run*. And he truly wanted to.

“Loki?”

No no. No thank you. No. Fuck off forever, please. He steeled himself and glanced at Tony.

“Come here. I want to tell you something.”

???????????????????? NO??? WHAT. STOP TALKING.

Loki got his things and walked over. “Yes?” he asked, setting them on the table.

(Wrong. Why did he do that.)

“So New Asgard,” Tony said, “is almost legally a, uh, place. Very exciting. There’s just a few more papers left to sign and then... well, it’s not a country or anything—it’s actually a pretty small logistical detail—but it’s really, really good and it’ll help with a ton of stuff down the line. I thought you’d want to know.”

“Oh. That’s great. That’s wonderful news.”

Tony nodded. “I guess you haven’t seen it recently”—he sat a little straighter—“but that space was pretty much just a few buildings, a dock, and the rest was complete wilderness and you can can’t even tell anymore. Everything went so fast. It looks amazing.”

“Wow,” Loki said, wondering if he sounded as unenthusiastic as he thought he did.

There was no further conversation. None. Not a word. They just sat there, eating. Pepper sometimes looked at the phone in her lap, but that was all.

It was unbearable.

Not to seem like that person, Loki resigned to the fact that he was now stuck at this table with his shitty little waffle and took a shitty little bite. It was pretty good: it wasn’t too sweet nor not sweet enough and it lacked the chewy, brick-like consistency that pervaded so many non-gluten items. It was very good, to be honest, so he took another bite. Still not a healthy breakfast on its own, but at least he was eating: in his chronically passive opinion, whatever.

Something—the screech of chair against floor; shoulders up, a hitched breath—and then Natasha was gone and it was only the three of them there. Nope: this was fine. This was completely fine. Everything was fine. Loki pretended he hadn’t noticed and kept eating. It was beginning to feel like he was intruding, though, and, true or otherwise, like the silence was because of him. Tony was usually so talkative—and with Pepper? Even more so. To see him this way, just... quietly and politely picking at the remains of a scrambled egg, nothing else, not even joking, was the worst kind of hell. This wasn’t working.

Loki scooted closer to the edge of his seat, as discreetly as he could, and tried to determine a good time to leave. Minutes passed. There was none. Pepper tucked her phone in her pocket, excused herself, and exited downstairs. And then it was just the two of them.

Oh, gods. What was Tony thinking? What could he possibly be thinking? The last time they were alone together, there was—instincts and old impulses—old habits—a feeling so so so very like that one year: rage and blood and death and then they were skin-on-skin in all the wrong ways—and it was still so fresh in Loki’s memory he could almost feel the sandpaper-stubble beneath his fingers, the slow, even breaths betrayed by a terrified heart. What was it like for Tony?

“You know,” he finally said, “the fact that you’re feeling guilty about this says a lot about you.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

Tony looked like he was expecting that. He leaned back in his seat, thoughtful.

“Guilt,” Loki said, wishing he could laugh but unable to find the strength, “never stopped me. It doesn’t change what I’ve done. It doesn’t solve anything. It doesn’t make me better.”

“It makes you better than someone who doesn’t feel guilt at all,” Tony said.

“So if I had killed you and then felt guilt that would make it right?”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“Why do you keep trying to justify my actions?”

Tony thought about it again. Not like he didn’t know what to say or how to say it; mostly he seemed to be coming to terms with the answer. “Because I’ve done the same with everyone else,” he said, “and it’s not fair to stop at you. You deserve the same chances we all give each other over and over again and... I have a responsibility to try.”

“But you don’t know me,” Loki said. “I’m not part of the team.”

“You’re a team member’s brother,” Tony said.

“Adopted.”

“And a friend.”

“I’m no one’s friend.”

“Not even mine?”

“Friends don’t try to kill each other.”

Yeah, tell that to the team. Tony sighed. “You know Bucky?” he said, leaning on a hand. “I have a story I want to tell you. Long one, but I’ll try to keep it short.”

“I’m not him! Why?”

“No, I promise it’s relevant. Just hear me out. It was a lot like you, actually. Basically, these people took him and brainwashed him into a mindless super-assassin and he did all sorts of horrible stuff he couldn’t control. Awful, terrible stuff. Even after everything wore off he still didn’t know how to stop. Instincts! It fucked him up. Years after getting out, he’s still not back to what he was and he was scared to help with everything in case he freaks out and loses it again. Last time it came up he said he wants someone to kill him if he does. Well—that’s a lot, isn’t it? You can’t even tell a lot of

the time but then you talk to the people who are with him more often, y'know, Thor and the rest of Asgard and the folks over in Wakanda and—that part's not relevant, look, you get it, right? Sorry, I ramble when I'm nervous"—Tony coughed and tried to catch his breath—"I mean, I ramble in general, it kind of makes it sound like I know what I'm talking about even if I don't but... um. Well, turns out during all of this he killed my parents. And I'm not okay. I think about it every time I look at him. But a few years down the road I bump into you again and I see all this shit going on and I think, okay, I guess things are different and if I'm giving you a second chance then I should be giving him a second chance too because he's changed. I didn't want to but I tried anyway. See"—Tony laughed to hide that he was struggling not to cry—"this isn't my first rodeo."

"But Bucky has changed," Loki said with hardly a blink. "He took his second chance and he did something good with it."

"So have you!" Tony argued. "You didn't have to stay this long. You didn't have to play nice, but you tried."

"I tried because I was recovering. Do you think I could have defended myself in that state? I tried because I would be safer if I didn't provoke anyone. I tried because it was a strategy."

Tony laughed. "A strategy! Hell of a strategy, huh? Sure fooled me."

"I mean it," Loki thinly said. "I don't make friends, Tony. I make plans. If I had ever been your friend I would have been able to hold back."

"You were drunk," Tony said.

"I wasn't drunk when I tried to strangle you."

"But you didn't. You were only threatening to strangle me."

"And if you had answered wrong, I would have."

"Did you hope I would answer wrong?"

"I *was* in control."

Tony tried not to react, but something wavered in his eyes.

"I wasn't mindless," Loki said. "They didn't break me completely. They didn't need to. I knew what I was doing. I remember it all. And I enjoyed it."

Something else wavered too. Tony didn't say anything, though.

"I felt every kill," Loki softly said. "Each one. It felt right. It felt so right. I welcomed the chaos like an old friend. No one made me. I always had it in me. It's in my blood to kill."

Tony still didn't speak. Didn't even move: he just sat, stone-faced, a faint quiver to his eyes' sheen like he was holding back tears, and listened.

"I don't deserve a second chance. Look at me. Look at what I did with it. Don't waste your kindness. You'll only disappoint yourself."

Tony leaned on his other hand. “We had some good times together,” he said with a sad smile. “I don’t think it was all wasted.”

“What happens when I snap again?”

A long time passed.

“My closest friends have all tried to kill me,” Tony said. Then he shrugged. “Maybe not everyone, but most of them. Whatever.”

It wasn’t just whatever: that innocent terror in his eyes hadn’t faded one bit. It was so far from whatever.

The cold died a little and Loki felt his brows go up in looming tears, felt his throat tighten, and he said, “I’m sorry.” Always that: I’m sorry. There was nothing else left. “I’m sorry I’m like this. I’m sorry I did all that.”

He was lying, his conscience screamed. Steve Rogers was right. They were all right. He deserved to have

“I know,” Tony said.

burned, why didn’t he

“You don’t know anything,” Loki said in response, and Tony sighed.

“Look at me. *You* look at me. I’ll keep giving you chances. I don’t care what you think: you deserve them. You deserve so much for what you did for us and what’s happened to you.”

Tony stopped, and there was the briefest instant where Loki knew he was remembering the previous night again. Where they were both remembering it. That one instant, as short as it lasted, felt longer than anything.

“I don’t go down that easy,” Tony said. “It takes more than a threat to break me these days.”

Confident words didn’t hide everything else. The flit of his lower lip. The steady, unnaturally maintained pace of his breaths. The tension.

“Look at me, Loki.”

He did.

“You’re on edge,” Tony said. “Constantly. You’re always watching for danger. I pushed you twice. You acted out twice. Of course you fight without thinking: they’re called instincts, and yours are so trained to react to the smallest things that you can’t help it. I can’t blame you for something like that.”

“Do you still believe the invasion wasn’t my fault?”

Tony, perhaps having expected it but nonetheless a little off guard, had to take a moment.

“Do you really think,” Loki said, struggling to steady his voice, “I didn’t want that? Do you think it ever would have gone as far as it did if I didn’t already crave it on every level? I always come back

here. I always will. I am vile and angry at heart and I feel it in everything that I've ever done and if you've somehow convinced yourself otherwise, then... I'm sorry. I can't change."

"Are you vile and angry at heart?" Tony said, folding his hands in front of him, with a look like there was much, much more he wanted to say but he didn't know if he should. "Or... is that just how you protect yourself?"

Tony... no.

It wasn't like he would accept any argument; he clearly believed it and planned on taking the idealistic route against every obvious rationalization, which was that sometimes people were simply born evil. They didn't have excuses and they didn't have motives and they didn't have outside forces pushing them no matter how much they played it up or how much they wanted it to be the case: that was just their nature. And if anyone could ever be born evil, it was the frost giant in the room. Maybe after enough attempts on his life Tony would come around.

"I have things I want too," he said, "and it takes a lot of effort to hold back."

"But you do," Loki said.

"And so do you. I see a lot in you that you've been working hard on."

"You see lies."

"I see a good person who's convinced himself it's not true."

"You see a liar."

"Then I'm a liar too."

Loki thought about getting up for some of the coffee.

"I do have a question," Tony said. "I remember a while back when we were doing tests on that sceptre I held it a few times and it always gave me this weird... high. Like tunnel vision. Everything in the back of my mind was suddenly all I could think about. All the good things, but all the bad things too. Habits. Impulses. Ideas. Everything I don't act on. If I'd wanted to kill someone in that moment, I would have. What did you feel?"

"Nothing," Loki said.

"Did you notice it felt kind of buzzy? It had this, like, electric charge or something."

"No one made me, Tony. Not Thanos. Not Asgard. Not the torture. Not the sceptre. Nothing. I made myself."

"Loki," he softly said.

"It was already in me!" Loki yelled. "And I'm sorry I led you on like this. All of it was me and I shouldn't have told you anything else."

"Do you understand that... no matter how you put this, there's an element of duress?"

"That's not an excuse! I could have held back."

“I don’t think you could have.”

“No. Not everything can be explained away. Not everything can be justified. Stop.”

Tony tried to find another clever response.

“What will it take to make you hate me?” Loki asked.

“Oh, you’re making me think now,” Tony said, forcing a smile. “Hm. Kill my friends and family? Necromance my dad back to life and have him haunt me? I don’t know. Why? Do you want me to hate you?”

Yes. He deserved it.

“Loki.”

He looked at the floor.

“I can’t do that,” Tony softly said. “I’m sorry.”

“Alright,” Loki muttered.

He left before Tony could continue the conversation, stopping just to add his fork and plate to the dishwasher and then again as a jab of dizziness floated over him. Tap, tap, tap: toes on that invisible tightrope, fingers clawing restlessly at his side, waiting, poised, like he always did. No attempts to follow were made; he checked, every two or three or so seconds, through those same uneasy, reflexive looks over his shoulder. Mindlessly. Breathlessly. He could never be sure.

He couldn’t say when or why; he was perched there in his room for eternity and a day, picking his knuckles raw before the window and trying to decide if he should vanish. He only knew that at some point, without really meaning to or wanting to, he was in the bathroom, on his knees, with his eyes shut tight to tears purging what little he’d eaten.

This again.

He never did leave; he mostly lost the strength after that and spent the next few hours with his face in the tiles, trying to stop breathing. Dying from the inside. Counting everything wrong with him: the room was long gone beneath the haze and that was all he had anymore. Shame, an empty void of time where he felt like his younger self, where he hated everything he was and everything he’d done, where he just wanted to erase himself from this reality. Anger buried deep in his chest, threatening to burn him alive. Utter sickness of life and everything. Terror.

Terror, terror, terror, terror, terror, terror, terror, terror, terror, terror, terror, terror.

Run and don’t look back; run before they catch you.

That. Always.

There was still at least a part of him that knew he was spiralling, but it didn’t matter. He picked himself up off the floor and checked his knives. Checked them again. Walked out and checked each

individual ward around the room. Checked whether he could teleport: no, he couldn't. And then he panicked and tried to calm himself and

//// they would come for him, chain him up, they

he breathed in sharply, one, two, three, breathed out, one, two, three, four, five, in once more, a little less hurriedly, a little slower and heavier, out, in, squeezed his hands together and tried to keep his thoughts clear, but why

/// he was unsafe unsafe unsafe—

and he breathed in sharply, one, two, three, breathed out, one, two, three, four, five, in once more, a little less hurriedly, a little slower and heavier, out, in, and tried to keep his thoughts clear, but

how

could he be calm here? Surrounded by people he still only trusted to kill him, too weak to manage a simple, life-saving spell, too dazed to plan his safety—how could he be calm? Definitely not: he shouldn't be. So he took another deep breath and tried to clear his head and tried warping again, one side of the room to the other, and wound up, successfully, in the kitchen.

His nose was bleeding.

No.

No no no.

Not now. Not now, please

no—

He smeared the blood on a knuckle, held his finger there for a moment, thinking this was bad, this was bad, this was bad, they would get him like this, so weak, so powerless (what was he talking about? He wasn't—was he?) ————— Invisibility? He tried: there was that telltale shift and prick of magic along his spine, but he had to check. He crept back into the bathroom and watched his reflection, the way it swam and stuttered out of existence almost imperceptibly when he moved. Adjusting to his eyes and his eyes only. Of course: if he couldn't run, he could at least hide. Right?

His nose was still bleeding and he was sheet-white. He looked like a mess.

There was another part of him that wanted to lock himself inside and sit, stay, and continue doing nothing within this illusion of safety. Maybe try, as usual, to endure more than a few drops of water on his skin—maybe even succeed. The other part still wanted to run. So he fixed his clothes (those comfortable but easily penetrated ordinary clothes that he was so tempted to replace) and put his boots on, walked out, still invisible, and padded upstairs to the roof. He needed air.

There was a cool breeze when he opened the door and the sky was pink and grey. The compound looked smaller from here; he could walk the building's entire length in a minute or two. Off in the distance, barely audible, sirens droned.

He wandered to the far end of the roof and sat.

One, two, three, four, five. One, two, three, four, five.

He was safe here. They would not hurt him. Nothing was burning.

The streetlights were just turning on, and for a time, as the sky went from dusty rose to a cold, washed-out blue, they were all Loki acknowledged. This silence and these deep city colours and that chill on his skin soothed him, and though the clouds in his mind didn't fade, though he felt as tense as before, there was some peace to be found.

He closed his eyes. Everything was moving too quickly.

For fear of what he knew would happen, for that hatred and disgust that he knew would keep him from a comfortable meal if he tried, he skipped dinner. When it looked to be around six, all he did was choke down what little hunger he felt, stand and stretch, and clumsily, tiredly tiptoe back to the stairwell, down that floor and the next, and straight to the main entrance. There, he checked for a thousandth time that he was still invisible, looked once over his shoulder, and then quietly walked out.

He went to the dock and stood there, alone, looking at nothing. The panic settled, but the fear stayed—that wide, constant pressure in his mind, thoughts and feelings telling him that he couldn't rest, that he needed to hurry, that he was running out of time. Even after a long minute of calm, deep breaths, lost focus, empty staring at the fluorescent-tinted waters, it didn't go. This, all of this, all of that constant stress and self-loathing picking at him, was moving too quickly. It was exhausting.

He wandered back from the dock, skirting the main building and all its little walkways and outposts under the evening air, and continued into the park perimeter: down the central drive, past each tree and shrub and steel fence, to the first sidewalk just listening to the muted echoes of cars and conversations around him. After a while, that was all there was. Every now and then, when that fear in his chest spiked again and he began to feel too naked, too vulnerable, he still checked his visibility in the nearest reflective surface. He still saw that same offness to his appearance every time, without fail, and everyone he passed seemed harmless and he swore he couldn't be found, anyway, not here, not now, but he still maintained those regular glances at his blind spots. If he tried not to then the panic started creeping in, and so he didn't: every two or three or four seconds, as usual, he looked. Eventually, it became automatic.

He slipped into a courtyard and sat in the nearest bench. The city sounds seemed quieter, like a door had been closed on them, and the grass smelled of fresh dew. He could see the moon from here, fogged up by all the smoke and light.

One, two, three, four, five. Hold. One, two, three, four, five.

He was tired. Tired and... afraid.

Last night's guilt was still nagging him—this too-familiar sensation that always superseded whatever gutsy apathy that should have and often did follow a less-than-moral activity. He had murdered and been fine. He had done everything there was to do and been fine. He was never one for these sorts of emotions; he let them burn before they could do any harm and for most of his life, that had worked. That was how he got by: this chaotic lack of permanence, lack of concern for any of his consequences, lack of any long-term negativity. He killed such worries off before they killed him. It was easier. These things always happened and they never bothered him. Why, then, did he hate himself so much? Was it really as FRIDAY had said?

He leaned back. One, two, three, four, five. One, two, three, four, five. Clothes on his skin. Wet grass and smog. Traffic. Nothing was burning.

He stood after some time, how long, he didn't know, and tiptoed out into the main streets once more, and kept walking for hours.

It was close to midnight when Loki started towards the compound and a little past when he glanced at the clock in the foyer. If he was hungry, he didn't care; he hoped he was tired enough to sleep and made for the dorms. Knowing he was too much of a coward to even leave. Looking too frequently behind him. Blanking again. Though he wasn't cold, no, never, he found himself shivering slightly.

The lights were on in Tony's workshop and the door was open a crack.

Even considering it only ended with a stab of fear in his gut and an absolutely breathless strangled pause: why the hell should he? What for? But, perhaps even more afraid of walking away, he shed his invisibility and slowly opened the door and walked in. It wasn't like he had anything better to do.

Tony didn't look up. "Hey," he said. "Where've you been?"

"Out," Loki said. He strolled to the desk and watched as Tony tried, apparently, to restore an unidentifiable tangle of chips and wires in front of him. "Isn't it late?"

"Time is a construct."

There was a steaming mug of coffee by one of the monitors and the remnants of something sweet; by the looks of it Tony had no plans on sleeping tonight. Loki knew it was nothing recent but wondered if he had provoked it. And then he wondered if he was why it had become a problem in the first place and asked, "Am I a bad person?"

Tony looked up, the faintest gleam of surprise in his eyes, and said, "No. No, of course not."

(he's lying)

"I asked Peter once," Loki said, "and he told me the same thing. But that's not true, is it? Look at me. Really look at me."

And Tony did, and between their tired eye contact, so slowly and gently, that buried emotion changed to old, familiar terror. Don't make me, Loki could almost hear him saying; please go away, please, I'm still scared, I swear that's just me, you're still a good person, you have never been bad, just believe me. There was only silence, though: his throat twitched like he wanted to say it, like he was about to, but there was nothing.

Loki stepped away and sat on one of the surrounding tables.

"You're not a bad person," Tony said, toeing the chair around to face him. "You're not. Please don't say that. You do what you need to. That doesn't make you bad."

(and all that blood on your hands?)

“Do I need to threaten you again?”

new york and—

“No. No, please don’t.”

the statesman and—

“See? What kind of monster does that?”

everything else—

“You’re not a monster.”

What the fuck does he know?

“I shouldn’t have asked,” Loki muttered, stepping off the table. “I’m sorry.” He turned to leave.

“Stop. Listen to me.” Tony stood. “How do I convince you?”

“You don’t,” Loki said, and, after a last, “Goodnight, Tony; we’ll talk tomorrow if you truly want to,” he walked out and closed the door behind him.

Chapter End Notes

English teachers: messing with text visuals isn't a writing method

Me: [winks at the camera]

In all seriousness, though, that hopefully added to the chapter. I wrote a good chunk of this a recent while back in the midst of a Very Horrible Week (Or Two) and just like... well, something about garbage thoughts and wanting to convey that whole scatteredness without the constraints of prose or grammar or whatever. It comes easier than proper sentences and I feel like applied tastefully, it makes for a pretty neat read. Experimentation is important and we'd never have had a lot of great books if we kept prescribing to everything.

Friðþæging (Atonement)

Chapter Summary

There's nothing left.

Chapter Notes

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

The morning was cold and empty. The world still existed. Everything was still there: the hunger, the dread, the exhaustion. No memory of a dream. No plans for the day. Nothing. Maybe a headache, but that was typical. Same old. It was disappointing, to be honest, and, too exhausted to even get up, Loki pulled the covers back over his head and pretended he wasn't alive.

It wasn't like he was missing out: what did he ever even do all day? And sleepless rest was still rest if he couldn't find a way to fall asleep again. His head was killing him, too; he couldn't imagine getting anything done like this. So why didn't he just... stay here? What was so wrong about taking some time off? Just once. He wholly considered it: he had no idea how long he was half-awake there, ten minutes or two, three, four hours, only that it was for terribly, terribly long. Although the sun creeping over the horizon might have meant something, he wasn't watching closely enough to know and he couldn't be bothered to. It didn't matter. Just once. Just once; why not stay?

Still, eventually, he decided against it.

He got up and then sat straight back down on the bed, nauseous.

This shit again. Oh, gods. He waited. Listened to his screaming heartbeat. Roaring ears. Steady; he breathed in and, clutching the edge of the mattress with a hand, he slowly stood again and managed not to die. And now for a plan, which he didn't have, and wondering why he even bothered knowing he had no reason to be up.

Breakfast?

He was hungry enough; days upon days of not eating were starting to stack painfully against him and it would only get worse from here. The dizzy weakness might go and, while he was at it, maybe he'd come up with something to pass the time. Or he might also get some coffee to top it off and reassess his, quote, sleeping patterns. But then he remembered everything he had done—all of it—and decided he shouldn't. Under most circumstances this would be a cause for worry because he knew himself and he knew how that went, that for all those three, four, eight thousand times he had suffered through such hell it was always the same: a meal skipped here, another one there, throw one up, and then he was suddenly worn to skin and bone and living off magic. Stop, that past experience said; stop now before you can't. But he didn't reconsider. Why should he?

No breakfast it was, then: he checked the room was locked, checked again, and then went to see if he could get through his last untouched novel. Same old. Turned out he couldn't read, though, as he had feared; it was hard to keep his eyes open and the words danced on the paper and when he

was taking up so much space. Can't be trusted with a glass jar? Here: handle some knives while contemplating time's slow and miserable crawl. Brilliant plan! Everything that can go wrong will go wrong. Don't do this. Don't try. But there was no sense; there had never been. It was one of those eternal truths about him. And so it was very like him to completely ignore his own advice and proceed anyway.

He wished he had something else to do, but it was only that: a wish. It was this or return to bed.

At least he was being productive, though.

He stared down the dagger. It was a good one; the blade was thin and smooth and the handle, etched cherry with two dips moulded to his pointer and middle finger, was sturdy despite plentiful wears. None of it looked particularly dull, but eyes lied, so he flipped the dagger into a better grip and dragged it across the back of his hand. Nothing. He sharpened it and tried again: a thin line of red appeared and began to bleed. Good enough, wasn't it? Anyone who crossed him would be dead before they could blink. This worked. Just to be sure, though, he tried again. Same thing; he healed his hand of both cuts. Then, mostly content, he sent the dagger away, crossed it off the mental list, and took out another.

At least he was being productive.

At least.

Slowly, he continued through the list. One by one. Into the afternoon. Into the evening. It was automatic; he didn't notice the time passing, nor how many he went through—and he did go through most of them. There was only the thin drone of the spell and the emerald sparks against him as he picked away at the blades. No danger. No duties. Nothing. He mostly just realized how ridiculous lugging around so many knives was and wondered why he was hoarding them, but he supposed it wasn't that bad: it meant he got to put off maintenance for years until he needed something conveniently mindless to do. He thought about why he was here and why he was still here. The ship. The last-minute plans. The Avengers. All the large and small bits along the way: what remained of Asgard, what would become of him, and Tony. Always Tony.

He thought about everything, and then he stopped. He put the knife away and tried to breathe.

He shuddered, and, closing his eyes, he tried to breathe.

He was dying.

Gently, in a way that he knew would take him months and even years if he held on tightly enough, he was dying. Magic wouldn't hold him forever; eventually, he would start burning through it faster than it could replenish itself. And this wasn't a good way to stay alive. This way hurt. He hated this way. It would only get worse once externally drawn magic no longer sufficed and his body began sacrificing its internal reserves and by the time he slipped into something resembling an exhaustion coma it wouldn't be sparing him of much more. There wasn't a single more horrid way to go that he could possibly think of than total magical drainage and he knew by all of his close calls that he didn't want this: he needed something, anything, even just a bit very soon because he really, really, really didn't want to go through that ever again. He still didn't want to eat, but he could have some water, at least, couldn't he? If—if!—he could get it out of the tap without bursting into tears like—like the useless wreck he was—

the—

Damn it.

He stumbled to his feet and went back to the kitchen. He found a cup and brought it to the sink, and he stood there for what felt like a solid minute, heart pounding, chest hot, counting one, two, three, four, five. Just some water. Just some stupid—breathe—just some water: he took a deep breath, released it, and then turned the tap full-strength, held the cup underneath, thinking

this is taking too long, this is taking too long, stop stop stop stop stop please STOP—

He shut the water off and tried to breathe.

What are you scared of?

Nothing.

What, boy?

He stared into the cup.

Nothing?

Nothing; he drank the water in one long go and then set the cup on the counter. Nothing.

“Did you forget, boy?”

Forget? The—the—he swallowed emptily and closed his eyes. Nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing

“Don’t lie to me.”

One, two, three, four, five. One, two, three, four, five.

—the universe chose you. Your strength is unrealized; your destiny remains unfulfilled. You bear a glorious purpose, but you are too blind to see. You turn down revenge for what? You smother your rage for what? Are you not a god? Do you not deserve more?

You should have burned on that starship, boy.

He took a trembling breath and walked out. Not this shit again. No. No no no no no no no—he was still thirsty?—no no no no no no no no ——— no; he couldn’t be standing his legs hurt from standing so long he shouldn’t be standing this long he needed to

Sit.

He did. Right there on the floor at the foot of his bed with his knees up and the steel bedframe digging into his shoulders. Tried to breathe above it all. Cold chains. Colder silence. Sunset-coloured skin. His throat eating itself beneath the screams. His mind coming apart. This—water?—this was easier, wasn’t it?—easier than knives and broken bones—this white-hot searing him from the inside out to only a fleeting blush in its wake. No marks. Nothing; the pain died with him. Old blood ran from his skin. Old dirt. Sweat. He watched it leave. Why

He locked his hands together, squeezing them until the knuckles went white, and leaned farther into the bedframe. Not this. Please

One, two, three, four, five, one, two, three, four, five, one—

one two three four five—

one—

two, three, four—

“Get up.”

What? No. He

“Get up!” they growled, dragging

lost the numbers lost track of his breaths and wrapped his arms around himself, pushing down on his ribs like it might keep him safe, but there was nothing. “Stop,” he whispered, teary. Intention? “Don’t hurt me.” Or maybe desperation; was he keeping track? Was he—“Don’t hurt me. Don’t hurt me. I’ve been good. Please. Please—”

You arrogant! and ungrateful

filthy lying—

He curled into himself and began to weep.

His wrists.

“Stop.” Magic in the words. Magic he was running out of. Magic he could barely even control anymore, but it didn’t matter. Stop. Stop it. Stop it stop it stop it stop it stop it. “Not now,” he said, knees muffling the sound. “Leave me alone.”

Was it that? That stupid little cup of water. He didn’t even splash it: must have been the anticipation alone of that familiar sound sending him into another episode—and was that what this was? Just an episode? Was it just routine that he felt

Crack!

like a wall crumbling around his life and a veil lifted from all of that scattered happiness masking everything—*everything*—that all circled back to—that time on Jötunheim: hands that weren’t his, skin that wasn’t his, fear, disgust, clawing his bones out; falling, burning, bleeding, losing his mind, almost losing it again in a cell (insult to injury); old horrors and the feeling that he was worthless and he’d never mean anything and wanting to die and wanting to rot and always always always Asgard and

all these old horrors

all of them that he had joked about on Sakaar (and that still felt so close) because they hadn’t seemed real, because they’d been a distant nightmare, because he’d recovered and moved on and now he was free from all the pain and betrayal and disappointing and disappointment except no he wasn’t, no, he wasn’t—nothing had ever gone, had it? Hadn’t he known it once? That this—this! All this—had merely sunk to the bottom of his mind and lain itself dormant, festering slowly, quietly, and now, here he was: here was everything.

Weep, little god; there are no miracles left for you. The universe won't save you this time.

By the time he calmed himself, his itchy wrists were raw from scratching them.

And there was so, so much shame. And guilt. All of it.

This again.

He let his knees fall and squinted at the window. How long until this happened again? One hour? A day? If this—this: he didn't even know what to call it—if it was like everything else, it would have, should have tapered off eventually, but when? Would it really? Sure, it tapered, but it always took parts of him; he never came back completely from these things and he never had all those millions of times they'd graced him. He broke. Someday, there would simply be nothing left.

This again; he leaned his head back and stared at the ceiling. Same, same old and it would only ever get worse. Damn it.

Not knowing what else to do, he formed another knife and held it up. The blade was so smooth and well-polished that his reflection was like a mirror's: he frowned back at it. He looked paler than usual. A bit hollow. His eyes were still glossy and red and part of his hair had come loose and stuck to his wet cheek. He turned it again to read the runes along its spine. "Give me the strength to win my battles" on one side; "May all who die by this blade find Valhalla" on the other.

He *was* lying: it was never just about maintenance just as it was never just about glory.

Yeah. This again. He deserved it.

He tapped his shirt with his free hand, warping it to the floor with a thump. Underneath, he looked the same as ever: pale, nearly translucent skin, no blemishes, no hair, nothing. But, and he realized this jarringly if a little belatedly, the muscle had softened and he could almost—*almost*—see his ribs. Ah. Almost. Almost was not quite. He already knew he could survive worse.

How many times can a broken thing break?

"Let's see, shall we?" he murmured.

The blade wasn't as sharp as he'd expected: he had to push hard as he dragged it against his abdomen, and even then, he didn't draw blood—only uncomfortable friction as he failed to break the skin. He thinned the edge and tried again; a thick red line bubbled up behind it and began to run. It rolled heavily down his stomach, soaking into the waist of his pants and leaving a dark, wet patch in the fabric. No sign of clotting, but it didn't really matter: he'd heal it later. He was fine for now.

Slowly, he made another slice.

Then another.

And another.

He was gentle, but as the cuts grew in number and the unbloodied spaces vanished, he couldn't help but get a little reckless. They got deeper. Wider. He started crying again; his hand was unsteady beneath the tears and the pain faded. No fear. No screams. Nothing—till he knocked a wrong cut loose and it peeled a bit and he thought of that time and a thousand like it

this—

He tightened his grip on the knife and squeezed his eyes shut. No—no—no. It was him now. It wasn't the same. It wasn't the *same*. Not that again—shut up and stop and just please—please—he suddenly dropped the knife.

Ears ringing. Vision red. Leaning back to try and keep himself awake. His heart pounding. He couldn't breathe. He—

... was dying.

Not a soft, months-or-years death: he was dying for real. He stared down at himself, foggy-eyed and a sob in his throat, and bit back the terror long enough to think. Most of them were still bleeding; his entire midsection was drenched with red, as were his pants and the surrounding floor. More than a few weren't clotting whatsoever and he knew they would be too much if he let them. His magic was already burning up and he was barely awake without this: this was all too much and if the blood loss didn't get him first, depletion would. If he healed himself now he'd pass out regardless, but he'd live.

He raised his hand, half-filled it with magic, and then... stopped.

... Well. Last-minute decisions always were so like him.

His hand remained up for what seemed like forever, shaking slightly, glittering with that emerald energy. He looked over the damage as best as he could with his faltering, fuzzy gaze, and then sighed and killed the spell. There was nothing: just a resigned calm as the blood continued seeping out of him. Nothing at all. He took the knife, rested his hands in his lap, and let himself go slack. Easy. He wasn't afraid. Maybe that was enough; maybe if he mustered some courage at the end, he'd have a place to go. Maybe not. He didn't even care. The trembles eased a little. He managed to slow his breathing. His eyelids drooped. No panic. No panic at all. Nothing. This wasn't so bad.

He almost didn't hear the knock on the door.

That old exhaustion and bitter sympathy he remembered hadn't gone: "There's dinner," Tony gently said. "Good dinner. Would you come try some? Please."

fuck fuck fuck fuck SHIT

Loki sat straight up, eyes wide. What (that promise that ??? oh gods something about ??? talking ??? and—) what the fuck was he doing was he absolutely insane ?????????????????? he ——— *NO NEVER MIND THAT YOU* (one, two, three, four—) *picked the wrong time you should have waited should have left should have w*

He sniffed and wiped the tears from his eyes. "Give me a minute," he somehow said, steadying his voice as best as he could.

Footsteps sounded, only to stop a few seconds later. They picked up again back towards the door. "You good?"

He—

"Fine."

couldn't breathe he couldn't breathe oh gods he was—

“Oh. I just thought you sounded kind of...”

He broke into a coughing fit.

“Loki?”

“I’m—fine.”

“Loki.”

“I said I’d come down in a minute! Leave me alone.”

“Open the door.”

~~no no~~

“Please.”

No, definitely: clean the blood, leave, never come back here again. Easy. Clean the blood and leave right now ——— clean the blood and leave. Clean the blood. “Go away,” he muttered above another sob.

Something rattled. “Are you naked right now?”

“What? No! Tony—”

The lock clicked loose.

He snapped around to look over the footboard. “... Walk away.”

Bang: the multitool fell from Tony’s hands and chipped the floor.

“Close the door,” Loki growled, “and walk away.”

That look.

That—

(that it hit him so suddenly and he couldn’t fight it this time: he started coughing and kept coughing, blood sweat tears magic and all that—that——)

“Hey, look at me—look at me, Loki—”

He raised the knife with a snarl.

“You didn’t—”

“Get out!”

“Stop.”

He tried to nick Tony but couldn’t reach.

“Look at me. Tell me—”

“Get out of my room!”

Tony grabbed his wrist; the knife stayed. “How much blood did you lose?”

“Enough,” Loki growled. He saw himself in the blade. Wet cheeks. Green eyes. Rage to kill.

“Can you heal yourself?”

“You can’t make me.”

“Okay, cool.” Tony made to stand with a hand still tight around Loki’s wrist. “I’m getting help.”

“No!” Loki shrieked, jerking out of the grip. “No. No, don’t. Don’t let anyone else see me like this. Please. Please please please please please don’t.”

Tony stopped. He sat back down; the blood was soaking into his clothes, but he didn’t seem to care much. He tried to find the words. “Talk to me,” he softly said. “Why would you do this?”

Why not? Why the hell not? No more fear—no more loss—no more wandering around looking for something to fill every single hour and no paradoxes; no thirst that couldn’t be solved and no hunger that shouldn’t be and no more screaming and no pity—and—and——and——

“Look, why don’t you clean yourself up and we can go over it?”

“I don’t want to go over it! Because all that’s going to do is—”

“Put the knife down.”

“—is—you’re going to look at me and you’re going to start pitying me again and I don’t *want* you to pity me! I don’t want you to—”

“Put the knife down.”

“Why should I?” Loki yelled. “I know you want me dead! I know you’re scared of me. You never wanted me here.”

“You don’t know a thing about me,” Tony said. “Put the knife down. And heal yourself. Now.”

No.

“Did you think this through? Did you think that I’d be the one to find you? I don’t want you dead. I don’t want anyone here dead. I never would have forgiven myself.”

Loki stared at his hands. The knife. The blood.

“I want to see you heal yourself,” Tony said. “Now.”

No. Please no. Leave. Leave now. Please.

—and why did it sound so, so, so angry? Please stop; it didn’t need to be like that. Lower your voice a bit. Please. The room was already going and his ears were ringing again. Words. Static.

Something else. He breathed in, eyes on the blade's muted reflection of the ceiling, and breathed out. Easy; he could do this. What was he doing?

Tony slapped him.

"Ow." Loki raised a hand to his cheek.

"I'm waiting," Tony said.

"I'll get to it."

"No. Now. Right now."

He didn't want to! He didn't *want* to. He was so close; why couldn't Tony just leave so they could be done with it? Please.

"Loki."

He heaved another long, shaky breath and set the knife in his lap. No thoughts. Nothing. It all took him so achingly long, drawing on focus and energy that wouldn't come, that he almost expected it to fail—that the magic would fizzle out and he'd have no choice but to die here, incapable of anything else. Tony couldn't blame him for that, could he? If nothing happened—if—he could pass it off as an accident, as "I can't" rather than "I won't" and then—then—right? He could do that. But he still pressed his hands to his bloody stomach and somehow maintained the spell above the tears. This one hurt for sure: every part of him was fighting against the additional exertion. The cold sweat beneath his fingers stung and the glow around the edges kept flickering and the worst parts were pulling painfully under the pressure. His throat burned. His lungs. He felt like throwing up. It took too long: five seconds, ten, fifteen, twenty, twenty-five.

The spell died before he could fully smooth the edges and he collapsed into Tony's arms.

"Hey," Tony said, propping him up with a grunt. "Stay with me."

"Close the door," Loki managed above another tremor. His mouth tasted like burnt iron; he leaned on the bedframe and tried to breathe. "Please."

The door was open no more than a crack, but Tony stood regardless: he checked the halls, carefully shut it, and then returned to that little spot before the foot of the bed. There were no words. Nothing—just ragged breaths and stifled tears. Deathly silence. Seconds turned to minutes and the minutes turned to more and the feeling of dying lifted and they still didn't say anything. Tony was patient, though.

"He... never wanted me," Loki softly said.

Tony's eyebrows raised. "Your..."

"I don't want to call him a father."

Looked like Tony already knew how that went: he sighed and nodded and then scooted over to sit a little more comfortably beside him. "Do you think that's true?"

"It sure felt like it," Loki said. "I think he was happy the last time I tried this. Don't tell me it wasn't like that: you weren't there. He didn't try to stop me. He didn't even blink."

“Do you want to talk about him?”

“There’s nothing else to say. He tried his best. It’s not his fault I turned out like this.”

Tony leaned back. “You know,” he said, “good people can still be abusive.”

Oh, damn it. Not this shit again.

“You can’t talk me out of this,” Loki thinly said, pretending he hadn’t heard.

“I can try,” Tony said. “And if I fail, I fail. But I will try.”

Loki watched the ceiling. The blood was still wet, covering most of the exposed skin from his last ribs to his pants’ waistband; there, it continued spreading through the fabric at a slow, almost undetectable pace. It felt cool.

“Did something push you tonight?” Tony asked.

“It just... keeps getting worse.”

“All of it?”

Loki tried not to start crying.

“Is there anything I can help with?”

“No,” Loki whispered, keenly aware of the totality of everything: it went farther back than anyone could ever know. Thanos was only one part of a million. This didn’t get better. This never got better.

Tony, very deep in thought, said nothing.

“It doesn’t stop,” Loki said, tearing up. “No matter how long I hold it back or how well I think I’m doing it always ends here. Every time I figure it out and I find a way to live with everything it still ends here and every time takes a little less than the last time. And it just keeps taking less... and less... and less.”

“Loki,” Tony softly said.

He shut his teary eyes. “I can’t break forever,” he said through the grit teeth tremble of a sob. “I can’t keep up! It just keeps *building*. It doesn’t stop building. It will never leave.”

“That’s not true,” Tony said.

“You don’t know what I’ve been through,” Loki said, coldly looking up at him. “You can’t even dream of the things I’ve been through.”

“No,” Tony said, “but I can—”

“You can’t.”

“I can try to empathize.”

“You can’t,” Loki growled. “What are you empathizing with? I’m sure you could; there’s plenty that’s not particularly rare. But do you really think you know what it’s like to be destroyed? To have everyone you’ve ever known against you? To be isolated for so long you can’t even hear your thoughts anymore and to watch yourself falling apart before your eyes”—a sob cut into him—“and know that all anyone who has heard of you thinks is they’re *glad*. You don’t know what it’s like to hate the skin you were born in. You don’t know what it’s like to be told your entire life that you deserve pain. You don’t know what it’s like to find out you were a peace offering! What are you empathizing with? Was it watching the people I grew up with die because of me? Or is it that I still see Thanos sometimes when I close my eyes? You don’t know how that feels. You don’t know how any of that feels.”

“No,” Tony confessed. “I’m not claiming to understand what you’ve been through because you’re right: I can’t know. But I’ve come closer than you think. And it doesn’t need to end like this.”

“But you’re not me! Suffering is *relative*.” Those tears Loki was holding back began to well; he didn’t care. “Look at me. Tell me, don’t you know that? You’re smart enough.”

“Yes, I know,” Tony said. “Do I ever know. But you can’t just—”

“I can and I will. Do I need to wait? Is it you who’s stopping me? Fine: I will! How long do you have left? Thirty, forty years? That’s nothing. That’s the blink of an eye for me. It’s no bother.”

“What? That’s not—”

“I. Can’t. Take. This. What don’t you understand?”

“That’s life! Shit happens sometimes. It’s—”

Not your fault; but wasn’t it?

“How can you say that?” Loki growled, widening the distance between them. “All of this is because of things I’ve done. Thanos wouldn’t have found me if not for something I did!” he said; he pointed to himself for emphasis. “He wouldn’t have gone after our ship if not for something I did!” He pointed again. “I trusted the people who hurt me. I didn’t stand up for myself when I should have. I got myself into everything. It is all. My. Fault. Everything that has ever happened to me has been because of my own lack of judgment and no one else’s. Am I speaking clearly? Maybe you’d like me to try another language.”

“Okay, let me offer something,” Tony said, hands up. “Even if something is your fault, you don’t suddenly deserve to die as a result. Am *I* speaking clearly?”

No! Shut up.

“Revenge was all that kept me going,” Loki cried, already knowing he wouldn’t win this, “and I had it. There’s nothing left now! It’s just fear”—the tears broke—“and self-loathing and nothing else. I can’t—”

see past it; not one bit. Not what had been before and not a time when he would be getting better rather than worse ——— just those big and little terrors and spikes in his soul and constantly looking over his shoulder and (scratching his wrist apart) the spaces between getting smaller and smaller and smaller and smaller and smaller and smaller and

“—take it. Please just let me die already. I can’t. I can’t do it. Not again.”

Tony placed a hand over his. “Stop.”

It all flooded as if on cue—this feeling from one touch to another to this sensation of chains and bruised and bloody skin, wanting needing desperately needing to take the damage out please no no no no no no he turned and tried to pull away and “Let me die!” he sobbed. “Please. Please, I don’t want to live like this. I’m exhausted. I can’t.”

“Hey. Look at me.”

“Why, so you can see me crying? Fine! Go ahead. Tell me how pathetic I am.”

Tony shook his head. “Not even close,” he said. “You’re one of the strongest people I’ve ever known and this doesn’t change a thing.”

“Shut up,” Loki hissed. “You don’t know anything.” He turned and reached for the knife, only for Tony to tighten the grip on his hand, hold him back—*no no no*—“Let me go. Let me go!”

“I’m not moving.”

“Then you take that blade and you put it through my neck right now or I swear—I swear I’ll take you with me! I’ll kill us both.”

“Will you?”

Yes. Yes, so definitely, so certainly. He would. If that was what it took—

“I will,” Loki said, his words a low growl.

Tony released his hand. “Will you?”

Loki swallowed hard. The tears had not gone. “I will,” he quietly said.

There was the knife; it would only take a second to grab and they both knew. It was right there on the floor. Waiting for fresh blood. But Tony was calm about it. He softly asked again: “Will you?”

... No.

“I’ll clean you up,” Tony said. “Is that alright?”

No answer at all; Loki felt like a deer in headlights. He just... tried to think. And kept trying. He didn’t know what to say or how to say it. He feared whatever he said would be wrong. He wanted to vanish forever.

The rest was a blank, and, suspecting that Tony wouldn’t mind the silence, he waited it out.

... One, two, three, four, five. One, two, three, four, five.

Inhale... Hold. Exhale.

Repeat.

“Please,” he quietly said, head down.

The shirt on the floor was dark-coloured and already wet from brushing against the blood pooled beside it, so it wouldn't matter if it soaked any more. This was exhausting enough and there were worse ideas in the world either way; Tony took the shirt and bunched it together with a sigh.

It was brief, but it was a gentle moment, and, perhaps just deliriously distant beneath the blood loss and fading adrenaline, it wasn't as embarrassing as it could have been. Still, Loki could never dare to look up. If he had managed even a glance at Tony at any point he might have noticed, above everything else, some very faint and very well-hidden but nonetheless sorely candid horror behind those magpie eyes and realized that he had been so little from dying that one of his glamours, one he didn't even remember most days, was trying not to fail. That one—the shallower one where, somewhere between the Æsir skin and the deep, ashen blue of his heritage that was still holding just fine, the flickers showed... scars. The kind where you wished everything was exaggerated and it hadn't really been that bad. The kind where you couldn't help but hopefully underestimate. That kind. There were probably thousands. They were old enough that most of them only discoloured the skin a bit, leaving no dips or bumps, but they told their stories well enough. A slash here. A stab. Something carved. Something flayed. Something broken. Somewhere, there might have even been a brand, although Loki would never know this either: he had never checked beyond examining them as they healed and he refused to ever. For all intents and purposes, there wasn't—not that, were there something such, and not any of the other marks. Ignorance, as always, was bliss. So there they hid. But at least someone finally understood and believed him completely: there was nothing more genuine than seeing.

Tony paused at the hips, but, seeing no objection, he wiped there too. “You're probably not hungry after this,” he said, drawing back. “Are you?”

“... No.”

Tony also cleaned the blood from the floor. “I'll sanitize this later,” he awkwardly promised.

Loki managed to haul himself to his feet but stumbled as a jab of dizziness knocked the breath out of him; he grabbed the bedframe for support.

“Hey, take it easy,” Tony said, looping an arm around him.

“Don't tell me what to do,” Loki muttered, although, without much thought, he did accept the assistance and drape an arm over Tony's shoulder to match him. “Am I...”

“Heavy? No. As long as you don't put all your weight on me.”

They somehow made it to the side of the bed. This was a slow task, and when Loki finally managed to plunk himself on the edge, it was with another thick wave of vertigo: he held his breath and waited it out.

“You good?” Tony asked, sitting beside him.

“Fine.”

“Fine, huh?”

Loki gave him an exhausted look.

“I'm worried,” Tony softly said.

“No, you’re not.”

“I am. Even if you don’t believe me.”

Loki leaned to rest on his knees. “I’m... very, very tired.”

“Could I trust you to sleep?”

In spite of everything, Loki laughed: a painful, breathy chuckle bordering on tears. “You can’t trust me for anything,” he muttered. “You know that.”

“Hey, no. Don’t say that.”

“Why not?”

“Just don’t, okay? Tell me, are you stable?”

Hardly. Many of the cuts had managed to go, but many more of them were still somewhat visible and still a little warm and painful. Had he not healed them when he did he would have already been dead by now, too far for even magic to save him, and in all truth he wasn’t sure whether to feel frustrated or relieved. Maybe both.

“I lost a lot of blood,” he eventually said, his words no more than a whisper. “The spell can’t fix that. And I’m...” Malnourished. Dehydrated. All of the things that could kill a person, and that was without exsanguination. Was he even trying to stay alive?

(No.)

“... That’s it,” he muttered. “I just lost a lot of blood.”

“Which is fucking terrifying,” Tony said with a matter-of-fact nod, “and you know why? We can’t do transfusions. Thor’s the only person I can think of and one, he’s too far, and two, I don’t even know if it would work. Do you guys have blood types?”

“It’s more complicated than that. We’re... not related.”

“I mean—most donors aren’t.”

“That’s not what I’m saying! We’re not—” The same. That wall was still holding and it was so, so painful to try and so painful to decide above the rising tears and panic if Tony even needed to know, but it slipped out somehow: “... We’re not the same race. Blood types or no, it wouldn’t work. He’s a completely different physiology.”

It must have slipped Tony’s mind; hadn’t the scans rejecting the near-Æsir glamour been enough? He seemed unsurprised by the comment, but he was curious: “How different could you be?”

Oh, didn’t they always wonder.

“No,” Loki thinly said. “It won’t work and that’s all you need to know.”

Tony didn’t prod. “Look at me,” he said, just as Loki turned and pinned his gaze on the bathroom door. “I need you to know something: I am always here for you. And for everyone in this building.

I've told you this before, but I'll say it again, and it's that I feel responsible for the people who live here, including you. It kills me to see you like this."

"After everything I've done," Loki muttered, tears in his voice, still unable to face him. "Why?"

"Honestly? I don't know."

"Pardon?"

"I don't know." Tony shrugged. "All these grudges in my life, you'd think I'd be a little more apprehensive, but I'm not. Lord knows how that happened."

Loki broke down completely and began to sob.

It was a shy minute, but after a while of trying and failing to find something to say, what Tony instead ended up saying was, "Do you want a hug?"

"Please," Loki managed between sobs, and Tony pulled him close and let him cry into his shoulder.

"Do you want to keep talking?"

"No."

"And you're not hungry?"

"No."

"Okay."

And that was that: Loki leaned a little deeper into Tony and kept crying, and Tony maintained the embrace, tenderly stroking his back, and there was nothing else.

The tears eased eventually, and Loki fell asleep in his arms.

It was a slow realization, and, for fear of waking him, for fear of both startling him horridly and robbing him of such precious rest, Tony didn't get up. He did worry, and he did check with two fingers on the neck that there was a pulse and that it wasn't weakening, and he did also take out his phone one-handed and message Pepper: something came up, he couldn't come down, please put two servings in the fridge thank you, no, it wasn't an Iron Man thing, and no, he couldn't elaborate. But he didn't do much more than that. He silenced his phone, stuffed it back in his pocket, and, very carefully and very precariously and very painfully under the above-average weight, he pulled Loki into a horizontal position. Nothing else. It didn't really matter to him; the stress blocked out any possibility of boredom and he would have sacrificed it regardless because he knew what it was like to be this vulnerable. So he just sat there for a while, patiently confirming a steady heartbeat every now and then, and did nothing.

This was going to be a long night.

Chapter End Notes

So... that happened.

I hate to do this after such a major plot point, but it's going to come up sooner or later, so here we go: as much as I adore this story and as much as I love writing it, it's got me completely burned out and I simply can't finish the next chapter, nor the one after that. For the sake of my mental health and the quality of the writing, I'm taking some time off and just... doing things. Schoolwork. Crafting. Writing sundry other stories. Getting inspired, getting in a good mood, recharging—that kind of stuff. A forced story is obvious and I'd truly like to avoid that; I have too much love for this one.

Optimistically, I shouldn't be gone for any longer than I've disappeared in the past, which would mean a few months max. I'd like to make a promise, but that might further screw me over, so I'm gonna Don't.

Anyway: feel free to scream in the comments! I do love seeing people's responses to my emotional tomfuckery. 🙄🙄🙄

Emptiness — like floating alone in a fading universe — and screaming silently — and burning underwater — vanishing slowly — and lies; for there is nothing left.

Chapter Summary

Loki finds himself in a familiar place, and Tony, knowing he can do nothing more, offers a shoulder to cry on.

Chapter Notes

freakishly long megachapter incoming

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

He was alone.

He was so endlessly, exquisitely alone.

Between the hazy, midnight shadows, between the cold steam, between miles upon miles of sprawling caverns, there was only him, nestled there among the ice and praying to gods he didn't believe in for peace; safety; an end.

Blue hands.

He held them to his chest, palms in, protectively, and closed his eyes. Whisper-like, so distantly conscious of the words, he spoke to himself. "I'm sorry," he said; in the silent expanse of his hideaway, even this soft, trembling apology seemed deafening. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry..."

Again and again and again, until the sounds lost their meaning, until he forgot how many times they left his lips. And then, he recited something else.

"*Sjá,*" he said, just as quietly, "*ég hef misgjört þig, eins og ég hef misgjört svo marga áður.*" Lo: I have wronged you, as I have wronged so many before. "*Það er engin fyrirgefning fyrir syndum mínum. Gerðu eins og þú vilt með mér. Látum því enda.*" There is no forgiveness for my sins; do as you will with me, and let it end.

Like it was a fresh prayer, like it was another apology, like it was a simple plea. Again, and again, and again.

"*Ég er hræddur,*" he said. I am afraid; I am so deeply, horribly afraid.

And yet, he stayed.

Blue hands; on them, red blood, chipped and foreign. Smoke burned into his clothes. Healing wounds. The Tesseract, with which he'd managed, unharmed, to escape to the only horizon his panicked mind would permit. His sword, so beloved at this point, so cherished in its kind origin, with which he would defend himself from what he knew was coming.

Fear. Anguish. Shame.

Hopelessness. Rage.

Acceptance.

Loki awoke slowly, with fleeting memories and rising awareness of how off he felt. Hot, aching, dizzy; a sour taste in his mouth and old magic in his chest. Something had gone terribly wrong and the realization hit him like a kick to the gut. Gods, no. He tried to fall back asleep but couldn't and tried to move but struggled. Brushed away the hair stuck to his face. Everything hurt and he wanted to disappear. And Tony—Tony was curled next to him, snug under the covers and sound asleep without a care in the world. Hardly even a twitch save for the flutter of his dreaming eyes.

On another day, Loki might have shoved him out of the bed and out of the room and then screamed a slew of insults and accusations over the sound of a locking door. He would have. But this was not another day, and after everything that had come before, he couldn't bring himself to. There were bigger problems out there, like the dry blood remains pulling on his bare skin. He was shirtless and could feel that none of the cuts had fully healed, which was rare because he was a famously sturdy and fast healer. Mages tended to be: magic protected its wielder and after a healing spell there shouldn't have been a single scar by morning. And perhaps he realized then that he wasn't *just* skipping meals and failing to sleep. It was a lot worse than that.

Of course now Loki had Tony Stark to worry about, not just that they had both passed out in the same bed at an unknown hour but that there was now a witness to everything. It was raw and vulnerable and even in the face of all his shallower emotions that would have loved to savour this, the last thing he wanted was to share a bed with anyone. Certainly not Tony. Certainly not, a more jaded part of him said, an enemy. But... it would have been nice to ignore that part and stay in bed. Not at all in a sexual way nor anything close to it, only that it had been so long since he'd felt gentle touch that he wanted nothing more than to just draw a little nearer, pull the blankets a little tighter, and make as two sleepy people did in one bed. Tony didn't even look like an enemy from that angle: the faint morning light fell on him in such a way that all Loki could notice was how tired he looked, how exhausted, physically, mentally, and spiritually. The bags under his eyes were more than age and the deep grooves at the bridge of his nose were more than too-often crinkling, and besides that, whatever small amount of sleep he'd acquired seemed to have done nothing; he seemed, to Loki, a product of perpetual worry, and how this had gone unnoticed was a mystery. Too much had happened to him in too little time.

Tony shifted then, sniffed and mumbled something. Coughed a bit. "You alive?"

"Do I look alive?"

“Mmm...” Tony squinted up at him. “Pasty, sarcastic... that seems about right.”

“You’ve neglected to mention why we’re in the same bed,” Loki said, expressionless.

“I got tired.”

“There’s a couch.”

“I know.”

“What if someone saw us like this?”

“I’d say”—Tony rolled onto his back—“that you tried to kill yourself and I didn’t feel comfortable leaving you alone.”

Loki frowned.

“You’ve got... really cold feet, too,” Tony said as he drew the blanket a little tighter, closed his eyes again. “Felt it through your friggin’ socks. You kept kicking me.”

“I’ve been colder,” Loki quietly responded. If his half-stifled wince was obvious, Tony thankfully hadn’t noticed; nothing killed a mood quite like unresolved trauma.

“Breakfast?”

“I’m not hungry.”

“You need to eat.”

“I’m not *hungry*.”

That should have been enough. But then Tony glanced at him, sat up slightly, and, with sudden lucidity in his voice, said, “You’re starving yourself.”

It was like someone had stabbed him in the throat.

“You never eat,” Tony said. “I’ve been seeing you lose weight for weeks. Did you think I wouldn’t notice?”

Truthfully: no. He had only hoped.

Loki turned onto his side. “Don’t make me,” he muttered into the sheets. “Please don’t. I can’t.”

“I didn’t stop you from bleeding out,” Tony said, “only to have you die of malnourishment.” A second passed, and he dared to place a hand over Loki’s shoulder. “Are you even drinking? You look... severely dehydrated.”

Loki tightened his grip on the blanket. “I’m fine. I had some water yesterday.”

“How much?”

“Enough.”

Tony heaved the rest of him up. “You need to eat.”

“No,” Loki said. “No, I don’t. I’ve gone months without eating. I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine.”

“Yes, I am.”

“Turn around. Look me in the eye and say that again.”

“No.”

“Loki.”

“No! I can’t. I can’t just—I can’t. No. Please. You kept me alive last night. Isn’t that enough?”

“And what, I’ll let you die today? What’s the point of that?”

“I don’t die that easily.”

“Loki—”

“Please. I can’t. It hurts too much.”

Many long seconds fell upon them.

“Just a few bites,” Tony gently said. “That’s all I’m asking. Will you do that for me? Last night’s dinner was good. I saved some; I could reheat it if you want. Chicken with rice. How does that sound?”

It sounded lovely. But there was no chance. Any bite would result in a spiral of shame and loathing at best or another nausea attack at worst and Loki doubted he would survive either. Easier to just sit here all day and sleep off the hunger. That wouldn’t stop Tony, though, and after a while of no answer he just climbed out of the bed with a grunt and left the room. Left to get food.

The grey and fuzzy room only became fuzzier without someone to anchor to and it was a painful ordeal remembering how to move at all, but Loki managed to get himself upright. Then he tried to stay upright and pushed the tangled sheets away to see how bad it looked. There were hundreds of half-faded scars crossing each other from belt-line to so far up his chest they were difficult to look at, thin white slivers that looked like shards of glass on his pale skin. Not much blood; only enough to feel awkward, barely visible without squinting. All of them. It was a heat of the moment thing, angry and restless fidgeting gone too far, but he couldn’t say the same for refusing to heal himself. How many times did this have to happen before he learned how to follow through? How many times was he going to wake up with a well-meaning friend because he didn’t have the guts to do it properly? It felt like a curse. Too afraid to live. Too afraid to die.

Tony returned shortly with two lidded containers stacked in one hand, two forks balanced atop them, and a filled water bottle of the jar-like variety. He closed the door and sat on the edge of the bed, next to Loki.

“Can you stand?” Tony asked, turning to face him.

“Do I need to?”

“Uh... not really. As long as you don’t spill, I guess.” Tony handed him a fork and one of the containers. “We can do this the easy way or the hard way.”

There was no hard way. One of them would be dead before it came to that. Loki reluctantly accepted the items. “How do you know I won’t just throw it back up?” he asked, taking the lid off.

“Because I’ll stay here and make sure you don’t,” Tony said. “Not accidentally, not intentionally.”

“You’d do that for me?”

“I’d do that for anyone. I don’t just let people die. You”—Tony pointed—“are people. Don’t think you’re exempt.”

“I’m people? I didn’t know.” Loki cracked a smile. “Do I have people rights?”

“God, I can’t tell if you’re joking or not. Yeah, you do.” Tony set the bottle next to him. “I won’t forgive myself if you die. I know I said that already, but I really won’t. Do this for me, alright? Please.”

He would have. He hated seeing Tony like this if for no other reason than it snagged the constant guilt worming inside him and it might have helped to play along. But that was never enough and he was so very sure that even just one bite would make him want to die all over again, maybe even succeed in killing him if he was lucky: there was at least one known incident around of someone with his ancestry suffering fatal anaphylactic shock from grains and it was never too late for a first time. It seemed unlikely, but one never knew. There didn’t look to be many spices and the rice was of the plain, non-sticky kind and most of the volume was in chicken, which took extremely improbable immune responses off the table. No way but through. He wished he could teleport. He wanted out of here.

Nonetheless Loki managed to take a small bite of rice and remind himself how to eat. Force himself. It was a struggle. “Water?” he asked, dubiously eyeing the bottle.

“Uh, I tossed some electrolyte stuff in there, but yeah, it’s water.”

“Electrolytes? What do I look like?”

“Someone in desperate need of them. Don’t glare at me like that, okay? It’s this or an IV. It shouldn’t be too bad. Maybe a little a salty. Sorry.”

Such was life. They tried to eat together but it was awkward; Tony looked like he wanted to be elsewhere and Loki struggled with every single bite and by the end of it they were probably both wondering why they’d even bother. One bite after the other. The smallest piece of the problem was bigger than it looked, a physical manifestation of everything that had gone wrong. Breaking its hold wasn’t so simple. It wasn’t about the food just like it wasn’t about the knives. He wanted the pain. It was the only thing that still made sense. But that much was obvious.

“Do you want to talk about last night?” Tony quietly asked, but Loki did not.

Pain and all he couldn’t help but apologize anyway when he failed to finish the whole thing before feeling sick lest he get in trouble again. “I’m sorry,” he said, little more than a whisper, as he shakily set the fork and container on the nightstand. “You must think me rude.”

“Nah.”

“It’s good food! I just…”

“I know.” Tony gave him a tired smile. “It’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

“I’m so wasteful,” Loki muttered, closing his eyes. “If I were on Asgard—”

“We’re not Asgard,” Tony calmly interrupted, “and even if we were you’ve got a valid reason for it. And it won’t go to waste. I’ll take it if you don’t want it or you can have it later. Don’t force yourself. I’d rather you eat a little than make yourself sick.”

“But—”

“But it’s fine. I’m perfectly content with that amount. It’s better than nothing. It’s better than not eating for months and it’s more than you had yesterday and that’s what matters. Manners are the least of my concerns right now.”

But people lied sometimes and they could always find something else to worry about. Tony was probably still mad about that time he was thrown out of a window. He must be seething inside about his help falling on unwilling ears. Not eating was only one of many mistakes and Loki suspected he would either die soon or keep feeling like it: his wrists were throbbing like there was something around them and every other heartbeat seemed to miss. Sometimes people with good intentions were the ones that hurt you the most. Sometimes it was hard to tell the difference.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I don’t… I don’t think I’ll be hungry for the rest of the day. I know what you’re thinking, but… I can’t. I’m not used to this.”

There was a flit of disappointment in Tony’s eyes but nothing else. “Baby steps,” he said. “It’ll be easier tomorrow.”

“You won’t leave me alone, will you?”

“No. Not until I know you’re okay.”

Loki felt as much comfort as he felt grief. Someone cared. They wanted to help him. They wanted to do so without anger, without judgment, without hate: there was a pretty good chance it wasn’t like the last time someone had offered to help him. This, he swore, was what he wanted. He craved this. And yet the words cut into him like a knife. He didn’t have the strength to do his part and he was so sure he never would. This would be nothing but brief torture, a warm lie and then—

Then… Tony’s back would be turned.

Loki reached for the bottle and twisted it open. “How should I drink this?” he asked. “Slowly?”

“In theory,” Tony said. “As long as you’re hydrating, though, it doesn’t really matter. It’ll get in your system one way or another.”

Loki took an experimental sip. “Oh,” he said, lowering the bottle. “That’s not too bad.”

“No?”

“I’ve had worse. Much worse.”

“That’s a relief.”

Loki could not have known how thirsty he was. He told himself he functioned differently, that his biology was more efficient and that his magic alone could keep him well for months and years, that he still had tea or coffee often enough to hit that bare minimum, but he couldn’t deny it: he was parched. It was a wonder he didn’t immediately drain the bottle.

“Can I talk?” Tony said after some time. “It’s getting a little awkward just sitting here.”

Loki just glanced at him over the rim and kept drinking.

“I get the feeling you think this is beneath you,” Tony said—quietly, cautiously, like he was scared to offend. Like even now there was danger. They never knew.

Loki still said nothing.

“It’s humiliating, isn’t it? It makes you feel weak.”

It did.

“I guess you won’t listen to me, but I just want you to know that... you’re not. And you’re probably tired of hearing that, too. I know. The thing is, I just—I think all this is the strongest anyone could be. Hanging on when you don’t want to and dragging yourself back from literal blood, sweat, and tears takes a special kind of toughness.”

It didn’t. It was a coward’s move; only those who didn’t know how to die wound up here.

“Even if you think you’re weak for going through all this and even if everyone else thinks the same, I don’t. I know better than anyone that that’s not the case.”

He didn’t.

“Sorry. I just... wanted to get that off my chest.”

“Don’t apologize,” Loki muttered into the bottle.

“Okay.”

Then the silence returned. It might have helped to ask Tony to keep talking, to distract him with empty comforts and encouragements if only for that: distraction. He could feel it all building. Burning fear and shame melting a hole through his insides. Hazy nothingness. Minutes passed and the dream feeling became strong enough to drown everything else.

This wasn’t real.

He was on Asgard, in his palace bedroom, reading up on the window seat. It was a warm summer day and he could feel the breeze from here, smell all the blooming plants that filled the courtyard, hear, occasionally, a flock of birds passing overhead. There was no work to be done today; he could sit like this until evening, leaving only for lunch and dinner, a chat or two if he wished, and perhaps, if he had time, a bath. Tomorrow he would be off on horseback and busy building peace in a nearby settlement. Thor would say something stupid and someone else would make it worse and the food there, which they’d be forced to eat because they wouldn’t be home until well after dinnertime, would be tolerable at best, and Loki knew it would take all his strength to refrain from

any outbursts—for diplomacy, as painful as it often was, took his priorities. Today, though, there was this: a warm, flower-scented breeze, endless birdsongs, and a good book. He was safe here.

“You alright?”

“Mhm.”

“And?”

He looked up. “What?”

“I asked you something,” Tony said.

“... Oh. Um...”

“I was just saying maybe you’d want to shower. I couldn’t clean everything last night, and don’t you still have dried blood on your pants and all that? That can’t feel nice.”

“I’ll clean it,” Loki quietly said.

“How?”

“Magic.”

“I mean... sure, I guess. If that’s how you roll, then sure. I thought you couldn’t do spells when you’re worn out, though.”

“It’s a simple spell.”

“Simpler than a shower?”

Yes. Yes, it was. Magic was simpler. It was quicker and more effective.

“Loki.”

... Won’t you come outside? It’s such a lovely day today, and your brother was planning on visiting the market. Why don’t you go with him? You can keep reading when you get back; I won’t harass you.

“Hey.”

... But Mother...

“Are you sure you’re alright?”

... No wonder you’re so pale! You never leave this bedroom. Any longer and you’ll sprout roots.

Maybe I want to sprout roots.

And miss out on all the feasts? You like them.

Not really.

“Loki.”

You don't like crowding your plate with your favourite foods and then finding an excuse to eat outside? Come on. You wouldn't be able to do that if you were rooted to that window.

I'll photosynthesize.

You'll find it rather boring after a while, but I can't stop you, I suppose.

“Loooooo-keeee.”

... I'm just worried about you. I know it must feel overbearing at times.

“Goth Merida?”

... Oh, love, not again. What is it this time?

“Reindeer Games. Hey.”

... Look at me. Tell me what's wrong.

“Hey, look at me. It's okay.”

... I feel empty all the time...

... and tired... and afraid...

... I tried to kill myself again yesterday...

... I'm so sorry, Mother. I don't want to hurt you...

... I just don't see a way out...

... I don't understand why I'm like this...

... I just want the pain to end...

“Why are you crying?”

“It hurts,” he sobbed into Tony's chest.

“What does?”

“Everything.”

“Tell me. One thing. Hey—hey, look at me.”

Look at me, love. We'll get through this together. I'm always here for you.

“It helps to talk. I swear it does. Tell me what's hurting you so much right now.”

All of it. Here was one thing that didn't happen—this, that he never really remembered, whose details were exaggerated filled in changed every time, never happened but didn't it? Just like the rest that wasn't real; here was him cast from one set of hands to another, bound in heavy, warded

chains from his ankles to his neck (that behind the gut-churning shame made him panic so, so much for reasons he had repressed too powerfully to realize) and walked down an echoing hall to his father's feet thinking what a **disgrace!** he was, what a **failure!** he was, how he did and didn't deserve this and how and why—

Can you imagine, Tony?

Torture on your back. Rage burning holes into your mind. Old terror. Older grief. Your wounds haven't even healed yet and you haven't slept in days. The only reason you're here is because you knew it couldn't possibly be worse than the alternative..... but isn't it?

Here was that feeling of standing alone on a cliff, knowing he was about to be pushed off: nauseating, excruciating, empty. Desolate fear. Hopeless agony. Betrayal. As always, he laughed to hide the pain.

Imagine this.

Here: a snapshot of that very moment when he learned his sentence, standing proud and smiling his pained smile at the emotionless, grizzled face speaking the words, and here—a moment that he always swore wasn't as dramatic as he remembered it, but gods, wasn't he allowed to believe this was how it happened? Dragged nearly on the heels of his boots, screaming no, no, no, how could you, how could you, Father, no, please, and then, when he gave up on dignity, kicking and clawing and trying to wrest himself out of their grip until all that was left was bruises and tears down his cheeks.

If he hadn't already, this, he remembered, was the exact moment he truly began to hate this man who so claimed to have loved him.

He didn't. I don't think he did.

Look at you here: you were no worse than your brother, who demolished two realms' peacetime just like that. What was one city? One country? Was it so much worse? Did you really cause that much more harm? Your kills weren't so far apart in number. The collateral was nothing either of you hadn't done before.

Your brother was briefly exiled. You were sentenced to life in solitary confinement. Four thousand years. I don't think you can even begin to comprehend how long that is.

Of course he tried to run when they unchained him—those few precious seconds between eternity when he was suddenly free from all of the wards, bleeding power, knives and flames and fury to kill; oh, he tried. He reopened his wounds. He felt himself breaking. He fought as well as his collapsing limbs would let him. But they weren't on the brink of death. They weren't delirious with panic. They were more than one, and, above many more reflexes coded into the back of his mind, it reminded him of other times. Just like the chains. Just like everything. It froze him in the worst moment. Of course he didn't get anywhere and he felt the weight of it all come crashing down. And he sat there in shock, eyes on that white ceiling, and stayed, lost, for hours. White walls. White everything.

She convinced him not to go through with an execution, but is this really any better? Four thousand years of nothing. The others get to stretch their legs when they need to take a piss, but they know you can deal with that magically so they don't bother; if they had their way, you wouldn't even be permitted all the books and long-distance chats she sneaks in.

Maybe this is what they meant all along when they said he'd make you long for something as sweet as pain. Some days you hurt yourself just so you don't feel nothing.

Thor dared to show his face after a year of absence, offering temporary respite in exchange for assistance. Screaming. If that never happened, it didn't matter; he remembered it violently enough.

You bitch. You heartless bastard. Would you have noticed if they beheaded me instead? Would you have been among the cheering citizens? Tell me, brother.

Caught in a distant limbo of consciousness and unable to remember what happened next, he made himself remember the fear. He filled his organs to overflowing with it. He felt his mind exploding at the seams. Everything he was became a dying scream in a void. Nothing mattered anymore but terror. It was the only thing he had ever known.

If that never happened

(upon a battlefield, someone pierced a fatal blade into a feigned chest)

then you would have rotted there. Four thousand years of no interaction, no stimulation, no sunlight, no fresh air. Nothing. Doesn't the possibility alone fill you with dread?

Tony's arms were warm, and as the room returned, there was no urge to pull away. "Your nose is bleeding," he quietly said.

Loki reached with a shaky hand and smeared the blood off his upper lip. "Too much," he muttered, distractedly watching the red trickle down one finger. "Why did I... no. No... I'm sorry. I shouldn't have... I'm sorry. I shouldn't have shown you that."

"Please don't apologize."

"Is that it? Just the two of us taking turns telling each other over and over again not to apologize?"

"Stop," Tony said, frowning at the fizzle of green light as Loki rubbed at his nose once more and then warped the blood away.

"Don't tell me what to do."

"What, suggesting you don't use any more magic because that's obviously what caused your nose to start bleeding in the first place? Really? You can't just—"

"Please don't yell."

"I'm not—"

"You are. Please don't. It's too much."

Anyone else would have found it hypocritical: refusing to follow a request and then expecting something different to arise of his own. There was nothing, though. Tony closed his mouth and quietly calmed himself.

"May I have my knife back?" Loki asked.

"What?"

“That knife I had. It’s a good one. I’d like it back.”

“Do you know how that sounds?”

“I do. I just want to return it to my storage.”

“More magic?”

“My last spell for the day. I don’t think I could do more if I wanted to. Just that.”

The knife had been tucked in the nightstand drawer what seemed to be a very, very meticulous clean and polish; nothing at all remained of the night before. It was offered with caution and withdrawn a few inches when Loki reached for it too quickly—a casual but firm warning.

“I’ll get physical if I need to,” Tony said. “Don’t make me.”

Loki pressed his hand to the hilt. By the time he managed to open the rift and pull the knife inside, which took him longer than it ever should have, he felt his nose bleeding again. Down his bottom lip to his chin. He wiped it off. “This is nothing,” he muttered. “I’ve gotten nosebleeds on my best days. They don’t mean anything.”

“No?”

“I never really had them... then. No, they don’t... no. They don’t mean anything.”

“You okay?”

“Not remotely. Why?”

“You sound a little out of it.”

Loki held the side of his hand under his nose until the blood stopped. “What do you remember?”

“Fear,” Tony said. “Dread. Looking at your dad through your eyes and thinking, what parent does this to their child?”

There was a witty response brewing somewhere, such as “mine” or “you should have seen him with the commoners,” but Loki couldn’t bring himself to say it. He just sat there with his bloody hand, silent, and waited for the tension to ease.

“You’re drifting again,” Tony said.

“Forget you saw that,” Loki said. “Please.”

“Why?”

“It’s painful. I don’t want others to know. You,” he added, seeing Tony’s expression, “are counted among those. You understand, don’t you?”

“You’ll never get over it if you keep acting like it didn’t happen,” Tony said.

“I will.”

“Loki—”

“Is this how you treat someone who just tried to kill themselves? Give me some time. I’ll look at it eventually. I can’t do so now without crying inconsolably.”

“... Okay. Traumatic memory forgotten.”

Loki breathed in heavily and let his gaze float to somewhere at the end of the bed. He couldn’t take this. This—this expectation that he would get better, that he would stick around long enough to see it become a reality, that things weren’t quite as bad as he was making them out to be—was draining. He couldn’t take it. That look in Tony’s eyes was the only reason he hadn’t yet made a second attempt.

He pushed the sheets away and woozily hauled himself off the bed.

“If you’re not doing any more spells,” Tony said, “then—”

“No.”

“You don’t even know what I was going to say.”

“It wasn’t ‘Are you going to take that shower?’”

“Are you?”

“No.”

“You can’t just—”

“No!”

“Jeez, alright. You want to change, at least? Put on something clean?”

“No.”

“Okay.”

Loki checked that he hadn’t started bleeding again, saw nothing, and then looked down at himself—at the scars covering him. They weren’t that bad, but...

“I did wash that shirt,” Tony said, “if you wanted it. It should be dry by now. I left it by the bathroom sink.”

“Thanks,” Loki said, and he walked there with that same weary drag to his step, picked the shirt off the counter, and, inevitably, he looked at the mirror.

He was expecting worse, to be honest.

He was a little too pale, a little too violet under his eyes, and his would-be curls had puffed up into the wild, frizzy mess they always were when he woke these days. There was no fixing them without magic, and truthfully, he couldn’t be bothered anyway; he untangled what he could with his fingers, tucked it back just enough to keep everything out of his face, and that was it. The shirt’s hems were still damp, but he didn’t mind. He put it on, and, after a last glance at his reflection, he returned to sit beside Tony, who was watching the floor like it was the most interesting thing in the world.

“What now?” Loki asked.

“You get through the day,” Tony said. “Get your strength back. Read a book, watch some cheesy movie with me, maybe lie back down and take a nap. Kill time until dinner, I guess. I just want to see you alive for tomorrow. I don’t really care how you do it.”

“Is that all there is? Killing time?”

“It’s better than being dead.”

“Is it?”

Tony looked up at him. “Yes,” he said. “Yes, it is. I know it doesn’t feel like it, but believe me, it is. Anything you could possibly do right now is better than being dead.”

“I don’t think I’d be afraid of everything if I were dead,” Loki muttered.

“Is that worth it? Never laughing your ass off after making some weird go at me, no more dumb, silly shit with Peter—friggin’ chocolate, Lokes. Do they have that in the afterlife?”

“Probably.”

“You sound unconvinced.”

“I am. I don’t care much, though. That’s like asking me if I’d cut my hair to be happy. It’s stupid.”

“You’re not killing yourself.”

“Hey.”

“Loki.”

He looked up.

“You’re not killing yourself,” Tony said.

“Do you understand?”

“Loki.”

“Don’t yell at me.”

“I’m not yelling.”

“Fine, your—the tone of your voice!—it’s making me nervous. Stop. Please. I can’t do this.”

“Where are you?”

“Asgard.”

“Is it good there?”

“It’s familiar.”

“You want to move to my room and keep dissociating while I work on something? Or is the bed nicer?”

“What?”

“You. Spacing out. You don’t look like you’ll be coming down for a while.”

“I want to sleep.”

“You can do that in my room.”

“This one’s safer.”

—which, Loki realized the moment he said it, sounded incredibly like any other paranoid nonsense he tended to believe, but this was true: the wards were holding yet and now would be when he needed them most. He never knew.

“I guess,” Tony said. “I’m not here to argue. Not after everything. Will you come out for a minute, though, so I can get my stuff? I don’t want to leave you alone.”

Loki didn’t know what else to do but get his coat and shuffle after him. They walked together, but it felt awkward and uneasy. Like Tony was judging the slow pace or the bloody nose or how he refused to make eye contact, staring at the patterns on the floor instead. Everything seemed to vanish into them. The world wouldn’t stay and all he could think about was how empty he felt. There was no one else in but them.

Tony’s room was silent. Loki found a seat and waited.

“You sure you don’t want to stay here?” Tony asked as he searched through the pile of tech in the corner. “I’ve got a comfy bed. I can make you a hot drink if you want it, too.”

“I thought you weren’t going to argue.”

“Nah. Just double-checking.”

Something slid off the pile with a metallic clang and Loki winced.

“So you’re going to sleep all day? Nothing else?”

“Is that a problem?”

“Not really. I’ve done it before, and anyway”—another item dropped and Tony hissed a swear under his breath—“you probably need it. I’m not judging.”

Loki slumped against the armrest.

Tony left the corner about a minute later with an unfinished gadget tucked in one hand and, hooked under the collar of his shirt, his glasses, which he’d apparently forgotten there. “You good?” he asked, even though there was no point asking.

“Fine,” Loki said, even though there was no point answering, and then he stood, slowly and carefully, and followed him back down the hall.

It might have been worth mentioning that he did want that shower, and that he did feel awkward with dried blood and sweat soaked into his skin and every article of clothing beneath the waist, and that the heat, if nothing else, would ease the aches left over from last night. What, though, would it change if Tony knew? What was there to gain other than firmer insistence? More questions.

Why are you so reluctant if that’s the case? — I’m scared of ~~running water~~.

No. No, he wasn’t. He stuck his hands in his pockets and kept walking. “Don’t you have places to be?” he asked, glancing up from the floor.

“Not today,” Tony said. “Not for the past few days, actually. Pepper does. Everyone else does. I’ve just been sitting around looking for things to do. You’d think there’d be more, but it’s been pretty quiet lately.”

So they were, as Loki had figured, stuck together. He was one more loud noise from crying again; how were they supposed to do this? Tony still seemed like he wanted to discuss that memory and though there supposedly wasn’t any judgment, it felt like it. Staying so close to him in a dead-silent hallway was nerve-wracking. It was a wonder the tears didn’t hit.

Loki closed the door behind them. “What time is it?” he muttered, sitting on the bed.

“Ten-twelve.”

Loki tipped onto his back.

“It’s not that long,” Tony said. “It’ll go by faster if you’re sleeping, if that’s still your plan. Or you can come watch me code.”

“I’m going to sleep,” Loki said, and then he turned and hauled the rest of him onto the bed.

“Okay. Have fun.”

Loki saw him put on his glasses and then sit at the table with whatever he'd went to retrieve, calmly reclined in his seat as if the past twenty-four hours—as if even the past one, two—hadn't happened. There was a last uneasy glance at him, and then nothing: Tony pulled a multi-tool from his pocket and got to work. Sleep with such a rapid heart rate was a different matter. Loki didn't bother moving under the covers, nor removing his coat. He simply curled up with his face between the two pillows and closed his eyes. One, two, three, four, five. In and out.

This should have been easier; he was exhausted, and lying down only intensified it. As always, though, there was nothing. All he did was stay there, buried in the sheets, and think about how much his head ached. It wasn't too bad, and after a time, he did seem to drift off. There were no real dreams, no nightmares, either, and that was fine; the hours blurred just the same, and it soothed the unrested dizziness in the back of his mind. For a while, that was all there was: those stuttered, dreamless lengths of sleep, punctuated only by his usual amount of anxious stirring. He caught himself a few times and jolted awake, turning to glance around the room in sudden terror, but other than Tony moving to the couch at some point with his shoes off and feet up, there was never anything to show for it. So, reluctantly, he tightened his grip on the sheets, rolled halfway onto his stomach and his side, and closed his eyes again.

Then he fell asleep for real.

He couldn't say when he woke. It was light out, and when he finally cleared the haze from his mind and pushed himself up just slightly, he saw Tony at the table once more, skimming a manual over some food—so, he figured, it was sometime between late afternoon and early evening. The dizziness was gone and he felt hungrier than hoped, so after another moment to gather his strength, rub the rest of the sleep from his eyes, and realize, to no real disappointment, that his hair had tangled again, Loki crawled off the side of the bed and wandered over.

“Hey,” Tony said, looking up from the text with a soft smile. “How are you feeling?”

“A little less tired. I think I healed some more, but...”

“It's something.”

Loki sat across from him. “Am I allowed to say I still want to die?” he asked.

“You can say whatever you want,” Tony answered. “Free country, isn't it?”

“But you'd rather not hear it.”

Tony removed his glasses and folded them. “No,” he said, placing them on the table. “It really hurts to know you feel that way. What am I supposed to do, though? You could lie and say you're alright, but I'd still know. You don't go from actively suicidal to sunshine and happiness in one day. That's not how it works.”

“Why do you care so much?”

“See, you keep asking me this, and I keep telling you the same thing. I just have a big heart and a lot of empathy. You know that. The world knows that. It's one of the first things that pops into people's heads when they hear my name, right after Iron Man. You could be literally anyone else and I'd still be worried.”

“I tried to kill you,” Loki said.

Tony breathed a tired laugh. “So have a lot of people,” he said. “All things considered, I really couldn’t care less what you did. Hell, I think it’s kinda poetic. It makes the two of us sitting here way more interesting.”

“Maybe,” Loki said. He leaned forward, crossed his arms on the table. “But what about the aftereffects? I see you flinch when I’m near you. I know you’re still scared. Doesn’t that bother you?”

“Sometimes,” Tony admitted. “What’ll it change if I decide to hate you for it, though? I can’t undo what happened. Neither can you. The best thing anyone can do at this point is just forgive each other and move on.”

“I can’t do that.”

“No. You’ve got all that guilt sticking around, don’t you? You want me to hold a grudge. You think it would be better. But that’s not going to happen. I got over mine years ago, and once something like that’s gone, it doesn’t just come back.”

Loki laid his head in his arms.

“You’ve been punished enough,” Tony said. “Grudge or not, that debt’s been paid. You deserve some rest.”

He didn’t. He deserved to burn.

“So what’s with those glasses?” he muttered, eyeing them from where he was with his chin on his arms.

“They’re augmented reality,” Tony said. “They give me a live visual feed and let me do a whole bunch of other things hands-free, to vastly oversimplify. But that covers most of it.”

“Mm... I thought they might be something like that.”

“Yeah, it must have been pretty obvious after a while.” Tony picked them up. “I wear them a lot when I’m working. It helps with all the fine details.”

“May I see?”

“Uh, yeah, actually.” He held the glasses out, and Loki sat up and took them with one hand. “It won’t let you do much, but the feed’s still there.”

“Did you make these?” Loki asked, bringing them close.

“Mostly.”

Tentatively, with a light hold on each arm, Loki slid them on. “Oh, wow,” he said, skimming the on-screen information: various little graphs, charts, and text around the edges, as well as a clock in the corner, which read 3:35:07 PM. A lock on Tony showed basic personal info and biometrics.

“They look good on you,” Tony said.

“Do they?”

“Yeah. Not to rely on a cliché, but they sorta bring out your eyes.”

“Thank you.” Loki stopped to examine more of the room, all of the fresh visuals that appeared to match him. It was seamless. “This is... hm. Impressive? I like it. How long did this take you?”

“I’ve had the technology lying around for years,” Tony said. “I just had to shrink it down and tweak it to fit. That took me... gosh, I don’t know. Some ridiculously short amount of time, I think. I’m at least forty percent sure I did most of this on one of my three-days-no-sleep benders, but don’t take my word for it.”

“Well, that does seem like you.”

“Yeah?”

“I’ve spent enough time here. I’m fairly certain you could build a starship from scratch in a week.”

Tony laughed. “Maybe not a week. Depends how big, I guess.”

Loki took the glasses off and placed them back on the table.

There was another of their brief, weighted pauses, and then the mood shifted again. Tony’s eyes gained that hazy depth they always did when these things happened, and Loki, as he reclined uncomfortably in his seat, was sure his did the same, and for a moment, that was all there was. The universe felt smothering.

“Here’s a dangerous question,” Tony began; he sounded older than he was. “If you still want to die, why are you sitting here with me?”

Apathy. Hope. Something else.

“I think you’re still holding on,” Tony said.

“No,” Loki muttered, closing his eyes.

“Not even a little bit?”

He shook his head.

“Then why?”

Fear. Wasn’t that his reason for everything? “I’m too tired for anything else,” he thinly answered, not willing to say the truth.

“Is that all?”

“Most of it.”

It was silent enough to hear the echoes from the floors below them.

“Will you hold on for me?”

Loki kept his eyes closed and counted. One, two, three, four, five. One, two, three, four, five.

Tony was waiting with that bittersweet look, Loki knew, even without looking. Eyes glossy, like they were about to cry; brows angled softly up, like they were paving the way for those tears. A distant smile that seemed closer to a frown. Kindness. Regret. Too many burdens. One, two, three, four, five. One, two, three, four, five.

—and now he was the one crying; not again, he was thinking, not again, but he just slumped a little with his arms crossed at his lap and a lone curl in his face and quietly wept to himself. “I don’t know,” he sobbed.

“You don’t need to. I just want to see you try.”

“I am! I am. I’m trying so hard.”

“Good. Keep doing that.”

Lie, his mind was screaming, just as it always did; lie to him, lie, lie, lie, don’t let him know, keep him hoping, lie and say things are alright, things are getting better, things as they are now won’t last. Lie—because that was what he did best, and if anyone could swallow those pleasant falsities, no matter what the claims were or how obvious, supposedly, they would be, it was Tony. No one would ever know why the sobs deepened then. Memories. Memories, Loki could swear, and the hopeless fear and agony that plagued them. No. He fucking hated himself and the things he was willing to do. Tony didn’t deserve it.

“Do you want to help with dinner tonight?”

Loki shook his head.

“How come?”

Because he would get even hungrier and want to eat, want so badly to just sit down and have a good, filling meal, but there’d be that voice in his head again saying how dare someone like you, how dare you, how dare you?—and he would either force himself and then have to bear that feeling under his skin all night, or, too afraid of breaking down again, he would just remember the feeling of a low appetite and pretend he wasn’t slowly dying. What was wrong with him? What—

was *wrong* with him?

This wasn’t a god.

“Loki?”

He swallowed back the tears, tried to calm himself. “I mean—” No. No, no, no. “I guess it depends,” he muttered, rubbing his eyes, “what it is and—I don’t know. I can’t think. Just don’t make me measure anything.”

—and as long as there were no sudden noises, no yelling, no drips or spills or splashes, no reminders. Nothing.

“I can do that,” Tony said. “Maybe you can just stand there and be moral support. I don’t want to overwhelm you.”

“Because I’m so useless I can’t even help in the kitchen?”

“Because all the shit you’re going through has taken a toll and you need space to recover. You, Loki, god of chaos, mischief, lies, and a whole bunch of other things that, forgive me, I never learned, as well as a great sorcerer and a keen shot with literally whatever small object you can get your hands on, as *well* as hilarious and charming and just about one of my favourite people in this building, are not useless. Maybe all the things on your mind are making you that way—and no, I can’t deny that; I know there’s a lot you can’t do that should be easy for you—but it’s not who you are. You’re the last person I think of when I hear about someone being useless.”

For the love of—

“If you’re trying to change my mind, it’s not working.”

“I wasn’t expecting it to,” Tony responded, light shrug and all.

“Then what?” Loki snapped. “Why are you wasting your breath when you know I won’t listen?”

“I want to be honest with you. I’m telling you what I think.”

“What you think—”

is another white lie; ~~the same nonsense I’m feeding you~~; the same—

“Maybe,” Tony said. “Maybe not. Does it matter? I mean, as far as I’m concerned, it’s definitely the truth. I believe it. If you don’t, there’s nothing I can really do. But you might as well hear it.”

Loki sat up and glared through the tears. “*Farðu í rassgat*,” he growled.

“Is that all? You’re just going to swear at me? Because I’m here trying to help you—”

“I never asked you to!”

“You live here. I live here. Therefore, I’m helping you.”

“And how will you do that? How can you possibly do that?”

“Carefully. Gently. Patiently.”

If there was another casual, easily translated insult to be said, it wasn’t coming. Loki took a few deep breaths, leaned back in his seat, and began picking at his knuckles.

“You’re alright,” Tony said. “I think you can come out for a bit.”

“I think I’ll start crying again.”

“I’ll delete the footage if that’s what you’re worried about. Same as last time. I can do it in seconds.”

That didn’t solve anything. That solved absolutely nothing. But still, after a moment, after a chance to calm the tears and tuck his hands in his pockets before they went raw, Loki got up, pushed his chair in, and made for the door, stepping as lightly and cautiously as he always did, and Tony followed at his side.

The rest was a blur, lost to daydreams and distant memories.

Loki couldn't quite say he was upset, because he wasn't. He couldn't say he wanted that second attempt now, because he didn't; he was tired, truly, and he couldn't find the strength to sit somewhere and make a proper go at his life. This, as he drifted there on the couch with restless hands and hazy eyes, watching, waiting, was tolerable. He felt a comfortable nothing. What he knew for certain was that he wouldn't stay for dinner, he wouldn't eat it, and if questioned about either, he would cry. He knew that the sight of this awkwardly unkempt, unfocused, unhappy Tony Stark who kept glancing at him every few seconds ached him in the worst ways, and he knew, perhaps most painfully of all, that it was his fault: this, neither of them could deny.

He knew he hated himself just as much for it.

Dinner was easy, if slow. By around five-thirty, all that was left was for the regulars to return from whatever day they'd had, and maybe that would have been fine; maybe the lies would hold and no suspicions would arise, and maybe he would, eventually, manage a half-portion or two without suffering that creeping disgust under his skin. But no. He was too afraid. Tony certainly wanted to say something, but save for another worried almost-smile handed to him between distant conversations and detached, carefully guarded small talk with those few who had begun to show, there was nothing. Loki appreciated his attempt at a believable lie, at least.

"Can I go back now?" he quietly asked, joining him by one of the kitchen-adjacent walls.

"Right this instant?"

"Please. I'm getting nervous again."

Always that. This time, honestly, Loki couldn't blame him for letting some pity shine through.

"Alright," Tony said, and he went first to fill a bowl—two, because of course he did; Loki stared down at the floor, hands clasped in front of him, and tried not to panic—and then, just like that, they were out. No one paid them any mind.

Six o'clock took forever. Then seven. All they did was waste time and words at the table.

Loki wasn't surprised when Tony asked to stay another night, nor was he particularly upset. Fact was, he'd expected it. What he might have done was insist they sleep separately, but the logic here wasn't subtle: sharing a bed meant that any movement—any sneaking out, the reasons for which went unspoken—would be felt. So, after tidying everything, after a careful cleaning spell too quick to raise any criticizing sighs, they settled far from each other on opposite sides of the bed, just as the previous night, and that was that.

Why did this happen?

I don't know, love.

...

By morning, the tense distance between them had gone, and Loki, finding himself waking with his face in Tony's chest and his arms drawn tightly around him, had two thoughts. First was that it did feel as comforting as he'd imagined it would, warm and familiar in a strange way only former enemies could understand. Following that, of course, he blushed, spoke a thousand different self-aimed insults in his mind, and then spent the next ten minutes wondering if he should pull away and act like it had been Tony, not him, who'd reached for some soothing touch in the midst of a restless dream, or if, because he knew whatever façade of power and dignity he'd managed had long since been worn to nothing, he should just stay.

Damn him: obviously, he chose the latter.

It was another few minutes before Tony seemed to stir, and two, three more before Loki dared to let go and creep onto his back, a little more respectably apart from him. Then five. Six, maybe; it wasn't like he was counting.

"You awake?" Tony eventually asked, sleep still clinging to his voice, and honestly, Loki wasn't sure: he never knew these days.

"Mostly," he said.

Tony squinted at him. "Coffee?"

"I... sure."

It took a moment, but Tony got up, awkwardly gripping the side of the bed, and then he stopped, glanced at him, and said, "You need more stuff in this room."

"Probably."

"You don't care?"

"Not really."

"Well, I'm gonna go find something."

Loki sighed and followed him.

Things were slow, and Loki was as distracted as he usually was as he tiptoed at Tony's side. He didn't mind this; he was already a little bored and wanting to return to whatever dream he'd left, and if nothing else, that trip to one of the supply closets down from the lounge offered some variety.

"What do you want to do today?" Tony asked as he picked apart the stacks of boxes.

"Nothing."

"Nothing? Not even sleep?"

No response.

"Hey, hold this," Tony said, handing him an unopened electric kettle.

"This is unnecessary."

“Most things in life are. Sure does help, though.”

“We could just use what’s here.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You don’t want to come all this way every time you want to make something to drink and you know it.”

“Well, there’s a regular kettle in my room.”

“When was the last time you used it?”

“... Recently.”

Tony took out another box and held it at his chest. “Ever tried making coffee manually?”

“Once,” Loki said. “Maybe more than that.”

“Sucks, doesn’t it?”

“Not necessarily.”

“Ah, see, when you say ‘not necessarily,’ that implies you need to take extra care to make it not suck. Maybe you have that care, but I don’t.” Tony motioned for the kettle. “Hit me.”

“Are you—”

“Yes, I’m sure. I’m not as flimsy as I look.”

Loki placed the box atop the one Tony was holding.

“Can you grab a tin?” Tony asked, glancing at the extra grounds on one of the shelves.

“You’re not going to try carrying that, too, are you?”

“I might.”

Loki took that himself. “I don’t think so,” he said, and then he headed back down the hall; Tony followed.

Last night’s dinner was alright, so while Tony unpacked everything and set to work calibrating the coffee maker, Loki retrieved one of the portions, casually reheated it with a tap of his finger (since it wasn’t that straining and he couldn’t be bothered to do much else, and Tony wasn’t looking, anyway), and then plopped himself down at the table.

“You want me to go get cream or something?” Tony asked at some point. “Or are you okay with black?”

“It’s all the same to me.”

Emboldened, Tony went back to fiddling with buttons and supplies while Loki stared at the food on the table and tried not to start panicking again. It was vaguely relieving, at least, to know that he was too preoccupied to pay any attention.

They can’t hurt me. They can’t hurt me. They can’t hurt me.

“Mug preference?”

“None.”

I am safe here. Nothing can happen. Nothing—

Thud. Loki pulled his drink close.

“I think we should go out today,” Tony said.

“No.”

“No?”

Loki shook his head.

“Thought you’d laugh at the ‘go out’ part, double meaning and all that. I know that’s kinda your thing. You’re still not doing too good, are you?”

I am calm.

“No.”

“You know any other words?”

“... No.”

“What do you think about me not shaving for almost three days?”

“It suits you.”

Tony smiled. “Let me guess: you deal with that magically.”

“No,” Loki said, shaking his head again. “I don’t grow facial hair.”

“None?”

“None.”

“Genetics, or?”

“Something like that.”

“Cool.”

This was going to be a long day. Loki cooled his drink and slowly started on it.

“I think it would be good for you,” Tony said. “Going outside for a bit. And I know what you’re thinking, but if it gets to be too much—”

“When,” Loki muttered.

“—we can... always head back inside. Shit. Why are you so sure?”

“This room is safe.”

“And anything beyond it isn’t.”

“I think I should just rest.”

“Rest as in keep sleeping all day or hang out here and do nothing?”

“Both. Are there any other magic users in this building?”

“What?”

WHY DID YOU SAY THAT

“Um—”

YOU IDIOT

“I just—”

IDIOTIDIOTIDIOTIDIOTIDIOT

“I wanted to—”

Ward the building? What the fuck is wrong with you?

“Nothing,” he quietly managed, and he curled into himself, squeezing the mug tight at his lap, and tried to steady his breathing, his voice. “I was just curious.”

That delay was telling.

“It’s only you,” Tony said. “At least as far as I know. We had some others, but I haven’t seen them for a while.”

Loki didn’t respond.

“What do you do for fun?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“I don’t like anything.”

“I thought you read.”

“I can’t focus.”

“You haven’t tried yet. Maybe today’s different.”

Again, Loki didn’t respond. He only sipped his coffee, eyes narrowed at the table, thinking, vaguely, that maybe awakesness wasn’t worth worsening whatever mood he’d gotten himself into.

“I have some paperbacks in my room,” Tony said.

“I’m not moving.”

“I could bring them here.”

And leave me alone?

“Or we could stay and do nothing, I guess. Your choice.”

Damn it.

Slowly, Loki got up, holding the mug in that nervous two-handed grip, and tiptoed out of the room. He looked once over his shoulder and then not again. This wasn’t real, said that same voice in his head.

Tony’s bedroom was set in a separate area at the far end, with a brief length of wall between it and the rest of the suite. He disappeared inside for a minute before returning with a handful of worn novels. “I see that look,” he said as he dropped them on the coffee table. “Trust me, if you spill something on these, I honestly couldn’t care less.”

It was a small comfort. Either way, Loki appreciated it.

“Anything else?”

Loki crammed himself into one of the couches with a random paperback from the pile and flipped it open.

“Okay,” Tony said. He carried his things to the corner and got to work.

It wasn’t too bad. After many shaky minutes struggling to pick apart all the distractions and remember how to read, Loki managed to work through the text. He didn’t really enjoy it and didn’t even feel like reading but he didn’t want to do nothing so he stuck with it. The hours went slowly, but they were easy. Forcing down some books and a few bites of lunch and dinner was painful but doable and the next day was similar. No bloodshed. Enough to thin out any suspicion and stave off an argument. In those few days Loki became an expert at it. But even the best lies did not always hold and for someone with a long history of sometimes violently troubled sleep it was inevitable that something would come, which by strange fortune coincided with Tony still holding his little paranoid vigils in the room. The white lies turned to static. Tony, wide awake and sitting in bed hours later coding on his phone, heard quite a bit.

“*Fyrirgefðu,*” Loki coughed into the sheets partway through a dream. Tearing up. “*Fyr—mér þykir það leitt! Þetta svo—*”

Wasn’t he? Tony stopped mid-line and glanced at him. Nervous, he kept a transcript. He kept it for a very long many hours. It felt like he was listening to a conversation he should not have overheard, but he didn’t know what else to do. It was hard not to listen. It was hard not to skim the transcript between other work. It was hard not to translate it. It was hard not to read everything. Most of it was incoherent stutters and sobs; he took those out. It was hard to look at them.

I’m sorry! I failed you all. I don’t deserve it. I’m sorry. Sorry! Stop. Stop. Have mercy on me, sir.

I don’t understand. Why am I still here? Why didn’t I burn? Go on, sir: burn me now. Punish me. Let me bleed. Do it! Do it, come on. You can’t let me live. Look at this worthless beast. Burn me!

Come on. Please. Please.

I'm so tired, Mother. I'm tired. I want to come home. I'm tired of this pain. Hold me again. Let me rest. I've had enough. Do you hear me? I give up.

In a way Tony had already known, but it was heartbreaking to see like this. All the awkward hate and lies fell apart. All the fights. All the promises about trying; that this too, however long it took, would pass. That things were fine. He reread the words over and over with tired eyes and wondered how it had come to this, sitting there coding in the middle of the night with a pillow up against his back and Loki in tears beside him. Maybe he knew that too. He deleted the transcript and never mentioned anything.

“Did I do something wrong?” Loki murmured into the blanket.

“No,” Tony said. “Go back to sleep.”

There was a sharp kick, and then Loki wormed himself a little deeper under the sheets and, in that same distant, dreamy voice, added, “You’re so good to me, *elskan mín.*”

Then there was silence, and it was like nothing had ever happened.

‡

Morning came gently, a warm dawn no loud noises or commotions from the other rooms as they awoke in each other’s arms and then drifted apart before either could notice. Things were already so uncomfortably intimate; though those sleepy touches calmed whatever fear chose to linger, that was all they were. There might have been jokes some other day and certainly Loki would have had dozens, but he felt numb when he thought about it. More on him cuddling an enemy in his sleep so he didn’t have another nightmare. Sharing a bed so he couldn’t sneak out and lodge another knife in his gut. It could have been the setup to a cheesy romance but felt like a bad comedy. This or he was institutionalized; of the two it was only slightly better.

Tony still hadn’t shaved the scruff off his face and he went to do so while Loki distractedly watched the kettle, saying something about how familiar routines helped maintain sanity during stressful times. This was true, but the words went largely ignored; Loki had no such routines and he was sure that if he did they’d be too impossible. There was no point trying.

He did feel a little better physically but not much else had changed. His head felt clouded over and he wanted to go back to sleep, maybe get this stupid situation over with and leave. But that clearly wasn’t happening soon. It almost felt like Tony was in it out of spite: keeping someone alive was no longer a hope but a challenge, a kind of infuriating tough love chokehold with only one way out. If consulting the rest of them for advanced psychological intervention wasn’t an option at this stage then this was. And so was playing along. Loki was reluctant to cause any more of a commotion forcing his way out, but he was still Loki and he still had his lies and though there was no claiming everything was perfect they could try. This was rock bottom and there was nothing deeper. But trust him to dig.

Whether or not he really planned on that second go as soon as no one was looking, he did still make an effort. He made himself some tea and untangled his hair at the table while Tony washed up and didn't mind it much.

"What are we having today?" Tony asked, joining him in the opposite seat.

"I don't care."

"With a side of low appetite and apathy?"

Though faint, Loki managed a smile.

"I was thinking brunch at the seafood place I told you about," Tony said.

"Mm... that's a little much, isn't it?"

"Is it?"

Loki might have shrugged, but he only sighed and returned to his tea.

"You need some variety," Tony said. "You can't keep sitting here all day."

"What kind of driver are you?"

"Responsible when needed. I won't do anything crazy."

"And the restaurant?"

"Generally deserted. It's a bit expensive, so they don't get all that much action. We'll blend right in."

Or maybe they wouldn't.

"How expensive?" Loki muttered, taking another sip.

"Billionaire pocket change," Tony said. "Less than I make in a minute."

There were a dozen other questions Loki would have also asked, such as how fast he could run or how well he could hide or whether Tony was still somehow lying and only interested in landing him a fate worse than death, but he was being paranoid enough. Such inquiries were better left unspoken.

"What do you think?"

"Not today," Loki quietly answered. "I'm sorry."

Tony seemed somewhat disappointed, but nothing else. "Alright," he said. "Then maybe just regular breakfast here, followed by... come on, you do need some fresh air. A walk around the property? That's like, ten minutes. You can do that."

No, he couldn't. Not at all. If they stayed inside then maybe no one would get hurt again. It was worth the lack of fresh air to prove the theory right.

"Hey."

... one, two, three, four, five.

“Hey, look at me.”

Loki glanced at him over the mug.

“Omelette and a cheap movie?”

With a walk between the two. Tony wasn't very subtle. Loki involuntarily considered killing him and then choked on his tea. “That sounds nice,” he said, still a slight, lingering stiffness to his voice, and Tony raised an eyebrow.

“You're not just saying that to appease me, are you?”

“No. No, I...”

“I'm kidding. Come on.”

Not much of a choice there. How painful it was to drag himself anywhere but here. Better he cross his arms and stomp a foot and outright refuse because this was stupid: it wouldn't solve anything and it wasn't anything anyone could force him to do. Better he rot in the dusty confines of the guest room he should have vacated weeks ago. Might as well. But for all his I-am-better-than-yous and you-can't-make-mes he couldn't really find it in him to fight back, so he tried not to. And if he let his mind continue wandering and cast himself so far from reality that he couldn't feel it, following a flow he didn't want to stopped being as unpleasant. If the floor wasn't real and his dreamy footsteps weren't real then neither was anything else and all of the beautiful horrors in the universe couldn't make it past him.

He anchored himself to the scent of blooming flowers, a faded meld of memory and imagination that felt like the only part that was real.

Everything was fine.

Are you lying again?

The weather was fair: blue sky and hot, squint-inducing sunlight, which, though a little awkward to bear, felt good. Once Loki remembered that he still owned a comfortably non-magicked pair of shades, and once he ignored, to what small extent he could, the half-lucid terror and detachment that only seemed worse out here, he didn't have much left in the way of complaints. Their time outside, which consisted of him tiredly skirting the park perimeter and Tony guarding his back, was, for the most part, silent. Other than a hopeful compliment on the sunglasses and a poll on movie choices, there was nothing. If he was still lying, it must not have been obvious. They returned to the common space, to the little room at the end that had lost its original purpose, and, deciding on one of several cheesy, wholesomely distracting films (easy watches triple-verified by Tony with plenty of evidence to nearly never worsen a low mood) they sat together, a person's width between them, and that was the afternoon: two back-to-back comedies in the comfort of each other's presence. Time-killing, because nothing else would suffice; because that, even now, especially now, was all that could be done.

Tony said there was honour in such small attempts, but Loki knew it wasn't true. He knew he was weak. He knew his ancestors were frowning down at him, and in the shadow of every sight and sound that suddenly reawakened that impossible dread of being held slave to pain, to obedience, to

a belief that he was angrier than he was and that it wasn't wrong to be treated like a dog (and then those thoughts started piling up again and he eventually found himself back in his room, his real room, forlornly examining the trees and skyscrapers beyond the compound's limit while Tony researched something on the couch) he told himself that. Knowing beyond all the fear and grief that burned him with every movement that he had failed so as a god, as someone who should have been beyond such things, was painful. It was insult to injury and nothing Tony said could change that. At times it felt like the people who had hurt him were winning even in death; others it felt like he was proving everyone right when they said he would never be as good. He knew what he felt. It was a shame no one could see him now to know what a disappointment he'd turned out to be.

This still wasn't real. He stepped a little closer to the window, face pressed to the glass, and tried glimpsing what lay in the blind spot beneath him.

Everything is fine. Everything is fine. Everything is fine.

Grass and concrete.

(You lie. — Always; what is there left but lies?)

—and then maybe he got too distracted, too defenceless, because he heard a bang echo from somewhere and it hit him like nothing else: he snapped around, eyes wide, hands reaching for his knives, for anything—

“Hey,” Tony said, and Loki glanced at him for a split second; “Breathe. It's alright.”

No. No, no, no—

“Loki.”

COME ON BREATHE WHY CAN'T YOU

“Hey.”

(behind him, he touched his palms to the glass)

“Stay back!” he screamed.

No one ever knew what happened next, only that time seemed to stop and when it restarted Tony was awkwardly pacing the room many metres away and Loki was hyperventilating behind a magical barrier under the table. Glittering hands wrapped around his knees. Familiar words playing on repeat in his head. Stubborn but alive somehow, selfish and undeserving and not understanding, wanting power but too afraid of the cost. It felt like someone was touching him again but no one was there and he toyed with a dagger while he tried to recount the situation. Old pain but also not knowing who he could trust. If it happened once it could happen again. Selfish selfish selfish

“Loki—”

“I can feel them!” he half-sobbed, half-screamed, holding his hands in front of him, curling deeper against the table. “Get it out get it out get it *out*—”

“Look at me. You're making it worse. Breathe.”

“I said stay back! Stay the fuck back, Tony, I swear—”

apparently yelled something to the effect of ‘I’m fucking table!’ and was up there for all of two seconds before falling off the side and fracturing my collarbone. Then threw up and passed out. Fun times.”

Somehow, even though he still couldn’t speak well through the sobs and the tears soaking into his cheeks had not gone, Loki laughed. “That’s terrible,” he said. “Worst bone to break.”

“Tell me about it. I couldn’t move my upper body right for months.”

They sat there for a while. But the shield still didn’t go down; it swirled and sparkled in hazy green phosphorescence that seemed to vanish when looking at it directly. Sometimes a piece of dust crossed it and burned up in a tiny spark. Loki managed to stop crying not realizing he had started.

“Do you still like chocolate?” Tony asked.

“No.”

“Oh. I *was* going to say I had a secret stash of chocolate cookies in my workshop if you thought one would help right now. No gluten or dairy. I discovered them the last time I was eliminating stuff and thought they were pretty good.”

Loki stared at the inside of the shield for a long time. “You’d have to leave me here to get them,” he muttered. “Thought you didn’t trust me to be alone.”

“You could come with me.”

“I’d rather not.”

“Then I’m sure you could wait about twenty seconds.”

Loki put the dagger away and waited. It didn’t really help but it was a nice gesture, if a little mocking in spirit. Tony had to set the box down on the floor so the shield didn’t bounce it back. Sharing a secret stash of cookies together felt unusually... sacred. They were good and Loki felt bad for accepting them.

“Can you describe it?”

“You’re running,” he said into the flickering shield. “You keep running. You need to stop but you can’t. So you keep running. You run until your legs hurt and you can’t breathe. You start tripping over yourself. But you keep running. Even then you can’t shake the fear of someone catching up to you. Getting killed or worse. Of course it’s worse. Oh... there’s a lot of shame. If you’re not afraid of it happening again you’re ashamed that it happened before. It feels like everything is too big and closing in on you all at once. Agh. Why am I telling you this?”

No clue. Tony seemed apologetic, as if he knew he was encroaching on forbidden knowledge.

“If you stop you die,” Loki said. “If you turn your back you die. Everyone’s an enemy even if they’re not. If you forget then someone will remind you again. And the longer you’ve let your guard down the worse it is when they do. Then...”

Then that feeling.

“You’re there again,” he said, fighting another sob. “And you don’t die. You never do. It would be easier if you did. It feels like you will. They say dying is painful and frightening sometimes, but many things are. Eventually it doesn’t seem so bad. You’ve weathered worse than that. Everything is a threat. Every threat is a reminder. Everyone who looks at you wrong looks just like the last person who looked at you wrong. If it happened once then it happens again and when it keeps happening so often then it’s only a matter of time. So when you stop running, you start waiting. Every morning you get up and you wait. Every hour. Every second. All you do is wait. You brace yourself for so long that by the time something happens you’ve already lost your guard again. But it doesn’t kill you. It doesn’t make you stronger either. It just hurts. If you strike back then it proves you deserve it. Maybe it bites you. Not everyone will see you’re defending yourself. Not everyone will care. They build their own stories of you. They tainted you. You want to claw your skin apart and take everything out of you but you can’t. You’ve tried. Every time you look at yourself you see the things you’ve survived. You see the vilest crimes and the darkest places. Nothing you do can erase them.”

And then the words drowned in his tears and the sentence fell apart to sobs. Many minutes of loud and trembling sobs. The awful kind. But Tony knew better than to interrupt and the crying passed its course on its own, never quite stopping but pulling back like a wave away from the shore.

“Look what they did to you,” Loki eventually managed. “You grew up thinking you were so strong but now you feel nothing but small and weak and—and... you’re still there... you’re breathing so fast you’re lightheaded and just begging the universe to wake up and go home and have all of this, all these years of fear and agony and not knowing where you belong or when they’ll come for you be a nightmare. You can imagine it perfectly. Don’t worry, love. It was all a bad dream. All of it. Every little thing.”

He stopped to wipe the tears from his eyes and steady his voice.

“Over and over,” he said. “When you’re that terrified it’s all you can do. You pretend you’re not there. But you know that’s not the case. And so instead you have all these memories on your back and this knowledge that—that, look, you fucked up! That they’re coming for you, that they’ll hurt you again, that every step you make was your fatal mistake and it will be all you can think about as it finally gets you. Tell yourself you deserve it and it might be easier to stomach. You already know by the time someone kills you that you had it coming. Good riddance. Maybe you see yourself coming to in whatever shithole afterlife you managed to scrape together and you just start crying and never stop. Get up and wish you weren’t just imagining it again and carry on with your life knowing the best you’ve ever been was a grievance. Well, good for you. Laugh it up. Keep laughing. Laugh hard enough and you can learn to block out the feeling of them inside you. Maybe enough lies can make it true.”

Many more long minutes passed in silence. Tony looked like he was trying not to cry himself, too understanding for comfort. Loki stole another cookie knowing it was probably the only thing he’d eat for a while. The shield slowly vanished.

“I don’t know what to say,” Tony finally confessed. “I’m sorry. That sounds awful.”

“It just keeps getting worse.”

“Things don’t worsen forever. There’s a limit to how bad something can get.”

“I can’t last that long.”

“I’m sure you can.”

“No. No, Tony. Look at me. I’m in agony. I feel like I’m burning every second I’m awake. It’s just fear. It’s all fear. At night, I’ve got my dreams to fill that gap. There’s no escape.” Loki closed his eyes, tried to fight another wave of tears. “I’m not that strong,” he softly said. “I’m not who you met six years ago. I’ve never been. I’m just a good liar.”

“There’s truth in every lie,” Tony said. “You have it in you. I know you do.”

“Why am I still cowering under a table, then?”

“Instincts. Sometimes someone’s first reaction when they’re scared is to fight. Sometimes you run. Sometimes you freeze up and can’t do anything. That doesn’t matter. It happens to all of us. What’s important is what you do after.”

“So if I choose to stay here, what does that make me?”

“Nothing. You’re just doing what feels okay. If you’re calmer here, then sure. You’re keeping your best interests in mind. That’s totally legit.”

“I can’t do this forever.”

“No, probably not. You could, but you’ll get hungry. This floor’s also horrible for sleeping.”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I. Here’s where you and I differ on this: you’re looking at the big picture. I’m not. If all you’re doing is thinking about when you’ll get better and how long you have left to go, you’re going to get overwhelmed real fast. Look at the days. Look at how you’re going to get through the hours. If you stick to the little things, it’ll seem a lot simpler. What are you going to have for dinner tonight? Do you know?”

“Food, most likely.”

For want of a laugh, Tony smiled to himself—a warm, closed-mouth smile that coloured his cheeks red. Loki would have joined him if not for the tears he was barely holding back.

“Well,” Tony said, “it probably won’t be anything with grains or milk. And I guess you’d want some protein to keep you on your feet. That could be chicken, or maybe some of the fish hanging around in the freezer.”

Loki groaned something into his knees. “You never tried the pickled herrings,” he muttered, and then, abruptly, the sobs hit.

It took Tony a second; he sighed and said a tired curse under his breath, and then, “Sorry. I completely forgot about those. Are they all gone?”

“Yes!”

“Well, there’s always next time. Hey, maybe we can find something here. Some stores sell the craziest stuff in the foreign food aisle.”

“It’s not the same.”

“Then how about you take me back to that market?”

“No.”

“Oh. Alright. Then what if—”

“Stop.” Loki leaned a little deeper into his knees. “You’re too loud.”

If he tried he could still imagine the feeling before he switched himself on the Statesman, the terror but also the longing of watching fate from the outside like that. Staring death in the eyes and knowing that at least it was quick. The bones slipping past each other could have been his if he didn’t fall apart into grief and pull back instead, think that he could have solved it all and then prove himself wrong in the same breath. If he hadn’t dealt the killing blow then someone else would have; it didn’t need to be him shouldering everything. It didn’t need to be him choosing to be brave only to soak up the fallout, standing his ground before someone just for their voice to continue haunting him. There was something comforting in the finality of death that nothing else really matched. It would have hurt less if he died. It had looked quick from where he sat picking illusions in the fires; of every precipice he had passed in his life it was still one of the most tempting leaps he ever could have made. And he missed that feeling.

“I don’t understand you,” he sighed after a while. “You keep telling me it’s just... generosity. I believe you. But there must be a part of you that sees me and remembers what I’ve done to you and laughs. I’d think I got what I deserve. No offence, but... what the hell happened to you to be able to look at screaming on the floor without at least finding it a little ironic?”

“Shit life,” Tony said. “It humbles you. You stop finding these things funny after you’ve experienced them.”

“You’re not the person I met.”

“No. Not at all.”

Loki moved to sit with his back against the window. Not again. He tried to see the tomorrows but couldn’t find much. “Can you make it stop?”

“No one can,” Tony said. “The best anyone can ever do is help you get there. They can get you pretty close, but you have to do that part yourself.”

Loki wondered why he had asked at all. Tony didn’t know what he was doing and they didn’t even like each other. The whole thing was in shambles.

“What’ll you do now?” Tony asked.

“Something.”

“What kind of something?”

Anything. The thoughts were all hazy again; he couldn’t find an answer if he tried. If they were asking, his kind of something probably involved dying.

“Third movie, maybe,” Tony said. “Or I could see if Pete’s free to hang out.”

“Don’t drag him into this.”

“It’s not—”

“No?”

“No. He likes you. He’s a good kid. You know that. He can’t fake something like this.”

“I believe you.”

“Do you?”

Barely. A little more and he would swear Tony was faking too. But that went unspoken; those things always did.

“There’s a recipe I liked,” Loki eventually said, and he freed one hand and pulled it to his thigh, tap, tap, tap to keep him sane, and added under his breath, “if I can remember it.” If I can think long enough. All those ifs; he didn’t even want to try. “Maybe...”

“We could. It’s not too early.”

The recipe was nothing special: just that fish from the freezer and some vegetables cooked in a very particular way with very particular spices, most of which, given they were on an entirely different planet, had to be improvised and substituted. But there was nothing better to do, so they went to give it a try. It worked well enough and whoever was there for dinner thought it was pretty good. Loki himself ate a small portion, but he ate. The rest of the evening passed as a whisper. There were no other moments and the moon’s glow across the room, broken only where Tony wasn’t yet willing to sleep and had some books and a tiny reading lamp at the table, offered some distant sense of comfort. Sometimes he dozed on the couch or went out for a while. Sometimes Loki did nothing but sit in on the floor in front of the window and try to meditate under the moonlight. It was hard to tell why they were still together; occasionally Loki remembered the scars healing on him and wondered if they were waiting for them to finish fading. Or maybe Tony had panicked realizing how dangerous the situation had become right under everyone’s noses and was keeping an eye on him at all costs until something could be worked out. But they didn’t really bother each other for the most part.

Loki would never know exactly what happened that night. He woke with a sort of clarity, and as he pushed away the last imprints of smoke and flames on his skin it lingered. As he crept into the kitchen, hair tangled around his shoulders and one pant leg crinkled up a little higher than the other, hoping to do some good, it lingered. He made a two-person amount of coffee and a two-person breakfast he didn’t want and he waited at his usual seat, alone beside the dawning sky with a child’s serving of both, for Tony to wake. The view reminded him of home. He couldn’t say exactly what it was that he felt, either. Clarity, he called it, but it was more of a tired understanding: he was sure that if they tried hard enough the days would feel less like one long moment stretched into infinity and more like what they were before, that all this talk would mean something, but when he looked at himself he only saw more of that same lie. It was stupid to think that this one month in his ocean of years should hold any significance and he was conscious enough to know he was right, but it was hard to shake. Much had changed; now he no longer had even Asgard to fall back on. He was alone in this and he didn’t know where to go from here.

Tony took as long as he always did to wake, though there was a second when, upon turning and touching only mattress, he startled; that brought him back a little quicker. Then he sat up, saw Loki, and flopped onto the bed once more with an audible grunt.

“You need to stop staying up until three in the morning,” Loki said.

“Probably,” Tony responded, the words half-audible beneath a pillow. “And it wasn’t three: it was one thirty-seven.”

“That’s not much better.”

“Sorry.”

Loki watched him spend the next few minutes climbing off the bed and almost laughed. Almost, as usual, was not enough, but it came close. Tony slogged through his morning routine and then joined him.

It was a bit of a hassle at this point and they probably should have gone back to their own respective business, but they still hadn’t really discussed the situation in full nor found anyone else willing to take up the supervision. And it *was* supervision, and very annoying at that, but there weren’t many other options with regards to keeping a terminally suicidal man alive on short notice. Lord help anyone who tried driving him to a hospital because he would sooner boil their insides. Maybe it was a miracle this worked at all. Despite everything Loki didn’t hate the company and was just too proud to ask for it.

At some point after breakfast they found themselves at the dock again, considering options under the morning sun. Peter was busy, Tony mentioned; so was everyone else. As for him, there was nothing: they could spend those hours however they wished. Loki suspected that Tony was cancelling and rescheduling an entire litany of important matters for his sake and then decided that was definitely the case and then, as he tended to do, blamed himself for everything but tried not to show it. There was nothing so flattering as someone pausing their life for you and one of the highest respects, but it was hard to keep the lie up like he usually did. Flattery was nice when he could believe it. He was days from almost bleeding himself dry and staring at his and a former enemy’s reflection in the waves. He did not believe it.

In the end they just did the same as always: Tony’s room, Loki struggling to read on the couch while Tony continued some menial work in the corner, with soft and fuzzy instrumentals that almost could have been called rock playing in the background to ease the dismal silence. There was a conversation, but Loki didn’t remember it. He remembered, for those however many hours spent slumped between the back- and armrest with one hand fidgeting to the point of blood and an unseeing gaze on a sentence he’d been trying and failing to process, that he was counting ways to disappear. Dinner came and went and the smiles they shared seemed genuine, but the energy was fading. The food was hard to eat again. The room was falling apart again. The voices at the table were back to being a threat.

It hurt to think like this. Loki wanted not to care. He wanted, as was the custom for anything and everything in the universe, to throw worry to the wind and do what suited him and only him. He wanted to proceed as himself again, passionately undaunted and unstoppable. A menace. He could have. And after a while he did. Which was not to say he sat straight up, flipped the table, and then shouted to everyone in the room, “Farewell, you insincere fuckers; I’ve had it,” before promptly teleporting to another continent, because that would have been preposterous. He only admitted that he couldn’t eat, apologized, and upheld the restless small talk. It was a familiar group with Tony and the others but alienating. He worried that they hated him again and felt awkward trying to act like he belonged. Nothing happened but he expected it.

Watching Tony fumble his way through excuses and cover stories was embarrassing but worked somehow, and, despite everything, Loki appreciated the effort. There was a time and place and this wasn't it.

"Goodnight," Loki mustered as Pepper turned to leave.

"Goodnight," she offered in return, and to Tony, a hopeful smile, instead: that they'd have another chance later in the evening. Then she was gone.

"You should go," Loki said.

"But you," Tony protested. "No. I can't."

"You can't keep doing this."

"Well, what do you want me to do?"

Nothing. Loki leaned back in his seat and uneasily rubbed at one thumb's knuckle, wondering, distantly, if he had seen Steve glance at them.

"Loki."

"Don't yell at me," he muttered.

"I'm not—"

Loki gave him a tired look.

"Okay," Tony eventually said. "Maybe there's... I don't know. I don't want to leave you alone."

"For how long?"

There didn't seem to be an answer to that. Of course they couldn't frantically keep each other at arm's length more than a few days, only long enough for the damage to heal. And then what? Tea and biscuits, maybe? Back to the usual anarchy? Tony said nothing.

"I think you should go see Pepper," Loki said. "She misses you."

"And if I find you dead by morning?"

"You'll be alright."

You: not I. Loki caught it as soon as he said it, and he thought, by the sudden stillness between them, that so had Tony. His chest tightened.

"No," Tony said, "I don't think so."

Steve was still looking at them, Loki swore. He felt himself sinking.

"Are you going to eat this?"

"Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

“I promise.”

“Mm. You don’t break those, right?”

He tried not to. But, as with everything, there were times he could do nothing else. Some truths were fragile; others never were.

“I like you,” Tony said. “Please.”

Loki glanced over his shoulder. “I don’t hear that often,” he said, and, reflexively, he looked past the other shoulder. Something dropped somewhere and he tensed. “You seem to like people rather easily.”

“Loki.”

“What do you hope to achieve by constantly saying my name?”

Tony pressed a hand to his cheek. “I’m... lost. I don’t know.”

“That’s not like you.”

“No. None of it is.”

Loki moved to sit a little closer to the chair’s edge.

“Tomorrow?”

He couldn’t even answer. “I’m going to go finish that book,” he muttered, even though he had no real plans to do so, and he stood, silently pushed his chair in, and tiptoed back down the hall. Tony didn’t follow right then, for which he was grateful; he felt sick just looking at him.

Pepper was already unpacking for the night, which made retrieving the novel perilous. Loki knocked on the doorframe, darted in, grabbed it from where it was still on the couch, and darted back out, all while apologizing profusely. He thought he was being pathetic, and when he returned to his room, he didn’t even look at the cover: he left the book by the others and then sat at the table with his head in his hands and tried to come to terms with what just happened. All the fear kicked in again. All the anger. All the grief. This place wasn’t safe. In a fit of desperation he did something stupid. Frantically started looking for a contingency. Anything would do.

Everything still left in his storage was mostly for preparedness: weapons he had picked up over the years, magical ingredients including herbs, metals, and more animal bones than he knew what to do with, a few spare garments and sets of armour, a small selection of prepared spells and potions, and various other belongings scattered in between. Some of these things had been there for longer than he remembered. He summoned a vial of dark, glittering liquid and placed it on the table.

He didn’t know why. He didn’t know what he thought would happen. But he did. Coward, he thought, and then, with a slow motion of his thumb, he popped the cork.

The energy inside burned. It seemed to burst out in waves, an invisible cloud of danger that could not be seen or smelled but rather felt—warned the magically sensitive and the magically inclined in a way that many couldn’t grasp. Everything was screaming at him to get away. He wasn’t even that close: he still had it in front of him, on the table, and, after withdrawing his hand and leaning back

in his seat, it might have been far enough. But this was strong magic. And this was exactly how it was supposed to feel.

He lifted the vial to his mouth.

This was not self-harm gone rogue: this, no ifs or hows, would kill him. He would be dying the instant it entered his body and though there were a handful of things that could save him, though he'd certainly heard about pristine recoveries from contact with this spell, there was nothing like that to be found here. Left to his own devices, there wouldn't even be the time. This was final. And Tony. Twice was too much, and twice, knowing that there was no coming back from this, that all they'd have left would be helpless watching and waiting—

Tony wouldn't be alright. But who was he, anyway?

... A friend. An acquaintance. Someone who had offered kindness and generosity when it was most needed, blind of every thought begging to run and hide and unflinching when the danger proved real, blissfully reckless through every thick and thin. Not much, but enough. Comfort. Warmth. Light in the darkness. Loki was rather fond of him, admittedly. In the face of everything, though, fondness meant nothing, and fondness, he had always told himself, was better burned before it killed him. There was no place for such emotions. It didn't solve anything. It wouldn't solve anything. Damn it all, he deserved this.

He choked down the discomfort

and closed his eyes

and drank every

last

drop.

Past the strangling aura and all the screaming refusals clawing their way back up his throat there was nothing unpleasant about the potion. It was sweet and warm and tasted of herbs and flowers, as if it had been decocted in the finest spiced liqueur, and seemed to bring a sort of almost-drunk calm. It didn't taste lethal; it tasted like something to be mixed into someone's food or drink in secret. And only a few drops of it sufficed to slowly kill them over the next days and weeks. Loki had downed the whole thing undiluted like a shot. He didn't know why he did it and he expected to panic at the sudden realization, but he didn't feel much. He wondered where he had gotten this. He wondered how long he had kept it with him. It seemed like forever.

He destroyed the vial and sank a little deeper into his chair. He was a liar to the grave.

This amount would still give him enough time to leave, and he knew he ought to. He would leave, quietly and politely, and find a place, some soft meadow or forest or a well-worn path by a fjord somewhere, and lay his head down and let the magic carry him away. No one would be there to watch as he faded. He told himself that: I'm leaving now, Tony. I lied. I did something and I don't want to put you through all the grief of seeing. He told himself because he wasn't as cold as people

thought. Because no matter how much he tried to stay away from sentiment and sympathy it always came back to him. It was why he had made it here at all; if he hadn't considered his screaming brother and whether everyone else could be saved then he wouldn't have bothered surviving.

But he still did not leave. He rested his arms on the table, and his head on them, and waited.

How fucking heartless he was.

He could have been scared. He might have believed he should be—or that after years of self-loathing and misery and the knowledge that he had never been good enough, that he was an imposter on the best of days and a filthy monster who never belonged on his worst ones, and that whoever thought otherwise had been poisoned by his lies, he would find nothing but darkness when and if he awoke. That he was only making things worse. No eternal festivities, no reunion with the few he had ever loved, no respite from the pain. Misery at best. The chance that he was trading such a brief agony for one he could never escape was terrifying and he should have felt it. But he didn't. He felt... calm. If at the end of everything he found himself somewhere worse than this, maybe he wouldn't mind.

Fear, they said, was one of the greatest things that decided that. For those to whom Valhalla was closed, what passed in those last instants would guide someone to the next nearest corner of the afterworlds. Sometimes it was luck. Sometimes it was fate. But one always forged their own path and though no path was forever deep ruts were difficult to break; and so bravery now—bravery even with a pounding heart, with a dry mouth and choked breaths, for the true meaning of bravery was not the absence of fear but the perseverance in spite of it—brought an easier route. If he could only believe that he wasn't so dirty and undeserving of every golden hall and warm field then he was sure, on some level, that he would be fine. If not, that was just as well; it wouldn't be the first time he had ever graced that plane anyway and if he stuck around longer than his usual cursory dips in and out he'd have no problem darting between realms as desired. So what was there to fear? Nothing.

Snap: a set of fingers by his ear. He looked up.

“Did you hear me?”

Not a single word. Loki forgot if they had been talking or when Tony had come in. The door must have been open. It wasn't clear if seconds had passed or an hour. “No,” he said. “I just... I'm a little distracted. Sorry.”

“You're slurring,” Tony said.

They stared at each other.

“Oh,” Loki meekly said.

“What did you do?”

He didn't know why, only that he did. And he didn't know what to do now that he had short of perhaps sticking a finger down his throat and praying for the best. But he didn't want to. If anything he panicked not because the clock was ticking on him but because he had promised he wouldn't do this and torn all honour to shreds without thinking. Just like he always did: he didn't plan these things. The only thing left to do was apologize. He tried to form the words but couldn't. I'm so sorry. I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry

“What did you do, Loki?”

“Nothing,” he quietly said, leaning a little deeper into his arms.

“Look at me.”

“Why? I told you—”

“Sit up and look at me.”

Loki drew back slowly. But he didn't look: he stared down at the table and dragged his heavy hands to his lap and played the sentence in his head. I will leave. I will leave. He felt numb.

“What did you do?”

“Nothing.”

You coward.

“Loki, look at me.”

A coward

“I told you—”

and a liar.

Tony cupped his chin and forced them to lock eyes. “What. Did. You. Do.”

“I didn't—nothing! Nothing, I—” Loki tried to push him away but couldn't get a grip. The window seat with the flowers outside. Birds chirping. He couldn't breathe. “Let me go! I didn't do anything. Stop. Please let me go.”

It wasn't a tight grip; it was the stress of facing the situation that was unbearable. He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to look at the window seat. Soft cushions and a blanket. Birds outside and the scent of flowers. Serenity. There was nothing here but the books piled around him.

“Answer me,” Tony said.

What was that about bravery?

“Loki!”

“I'm sorry,” he muttered. “I'm sorry... I'm... I don't know. I can't...”

“What did you do?”

“There's this... for mages. I can't—” He snapped out of Tony's grip and tried to breathe. “I don't want to—I'm sorry! I'm sorry. I shouldn't—it's a poison for mages! There, I'm—shit, I'm stalling. I need to leave. I need to—”

“Loki.”

“I don't want you to—”

“Watch you die before my eyes?”

“Yes! Yes, and I’m—why,” he suddenly sobbed, pressing his hands to his face. “Why am I always—fuck you! I’m leaving. I don’t want you to see. You don’t deserve it. I’m—”

“Hey.”

“I’m sorry!”

“Then will you—”

tell me

how to

help you?

I know there's a way. I know you know it. If you're that sorry, you'll tell me what it is.

—that window seat. Nothing around him, nothing to worry about. The birds whistling their songs in the distance. They were all he could hear.

Remember to take deep breaths.

I don't think that'll work.

Give it time.

And then he was on the floor.

“Look at me,” he made out, and alright, he was on his back; the static around him slowly dissolved and he squinted and somehow managed a slight, faltering gaze on Tony.

No: look at what happens when you hesitate. Look at what a fool you are.

“Hey. Stay with me.” Tony pulled him into his lap. “Stay with me, Lokes. Don’t do this.”

Who was he to tell him what not to do? Let me go, Loki thought as he took those few deep breaths and tried, weakly and unsuccessfully, to weasel out of Tony’s arms; let me go, let me leave, and let me die. I’m so close. Let me go. Let me go.

You lying, cowardly bitch.

He forced a surge of magic and gave the words in his head another try.

“No,” Tony said. “Not a chance.”

“Please,” Loki managed, his voice a dim whisper. “I think I can still teleport... maybe if you...”

“No.”

“If I hurry a little—”

“No. I’m not leaving you.”

Then... that was his problem. And it was an agonizing realization. Maybe stubbornness. Maybe fear. But Loki refused to budge from here. He felt awful about it. If there was ever a greater understatement it was to refer to what he felt next as guilt. This burning hole in his chest telling him to scream I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry until his throat was bleeding wasn’t guilt: it was worse. And it was the worst he had felt so far. He was a waste of help.

“That’s alright,” he whispered into the arms around him. “I’m sorry I let you down.”

Chapter End Notes

...

... :)

Time to disappear into my gremlin lair for another month or two or three again and think about the Absolute Fucking Emotional Bullshit™ I just pulled! Just when you thought it couldn't get worse, it did!™ I am not okay in the slightest I guarantee you like I'm not even kidding a good portion of this was based off personal experiences and ramblings and miscellaneous things that have happened at some point and just buddy this is a pretty solid depiction of a breakdown that I've certified with my own two gremlin hands™

Disclaimer: I do not speak Icelandic, and though I take my time cross-referencing and examining various native resources and other such sites to make sure my translations were as close as possible, there are likely some mistakes. Writing out foreign text where it's implied boosts the immersion, in my opinion, so that's the risk I've taken. If anyone here is fluent, hit me up!

Starless

Chapter Summary

The wounded deer leaps highest — and related wisdoms found only in chaos.

Chapter Notes

I'm not sure what to call this. I think it's just... an intermission of sorts. It's short compared to the last chapter, and half of it's just poetry I wrote these past weeks and months. The other half's jumbled rambling. I think I should revise this before posting, but maybe it's better to leave it for now.

It's really not supposed to make sense at all.

That should stop happening starting next chapter, which is..... in progress.

All at once the room seemed to turn cold and empty. Everything became the hands, body leaning into body with held breath and fumbling thoughts. Trying to anchor oneself to the other. No one knew how this happened or why it felt like this; the panic sank to the floor like heavy rain and the words failed to come out and the room only remained a thin and silent void. Nothing existed but the thoughts. Wait here. Don't go yet. And all of the feisty sarcasm and stoicism didn't work anymore and there was nothing to argue out of or bite through with quick wit; there were no jokes to make it easier or a lingering conviction that it would end well and there was nothing to worry about. Nothing existed anymore but chance. It was a frightening place to be and it took everything to not give in and freeze entirely.

Part of Tony didn't know why he bothered, but he did. He called everyone he could. He called again and again. He didn't know what else to do. But every call ended the same way: "Hello? Call me back soon. It's an emergency. Please. Just this one time."

And he couldn't leave. Not now. Not like he could carry Loki out of the room either; he could barely drag him. So there they stayed on the floor by the chair that had fallen with him while the sun began to set. Tony pulled him a little closer, cradling him, and counted the heartbeats. Sixty-two, or maybe sixty-one, sixty; he couldn't really think and the pace was inconsistent, but sixty-two, he supposed, after an uncertain and hasty multiplication, was a fair estimate. He didn't know if that was resting or something else, but either made sense to him: it was what he saw in people like Thor and Steve and he had always thought that Loki—god, spellword, sly and charming Loki with the tight shirts and imposing glint in his eyes—wouldn't be much different. But of course Tony didn't know that for sure and he would be lying if he said that he didn't panic anyway because there was no telling what that number should have been, whether it was a Loki normal or an Asgardian

normal or if, in fact, it was well and entirely malfunctioning in every way. He remembered that Loki was not Asgardian at all and wondered if that had any bearing on it.

Minutes later Tony called everyone all over again.

Everything was time lost. Time left waiting. Tony knew he couldn't do anything else. His hope was arrogant and thinking that he had anything more to do than whisper a goodbye, lay this man back down on the floor, and step away, step out of the room, and number another death on his infinite tally was a foolish, foolish thing. He didn't know why he persisted, but he did.

"Tony?" Bruce said on the other end.

"Oh, thank god, I—"

"What's going on?"

You are falling.

And falling.

And falling.

"Loki's room," Tony said, trying not to sound frantic but knowing he did. "Now. Please. I don't care if you have to drop everything and run. I need you immediately."

There was the scrape of a chair, something put down. A door slammed. "What's going on?"

"He poisoned himself."

"What?"

"He poisoned himself!"

"On purpose?"

"Yes! Yes, on purpose—please get over here!—and now he's unconscious and he's probably fucking dying and I don't know what to do and"—Tony's voice shook—"I'm scared. Help me."

"Okay, hold on. I'm coming. Is he breathing?"

"Yeah, he's breathing."

"How?"

“Slowly. Like he’s sleeping.”

“Heart rate?”

“Sixty-two.”

“Is that his normal rate?”

“I don’t know. I think so.”

“Alright. What did he take? Do you know?”

“Um, he said—something designed to kill mages. And I’m—I’m hoping that maybe it’s just—it had some spell stuff going on but you know, maybe it’s still just like regular poison when you get down to it and—Jesus, I’m gonna cry—you hung out with Thor, didn’t you? Did he ever mention something like this?”

Only a few seconds passed, but they felt like an hour.

“No,” Bruce said. “Can you get to him now and ask?”

“I’m trying!” Tony said. “I know Nat’s usually with him and I’ve been calling her but she’s not picking up—she’s probably not even awake right now—I don’t know, maybe someone else could route it—fuck! Why didn’t we get him a—”

“Hey, I need you to relax, okay? Can you try again?”

“Right now?”

“Yeah, I’ll be there in a minute, just—”

“Alright, thank you.”

“Anytime.”

Tony hung up and called Natasha. Voicemail. He ended the call and tried Bucky.

“Hi,” Bucky said.

“Hey! Hey, is—is Thor there?”

“Thor? Why?”

“I need him! It’s urgent. Please.”

“Mm... yeah, gimme a sec.” Footsteps; a door slamming. “Okay, I’ll call you back. Hold on.”

“Wait—wait, do you know where he is?”

“Yeah, he’s out at the dock or something, I’ll just—yeah, hold on. I’ll get him for you.”

“Thank you. Thank you so much.”

End call. Tony placed his phone on the floor. He shifted, adjusted his grip on Loki, and counted once more. Sixty. That was alright. One, two beats miscounted, missed by the body—two; that was fine. It happened all the time. But somehow he startled. He told himself now that he was calm, that he was in control and he would make it through this the same way he always did, head up, guns blazing, blistering wit and willpower on both sleeves; he reminded himself, distantly and halfheartedly, that he was an Avenger and this was what they did best. But they were only people and between everything they tried to believe they had accomplished they had killed, maimed, fucked up, failed. They were only people and not even good people. The older Tony grew the more he understood it. And as he awkwardly stirred around the weight and tried to hold this young man that was older than their entirety, this broken soul in a god's body with peaceful breaths and closed eyes like he was sleeping—

This was more false hope.

Damn him, damn him, damn him—and before the door opened, Tony would find himself trading his stoicism for half-hidden sobs over this softly slumbering acquaintance, friend, brother-in-arms pounding with both fists on death's door. Because he was weak. Because he could have done better. Because he had bought those tragic but well-meaning smiles and promises: white lies that ruled them both. He had known. He suspected; he knew it would come to this, and he knew it would be sooner than he'd be prepared for. He should have listened. Check, one mark on that invisible tally in his head, and he pulled Loki to his chest and waited for hope.

Tony did not think that this was the kind of person he would have killed in another life, nor that this was naïve, ironic, or whatever else he could have. Not that there were better things to worry about or better people to save. He thought a sorry, and then another, another, and another, until, though he would never know, they had matched each other in their number of secret apologies. He thought he should stop, that Loki was right to say these constant repetitions were too much, but, of course, he didn't.

The minutes were long.

tick

tick

tick

from the universe. Waiting.

and meanwhile, those flickers:

three, ten, a thousand seconds

consciousness screaming

let me out.

and still

waiting

waiting

waiting.

“Oh, jeez,” Bruce said to himself as he walked in, sighted the two of them on the floor—Tony's still-holding embrace and the uncomfortable tears that were staining an otherwise composed expression, a gaze fixed to the floorboards. “Did you reach Thor?”

“No,” Tony answered, not looking up, “no, Bucky said he'll grab him for me, but—”

Bruce knelt beside them and laid a hand on Loki's forehead. “Oh,” he said again. “That's... the highest fever I've seen in my life. How is he not—”

“He's not human!” Tony snapped.

Bruce withdrew his hand. “When did he take this?”

“I don't know. Anywhere from ten minutes to an hour ago, I guess—sometime when I wasn't looking. And I don't know—how long does this take? He didn't say! I mean, why the fuck would he—but maybe—”

“Looking at him,” Bruce muttered, “I'd say a few hours. If we clear it now, he should be alright.”

“Should be?” Tony yelled. “What does 'should be' mean?”

“It means I can't guarantee anything,” Bruce quietly answered. “If it's been completely absorbed into his system and we don't have an antidote, that's it. Even if we succeed, there could be permanent damage, not to mention...”

“Do you remember the view from halfway down? When you let yourself fall

and you fell

and fell

and fell

and fell

and fell

and fell.”

“Tony?”

—and the stars are vast; blackness glittering into infinity, drops of the universe pouring onto icy skin, an icier heart—dear, screaming:

“Do you remember that feeling, fear and dread and regret, regret, dear, you helpless young spirit, that dug its claws into you the moment your fingers felt air?”

“We need to get him into the infirmary,” Bruce said.

“He's heavy,” Tony finally managed, part arguing, part hopeless fact-stating. “Something about his body structure... um... he's three times denser than humans or something. I can't...”

“Steve?”

“He wouldn't help.”

“Tony, don't be ridiculous. He can't just—”

no

no

no

no

no

no

no

no.

There is no such fear when the blade is drawn, when the trigger is pulled, when two weather-worn boots walk the void, wandering, wondering will the universe love me, will you love me, will you let me rest, will you please, please, please, please, please; no fear, no regret, nothing, he would swear, nothing—

but then there's that moment:

that flicker of light

and then the better brain says

no, no, no, what have you done?

Clarity—

and though the view is still comforting, warm coldness, safe loneliness, absence to soothe the eyes, and he swears he won't fight, this end is inevitable: he finds himself with hands grasping at hope, feet kicking slowly, thinking no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no—

Always.

At that point everyone knew, but there wasn't much anyone could do; it was just their little group there and the usual medical expertise was closer to binding wounds and extracting a bullet. They discussed calling an ambulance or perhaps just people to help in the infirmary but in the rush never got to it. Easier to clear a path and they assist Bruce themselves. Luckily there was an elevator and Steve was willing to lend a hand carrying. Mostly it was just the three of them and the unconscious Loki, but the others were around. Tony was still waiting on a call back and afraid this would turn into another argument. Bruce was walking ahead and reciting notes under his breath. No arguments; only Steve struggling a bit under the weight. Sometimes Loki coughed and they checked he wasn't choking.

On another day, this wouldn't have happened, but on another day, none of it would have.

No, love.

Coward. Coward. Coward.

... and the struggling stops.

This

is

just

like

falling.

Tony's phone rang halfway down the hall and he nearly dropped it answering. It was Bucky's contact but Thor's voice: "What do you need?"

"Hey, listen"—Tony fumbled around switching it to speakerphone—"do you know anything about a, uh, poison for mages?"

"I know about several. What kind?"

Pause: a long, breathless moment wherein Tony tried to remember if he had been given any information, and, upon failing, he then said, "I'm not sure."

The silence on Thor's end felt even longer. Steve and Tony shared a dismal look. How many times had this happened? When Thor eventually spoke it was soft and hollow: "My brother's attempted suicide, hasn't he?"

Tony couldn't bring himself to answer.

"He most likely used witch's bane," Thor said. "Not the plant: it's an extremely powerful prepared spell designed to be fatal against sorcerers, since magic tends to protect its wielder. He's always kept some on him in case of emergencies, he told me once, but he's nearly never used it if at all. I know him. If he were to kill himself, it would be with that. How are your runes?"

"What?"

"There's a countermeasure," Thor said. "A specific combination of Asgardian runes on the victim will halt the spell's influence."

"I can't—"

"Yes, you can. Please. Don't wait for me."

Tony breathed in hard. "Okay, I'm listening."

"You'll need something with which to inscribe them," Thor said. "Pen, knife, doesn't matter. It needs to be visible and relatively long-lasting."

"What do I need to write?"

Bucky: "He's sketching them out. I'll send a photo."

"Okay."

Fifty-four.

"Chest and arms. Alright."

"This will reverse the spell's blocking his magic," Thor said, "and it will allow for some protection and healing, but it will do little for the poison itself. He's still vulnerable. Get it out of him. Get it out of him, Stark. Don't think; I know what it's like. Just do it. Whatever it takes. Please."

Chest and arms; Tony got up on the bed, sat there over Loki's thighs, and opened the Sharpie with his teeth. Chest and arms, he thought as he glanced every second at the picture on the screen, copied down each rune with a hasty yet cautious hand: one, two, three, another one here, another one beneath, lines joining them, a mark in the middle, and a drop of the victim's blood to bind it all.

"I can't lose him," he said, rising volume and tears in his voice; "I can't lose him! He can't—"

—as Bruce kept fiddling with the equipment, setting it up while Tony worked, and Steve maintained a nervous vigil by the door—

"I can't! I can't, you don't understand—you don't understand!"

"Tony—"

"I'm sick of my friends dying!" he screamed, and he turned, sent an accusing glare at Steve—

—and that was it; Steve nodded and apologized, and, with nothing left for him to do, he wished them luck and walked out, and then there was such silence

and rage

and fear.

~~Forty-three~~

—and Tony pacing the room, watching, waiting, restlessly thumbing the rogue curls on his nape and the glasses in his pocket and his shirt and his pants and every other thing that could be thumbed because there was nothing else: he couldn't take this.

Don't leave me, he thought again, or maybe he whispered it. Then he turned and sat back down on the bed ~~and kept waiting~~

and blocked it all out, because these were the sort of things no one wanted to have to see.

No

no

no

no

no

no.

Forty-three.

“Watch him,” Bruce eventually said, leaving to get some more things. “He should stabilize within the next few minutes, but if he doesn’t, call me.”

And then he was gone, and Tony moved to sit on the floor, back against the wall, and numbly slid his glasses on and tried to comfort himself with music. He checked the breathing. He checked the temperature. Heart rate wasn’t erratic or weak, but it kept slowing. Everything was slowing. He had seen this before; lots of things made a person go into a kind of hibernation. And if it all worked it wouldn’t progress much farther than that. He wanted to call Bruce now. He wanted to call backup but didn’t. He didn’t know what to do.

*...and still those voices are calling from far away...
...wake you up in the middle of the night...
...just to hear them say...*

*...welcome to the Hotel California...
...such a lovely place... such a lovely face...*

*...livin' it up at the Hotel California...
...what a nice surprise... bring your alibis...*

Tony stopped keeping track of the numbers on the heart monitor they had hooked up, only that they were incredibly low. Strong but low. Like someone sleeping. Bruce seemed calm about it but Tony spent the whole time bouncing questions between their group and the internet. People came and went and stayed for a bit and then left again; Steve sat outside the room in case something happened. Thor appeared like the wind, cold and quiet and barely dressed but for pants and an untied robe, and leaned the magic axe he had used to travel against a table and sat with them without a word. No one knew what to say to him. Tony wondered if this was his fault entirely and shut his eyes to avoid being present. It felt like he would get chewed out for not trying harder but no one ever did. No one made it about the fights they'd had, about who hated the other or who had broken the other's trust or who did or didn't care who died. No one made it about who the person on the bed was, only that he had tried his best. Instead of turning it towards them again he turned it towards himself. Instead of asking for help he backed away so as not to bother them. Maybe this wasn't who they remembered after all.

Once Tony felt a hand on his shoulder but it didn't change anything. Into the night they did their rounds and he stayed even when everyone else left, silently guarding the room from the floor.

...you can check out any time you like...

...but you can never leave...

Tony closed his eyes.

You

who is hurting; little god, little lies through a thousand lives

burning flames beneath the universe

chaos, laughter, love.

I see you.

Safety comes at a cost, o fearful old soul.

You may be safe.

You

may find your courage as an untethered piece of starlight:

o thieving one, there is no vessel grand enough to hold your might.

You may stop running

for they cannot chase you here.

Peace comes at a cost, young heart.

You

who in all your infinite fire has walked the void

whose fury can level mountains

whose grasp on the many is too vast to be quantified

are a peaceful one; the stars know this.

Where you are always looking for chaos

your body longs for rest.

Love precedes grief, o wounded one.

This

comes at a cost.

You

standing with one foot in the stars

heart crossed, teeth sharpened

knives in your soul

not wanting to

not trying to

but still finding your other heel

locked tight in life

tired hope, tired eyes

begging softly

wanting to vanish

wanting to drown again

You

whose mind aches to live

another second, minute, hour

You

who will never know

why.

I see you.

“Don't leave me, Lokes.”

Dawn

Chapter Summary

This time, things might change.

Chapter Notes

The world's ending anyway so here's a barely edited 13k word chapter. :)

Be kind, take care of yourself, and know that you are not the sum of your failures. Not everything in this fragile universe must hurt.

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

“At the bottom / I have started
To find my inner strength / Again.”
— Leprous, At the Bottom

It was all an instant. A blink. There were no dreams, no nightmares. Not even a memory of what had happened. There was, Loki slowly realized, a long, high ringing in his ears, and the room, as he softly blinked the sleep out of his eyes, took an eternity to come into focus. In, he breathed, and then out again: blurs of white, grey, green. No feeling. The taste of death. He must have been out a while; everything ached and he didn't remember how to move. His throat was dry and scratchy. Where was he?

All at once he understood as he squinted to the side and saw a drip and a heart monitor.

There was a clock on the wall opposite him and he stared at it for a long time, upset by the realization and too dazed to really look away. It was eleven fifty-three when he first looked and judging from the blueish sky colouring his windows, this was a morning hour. It was twelve when he found the energy to nudge the covers down to his hips and examine himself, and, of course, he

wasn't surprised: strings of thick, black writing lined his naked chest and upper arms. After some uncertain deduction, he saw that they matched Tony's script perfectly.

He turned his gaze to the heart monitor. Sixty. He took a deep breath and watched it leap to sixty-three, then back again.

This always happened. Every time. Every time, whether it had been genuine cause and determination or simply following a whim, he failed. This. Last week. The Bifröst. Every other incident before those. He always failed. Had he truly expected something different this time?

He coughed, cleared his throat, forced another hard swallow, tried, to no success, to ease the lingering rawness. Bleakly, the words soft and scratchy, he managed, "Tony's got you wired here, too, doesn't he, FRIDAY?"

Silence. Loki narrowed his eyes.

More silence.

Well, maybe he was wrong; it wouldn't be the strangest thing to ever happen to him. But then, a little reluctantly, he swore, her voice came on: "Yes," she admitted. "Only for the time being. He didn't want to leave you entirely unattended. I know you must hate it."

Loki would have smiled, but there was nothing. He felt no humour.

"Could you... tell him to come over? I want to see him."

Pause.

"He's coming."

"Thank you," Loki said, and then he went quiet. FRIDAY did the same.

He had no idea what he would say. What could he, after something like this? He spent those three or four minutes in sleepy, distracted agony, considering and reconsidering sentences, and found nothing.

Tony didn't knock. "Hey," he said, easing the door closed. "How are you feeling?"

Tired. Miserable. Like a failure. The fog was still there, holding its heavy, dreamlike veil over the room, and it was still as debilitating as before: Loki couldn't think, couldn't really listen, didn't remember how to speak. His body ached. He was afraid. All he wanted was to lay his head back down and disappear. Existing hurt.

Tony sat on the edge of the bed, and Loki, unable to face him, shifted onto his side and kept staring at the heart monitor. Sixty-five. Sixty-eight. "How long was I out?" he muttered.

"Three days."

Seventy-two. He glanced up and caught Tony in his periphery, watching with a hazy frown as the numbers climbed, and then looked away again. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Tony said. "Please. You apologize too much."

Seventy-six.

“You haven’t slept,” Loki said, “have you?”

“Not really. I got a few hours here and there, but other than that, I’ve pretty much been running on coffee and adrenaline.”

Eighty.

“Loki.”

He breathed in, counting one, two, three, four, five, and breathed out, one, two, three, four, five, to little effect. Eighty-three. Eight-four. It stayed there no matter what he did. “I did this to you,” he said. “How can you tell me not to apologize?”

“Do you honestly think I’ll expect an apology from you? For this? I can’t do that.”

“All that worrying...”

“I don’t care. I don’t. I’m just glad you’re okay.”

“Why?”

“Why? What do you mean, ‘why?’”

“Why are you so determined to keep me alive?”

Many heavy seconds passed.

“Because,” Tony said, “I’ve let too many people die.”

“Am I still people?” Loki muttered, forcing another look at him.

Tony smiled, but there was no joy in his expression. “Yeah. You’re still people.”

Eighty-five. Eighty-six. Loki tried again: one, two, three, four, five. Nothing. “I don’t understand,” he said, that same distant quiet to his words, “how this happened so quickly.” Then he stopped, took another second to breathe in, breathe out, see by the hastening lines on the screen that it wasn’t working; the eye contact was exhausting. “I don’t understand why.”

Tony must have known there was something else coming, for he stayed silent. Maybe it was nothing; maybe he just wasn’t sure what to say. It didn’t matter.

“He’s right,” Loki said. “We’re not gods. Not really. We bleed the same. We die the same. A little sturdier than the average race is all. I let it get to my head not even knowing if I was too. And I guess I’m not. I try to be. But under everything I just feel... cold. Not as strong as I was supposed to be. Not as brave as I was supposed to be. Not the right shape and size. Every time I think I’m blending in it comes right back to me. None of the lies ever change that I could have been better.”

“You sound so sure of yourself,” Tony said. “Why?”

Because he was a fraud. Because he acted like he was better than everyone to hide that he should have died in the rubble as an undersized babe, useless and alone. Because he only made it this far

by calculating every breath he took in the hopes that no one would notice everything was a lie. He did a good enough job of it when he wasn't half-dead and holding in tears.

"I dream sometimes," Loki confessed. "I see things I shouldn't. Glimpses of other worlds. It happens; dabble in certain magics and it starts to come naturally. You learn how things could be. You learn how they've been in other places. Nothing big. Only enough to start inferring about all the universes and your role in them. And I just find it so... sad... that I'm sitting here while there were so many versions of me that did better. The ones that didn't try to end their life every few weeks. The ones that did something incredible. Whoever it was that winked through existence at some point or another and left marks spanning back to the beginning of time. Ask the Vikings; they know what I'm talking about. I think you do. And I think I'm the worst copy."

"You're doing better than I could," Tony said.

"You haven't lost count of your suicide attempts."

"I didn't track them to begin with."

It felt like Tony was trying to bait him into saying more, like they were both broken so it didn't matter who said what. But Loki didn't want to give him any more ammunition. "How long have I lived here? A month?"

"Thereabout," Tony said.

"A month to go from completely fine in every way to this? How does that happen?"

"I mean... chances are whenever you were fine it was because everything was buried and waiting for something to set it off. It never *just* happens. Something triggers it and the rest comes pouring out. That's how it goes."

"That's stupid."

"Yeah, it is. Shit fucking sucks, doesn't it?"

Loki shot him a look.

"Do you want me to lie?" Tony sighed. "Come on. The world's unfair. The fact that some people remember their traumatic memories one by one while you had half of them dumped on you all at once because some guy decided to shove himself back into your life is unfair. It's horrible. You might as well call it what it is. I'm not trying to minimize it. The opposite. Chance fucked you over and I'm sorry. It happens to the very best of us."

It always all came down to the natural order of things and the natural order was chaos. Not wrong or bad, just beautiful improbability and fate in rules like no other. And Loki thrived in it. But in a way it felt that if he was so attuned to the random whims of the universe then he should be immune to them; ill luck and happenstance didn't apply to him because he existed parallel to its flow, beside it but never within it. Realizing this was not the case and that he could not always strategize his way through factors beyond his control was harrowing. He was as vulnerable to the universe as anyone else no matter how much he wished otherwise.

"Who's he?" Tony asked, and he crossed one arm, angled the other to distractedly lean on it. His squint seemed less like confusion and more like he was trying to hide a lack of sleep. "He's right."

“Someone,” Loki said. “Maybe my father. I’ve heard it from others.”

“You need to stop comparing yourself.”

“To whom? What are you talking about?”

“You. You think you’re not as good as you could have been? Cool. I will neither agree nor disagree with that. But who gives a shit? As far as I’m concerned, you’re doing just fine. And I still see you as a god, by the way. A pretty kickass one. The others are pansies.”

“You don’t know anything,” Loki said, though he said it as a statement, not an accusation: there was no anger to his tone.

“Maybe not,” Tony responded. “I’m just looking at things objectively. Objectively, it seems like you’re caught up in what everyone else thinks. Stop that. People suck. What they think doesn’t deserve your attention.”

“And what about what you think?”

“What do I think? Jeez. What about what *you* think?”

“In a general sense”—Loki sat up a bit—“I think it’s nothing but commendable what you did and I’m impressed by how quickly you must have reacted. Good job. Most people would have called the situation unsalvageable and made their peace.”

“Well, thanks,” Tony said. “And in a non-general sense?”

“I think you’re an asshole.”

“Oh. You know—yeah, that’s... that’s fair.”

“How dare you?” Loki growled. “Do you know what it’s like?”

“Extensively,” Tony confirmed.

“You heartless bastard.”

“Absolutely. Do you want to punch me, too? Will it make you feel better?”

It might have. For lack of any strength, though, and for lack of any honest desire to hurt him, nothing ever came: Loki sank back into the pillow, calmed his anger, and maintained what little respect he could. With no water, he distantly realized, and with his magic forbidding spell-based removal, the runes would stay on his skin for ages.

“So, physically,” Tony asked, “how are you?”

“I’m alright.”

“Can you get up?”

Definitely not. Loki shifted a little, tried to sit up in full, but he couldn’t. His muscles refused.

“Do you... want some help?”

Never.

“Right,” Tony said, all but rolling his eyes. “Look: you’re in a hospital bed. You look like death himself puked you back up and sent flowers and it’s not the first time I’ve seen you like this. So if this is an honour thing, then sure, I get it, but it’s pointless.”

Eighty-seven. Loki stared at the numbers. For a moment there was only that faraway memory of Asgard again: him, a younger him, a simpler him, and his comfortable life of familiarity. Safety. Not this. None of this. He couldn’t think. Eighty-eight. Eighty-nine. He took another deep breath. “Fine.”

Gently, with a careful eye on where the IV was taped, Tony took him by the hands and heaved him up. “Still good?” he asked as he let go.

Loki nodded.

“Alright. So this”—Tony gestured to that same piece of adhesive, towards which Loki held a tired scowl—“was a precaution: you were malnourished when we brought you in and no one really knew how well your magic would keep you, if at all. I’m sure you would have survived, but it wasn’t something I wanted to risk. That said—” He looked up. “That said, you don’t need it now, right? You do feel okay?”

“I’ll manage,” Loki said. “I’ve gotten by in worse states.”

“Okay.”

He couldn’t blame Tony for any of those next several seconds: stepping off the bed, rather deer-like in his motion, and moving to wash his hands at the metal basin in the other end of the room. It was a good practice to uphold in a medical setting, and really, Loki would have done the same. As always, though, he found himself tensing.

“Bruce told me,” Tony said as he shut the tap off, “that I should try to keep you here until we know you’re alright, but I know that’s not going to happen. I think as long as you’re not unstable, which, clearly, you’re not, you’ll be fine leaving now.”

A flood of shame hit Loki as he tried not to linger on the sound of water against skin, but realizing that everyone knew was worse. He hadn’t expected much else: Tony was smart enough to know when promises ought to be broken and this was one of those times, but it didn’t soften the blow. Knowing how and why it had happened only made it more painful. No one should have to see him like this, small and afraid and mortal. Tony didn’t seem to notice anything, though. There was no comment on the increasingly high numbers on the screen nor the stiffness of his posture; he was, as far as either of them could believe, no more anxious than before. Only for the defences to fail completely as some leftover water dripped out of the tap.

Drip. Drip. Drip. Loki tried not to stare but did. Trained fear and loathing. Glory. A means to an end. Not now. Please. But no: he was frozen. Was he overreacting? He was overreacting. They had done other things. It didn’t need to be this that brought him back. But it did.

“Loki?”

One-hundred-eight.

“Loki.”

It was a strange crossroads to be at; in this kind of moment he could reveal everything, but he clung to his shrivelled self-respect for dear life. If he said this then he didn’t have much left. So he sat there, calm on the outside but burning up on the inside, like he had just lost focus for a few seconds or maybe started to pass out. He could take this. Stop staring at it and everything would be fine.

“Turn the water off,” he quietly said.

Drip; Tony looked over his shoulder. “Oh,” he said, and he went and pushed one handle until it could move no further, pushed the other just in case, and then sat on the bed once more, all in a single fluid motion.

There was nothing so odd about this; many people couldn’t stand the sound of a leaking sink so surely this wasn’t too strange. The panic was a coincidence. The panic had nothing to do with this. The panic, Loki could almost say, wasn’t even panic. Maybe. But he still couldn’t breathe.

“Hey,” Tony said. “Look at me. It’s okay.”

Loki closed his eyes. One, two, three, four, five. Inhale. Hold. Exhale. Repeat.

Ninety-eight. Ninety-two. Eighty-seven. The room faded. Slow breaths, warm against his lips and deep in his body; a hand over his. Water on his back. No. No, no, no. One, two, three, four, five. One, two, three, four, five. Inhale. Hold. Exhale. Seventy-four. Seventy-two.

“I’m sorry,” he muttered.

There was that look again: please don’t apologize, not for this, not for any of this. The words were as pointless now as before, though, and so, they went unspoken. Tony removed the sensors from his chest. “I want you to have lunch with me,” he said, “and I don’t care how much you don’t want to or how hard it is: you will eat more than two bites. Do you know how thin you are?”

“I’ve been thinner.”

“And? Just because something could be worse doesn’t mean it’s not bad now. I can see your ribs. You’re right: it could be a lot worse. You’ve still got some pretty decent mass. But the last time I looked—the last time I really looked—you looked like you could deck me with one finger tight shirt and all and that’s not what I’m seeing now. Do you understand? You need to eat. Please. Something real; not like when I forced you to eat maybe half a meal for the day and then nothing. Actual, solid meals.”

“You won’t leave me,” Loki said, “will you?”

“No. No, I won’t. I’m taking you under my wing, and this time, I’m keeping you there.”

Loki bit back a tired insult.

Tony took his one hand, and, with a slow, careful motion, he removed the IV. A small bandage drawn seemingly from nowhere replaced the tape before any blood could leak out. “Can you walk?” he asked, looking up.

“Probably,” Loki said, which was not true.

“I’d offer a wheelchair, but I don’t think you’d let me.”

“You’d be right. I have a walking stick somewhere. If I can get it...” Loki stopped to search, and after a moment, after some several seconds of the spell refusing to work, a wooden, brass-handled cane flickered into being beneath his right hand. “This is fine,” he said, testing the grip. “I can hold myself. I’m just worried I might...”

“Collapse?”

Loki said nothing.

“I have that shirt you were wearing,” Tony eventually said. “The only one you were wearing. I guess all that magic kept it pretty clean.”

He knew. How could he not, after everything?

“May I have it, then?” Loki asked, trying to fight the upset in his voice.

“Yeah. Yeah, hold on.”

The shirt was in one of the drawers at the side, folded as well as it could have been amidst the chaos. Knowing perhaps that Loki wouldn’t catch it, that he wouldn’t even try, Tony took it and simply handed it to him.

“So you told Thor,” Loki said as he rested the cane against the bedframe, tugged the shirt on.

“I didn’t want to,” Tony said.

“You lie.”

“Do I?”

Loki smoothed out the folds. “You wanted me alive,” he said. “You knew he could help you, so you asked. You didn’t want to?”

“I know you wanted this to stay between the two of us,” Tony said. “I’m sorry it didn’t.”

“No, you’re not,” Loki said, and then he stood, grabbed the cane, and limped out of the room.

The hallway was cold, and this occurred to him as suddenly and as painfully as the true depth of his circumstances—as something he only realized when he stopped thinking, while listening to his muffled sound of footsteps and each frustrated, metallic thump that followed and trying, weakly and half-seriously, to keep himself afloat. He couldn’t look them in the eyes again. He saw this becoming another conversation topic at dinner, something to dissect and disfigure over a meal, and wondered when he would leave already. A few days’ rest would be enough for a trip across Earth, more if he found a better route. If he so wanted, he was sure he could even cast himself into another galaxy; he still had his usual means of extended travel and he still had, as far as he remembered, the dozens of rifts and shortcuts cutting through that section of the universe. If he so wanted, in fact, he could simply walk. He just needed to be out. He was suffocating here.

He realized now that he was watching for danger and that even though he believed well enough that there was nothing and no one and that Tony, who seemed back to keeping the sheathed Iron Man suit at an arm’s reach at all times, could guard him if needed, those glances at his blind spots

followed him. Split-second looks that came without a conscious thought. It was tiring, but he was too wide-open, too vulnerable; he couldn't help it. On and on, he watched.

They were alone in the building, it seemed, or at least close to it. No one bothered them as they walked down that infinite stretch of tiles. Had he any less pride, Loki would have agreed to take the elevator a single floor up. Unfortunately for them, though, unfortunately for him, mostly, that wasn't the case; after some brief arguing and armed with a passionate glare and a cane he still gripped to kill at a moment's request, he crept up the stairs.

There was no destination.

The destination, he supposed, was either his or Tony's room, somewhere calm enough to ease that three days' tension and settle, perhaps, on a plan—to tell themselves, in what string of white lies only they could manage, that things would be alright. But they had tried that; the same lie wouldn't hold twice, and so he knew whatever followed here would only serve as another delay. He wondered how far he could go before someone decided to lock him up. He wondered if Tony would say anything.

Tony's room was a mess. Papers were strewn across the coffee table and about half of what had been in the corner was now tucked underneath, caught between the floor and the two couches, and something smelled burnt: that morning's breakfast or the result of some hasty machining, Loki couldn't tell. Whatever emotions had been felt in those past few days, he swore, were still heavy on the air. He must have seemed a little off as he was, nervously plodding through the room with a white-knuckled grip on the cane and a slight tremor in his step, in his breaths, in everything, and it panicked him. This time, the dream feeling wasn't enough: he was naked here. He sat in the nearer couch, in his usual spot at the end, and brought his hands to his lap; to them, his nails, and, not really meaning to, not really wanting to, he began scraping the skin off the knuckles.

"We need to talk," Tony said, sitting opposite him.

"No," Loki quietly responded. "No, I think—I think we should have that lunch first, shouldn't we?"

"Sure. But we will have that talk at some point."

"No."

"Loki—"

"What talk?" he snapped.

"You," Tony said. "You cannot keep doing this."

"Who will stop me?"

"Whoever and by whatever means necessary."

"Whatever means? What the hell do you mean, whatever means? What, are you going to lock me up?"

"If that'll help—"

"No," Loki hissed with a glare. "No no no. Absolutely not. I don't care what you do, but it will not be that. Don't you dare. Don't you dare; do you hear me?"

“I do,” Tony said, “and so here’s what we can do instead: we remove the danger. How many things that can kill you do you have access to right now?”

Loki went silent.

“I think you know,” Tony continued. “Your knives especially; you seem to keep good track of those. How many, Loki?”

He looked away. “Um... too many. I don’t have a count.”

“See, you can’t even give me a number. Those are all things you could take out whenever you want and I know you’ll try. So we can either lock *those* up—”

“No.”

“No. Why?”

“I don’t trust others to look after them.”

“Okay, honest answer. Great. That leaves the other option, which is you still have them near you, but you can’t access them. You can’t tell me there isn’t a way.”

There was. There were multiple, in fact. The problem, Loki found, was not that he wouldn’t be able to try a third attempt. It was that he wouldn’t be able to properly defend himself should the need arise. He couldn’t much defend himself now anyway and so he would be relying on more physical means; without those, what was he?

So he said that.

And Tony, pointing out the incredibly obvious, said, “If you want to die, then why would it matter if someone tries to kill you?”

“Because,” Loki answered, “I’m not afraid of dying. I’m afraid of hurting again.”

“Ah. A fate worse than death,” Tony said, nodding. “Yeah, I get that. Well, tell me, who do you think would try that on you? Because I guarantee it won’t be anyone in this building.”

“I think Steve Rogers would if he ever got the chance.”

“Mm... maybe. Lucky for you, though”—Tony smiled—“he’d be screaming on the floor of fifty broken bones before he could succeed.”

“You’re bluffing,” Loki said.

“Well, maybe if I tried taking him on unaided,” Tony admitted, and he shrugged, considered it for a moment. “But see, if I get him with the Iron Man, and believe me, I would, because I really don’t care at this point about fighting dirty or whatever, it’d be pretty easy. He should know by now that if he wants to get to you, he’ll have to go through me first, and if he’s somehow forgotten, that’s not my problem.”

“And what about the others?” Loki asked, crossing his arms.

“Same thing.”

“Alright, then what if—”

“No. I’m here. I will slaughter anyone who dares.”

But would he?

There were still the worst-cases, the dangers none of them could face on their own, and maybe today wouldn’t make a difference: maybe, Loki thought, weapons or a lack of would change nothing. If he found himself in some dire situation now, drained of magic and barely standing, he was dead either way. But come those next few days when he had the strength to fight—come a failed spell at a crucial moment, where a single blade he might have summoned would decide his life—that, he knew, would change. Tony was right: no one here would try it. But they could have. Torture or worse. And to set aside his defences for his own sake was a difficult request.

“That’s a lot of trust you’re asking for,” he finally said. “That’s my life you’re risking, Tony. Is that a responsibility you’re capable of upholding?”

“To my last breath.”

“Swear it.”

“Fine.” Tony pressed a hand to his heart. “I swear on the general wellbeing of everyone I have ever loved that I will do whatever I can to protect you while you recover.”

“Hey. Not on your loved ones.”

“You didn’t specify.”

Loki pressed his face into his hands.

“Okay, on *my* general wellbeing,” Tony said.

“Fine,” Loki muttered.

“Yeah, and you thought I wasn’t serious, didn’t you?” Tony lowered his hand. “I am. Dead friggin’ serious. No one will hurt you.”

But they didn’t know that for sure! They didn’t know that everything wouldn’t go wrong. Even knowing Tony would fight tooth and nail and even knowing that the best knife couldn’t stop someone determined enough it still felt like the worst possible move. Putting faith in one person and hoping chance didn’t fail them both was reckless. Enough mistakes had taught Loki that. It left him vulnerable to something like what had happened before and he couldn’t survive it again.

“What about at night?” he asked, narrowing his eyes.

“Honestly,” Tony said, “I have no problem continuing to room with you if it would make you feel better. Whatever. But if you’d rather not, which, yeah, you’re probably sick of it by now, then... you could always grab that blanket from your room and take the couch.”

“Gross.”

“Okay, I know. But these are like, the world’s best couches to sleep on.”

“I won’t hear you and Pepper?”

“What? No. Ew. I’m not gonna have sex with someone while there’s a guest in the other room and no doors separating us. I’m not *that guy*, Loki. Jeez.”

How difficult it was to laugh then, but he did: he laughed that closed-eyes, chin-down little chuckle he called his own, and he thought he felt Tony smile, and for the briefest instant he could almost forget the pain.

“There are some sigils I could try,” he eventually offered, and he sighed: why should he even bother? “Simple spells. They should keep me safe enough.”

“Great,” Tony said. “Can you do those now?”

“I can. I’d rather not block access to my things now since I’ll need some materials later, but there’s the one. If you have something to write with.”

Tony reached to sift through the papers on the table, and then one of the piles at his feet, and then, finding exactly the same permanent marker used three nights prior, he sat up and threw it to the other couch. Loki plucked it from between the cushions.

“You’re lucky this one’s small,” he muttered, removing the cap. “Otherwise…” He stopped, taking a moment to remember the order, the shape. Slowly, going from the inside of his wrist down, he began lining the runes.

“How do I know you’re doing what you say you are?”

“You don’t.”

“Would Thor know?”

“No. But”—Loki paused his writing, glanced up—“I can tell you that most runic magic isn’t offensive. Certainly not to the caster.”

“I’d hope so,” Tony said, and then he leaned back and waited.

Loki nearly added that this spell didn’t discriminate by the type of harm, nor by who was responsible—that if a third attempt was wanted, it would be difficult to achieve any substantial damage; it was the price he was paying in exchange for safety. He could have. What, though, would he have accomplished other than outing himself as utterly powerless? Nothing. He capped the marker and threw it to Tony.

“I think we should continue that talk from this morning,” Tony said, tucking the marker into his pocket. “Well, earlier. You know what I mean.”

“I think you should go make lunch,” Loki said. “You did want me to eat more, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. Yeah, no, I’ll get to that. But there’s just so much that you keep bringing up like it’s nothing and I know it’s not. I’m still here, and if you still want to rant to me about, shit, maybe your abusive father, I’m happy to listen.”

“He wasn’t abusive.”

The look on Tony's face seemed like he wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry. He sighed, got up, and went to the kitchen.

Loki examined the sigil on his forearm. Such things faded after some time even without washing, and he didn't need it to fade much: a large enough spot in a significant enough area would suffice to break the spell. The marks on his chest might impede him too, but he couldn't see them affecting more than what they were designed to affect, and anything else... he counted. Three, four days minimum to achieve some meaningful wear, and by then, he'd be back to his usual strength: whatever he decided on, there would be nothing to stop him. Was it worth it?

He looked at Tony, who was busy digging through the fridge and piling what he retrieved onto the counter, and wondered.

These things, people would tell him, were fleeting. Though the experiences would never change and the scars would never heal completely and the memories would always linger, he could, eventually, overcome their influence, and he was sure that if he tried now he would. Somewhere between it all he could let himself grieve what was lost, let his fear and anger burn, and maybe it would work. This wasn't the first time he'd found himself here and it certainly wasn't the first time he'd had no way out of. The worst had long passed. But it happened too often and every time was a little harder to come back from; the breaks became too much, the recoveries became too much, and at the end of it all he was too drained to try again. No wonder.

Three, four days and then he could go; less if he truly wanted to. Maybe if he dared to burn the writing away with some especially vigorous rubbing or even just to cross it out. This time he would do it properly. But then he kept catching Tony's nervous glances, those fraught double- and triple-checks that everything was still as it should be, and doubted himself all over again. Guilt was a problem of the living: whatever came from his actions couldn't bother him. And yet when he imagined it, he didn't know how. Not like this. Where had his apathy gone?

"Hey, do you mind if I put on some music?" Tony asked from the kitchen.

"Go ahead," Loki said, not looking up.

Tony muttered something to himself about how all his songs were either too depressing or too angry, man, he really hoped no one would catch him listening to this because he'd never hear the end of it, and the this, to Loki's honest surprise, turned out to be a collection of bouncy 40s and 50s hits, trumpets and all. He almost smiled.

"No judgment," Tony said.

Certainly not; it was nice to hear him listening to something lighter for once. But Loki didn't even say this: he simply tucked his arms up against his lap, tight enough to curb the picking and careful enough to avoid irritating everything he hadn't even noticed himself doing, and watched the afternoon sky through the windows. There really was nothing left. Had he felt a little less numb, he would have cried. Instead, all he did was drift to the sound of Sinatra or some other, to that sunlit blue that seemed so much brighter than it was, and wait.

The minutes, as usual, were a blur.

"You are entirely capable of finishing this," Tony said, setting a small bowl on the table: plain meat and vegetables, Loki saw upon sparing a glance. "I've seen you eat more. A regular, you-sized portion of one of the most basic meals in the world is nothing you can't manage."

Loki took the bowl in his lap. “And if I don’t?” he muttered.

“I’ll stare disapprovingly at you until you’re really uncomfortable and have no choice.”

“Oh.”

Tony sat across from him. “Honestly, I’ve been there before, and I’m telling you: it gets easier.”

“I know.”

“You haven’t even picked up the fork.”

Loki did so and shot Tony a look: yes, I have.

“I think I know exactly what’s going on here,” Tony said, “but, well, maybe I don’t. Is there any reason you can give me?”

“I don’t deserve to eat and I feel bad when I do. Isn’t that how it always goes?”

“Often.” Tony swept aside the papers on the table, knocking a few sheets to the floor, and placed his bowl in front of him. “Why don’t you deserve to eat?”

“Is that really so hard to see?”

“Nothing I see when I look at you makes me think you don’t deserve to eat. If that were the case then I wouldn’t deserve to eat either.”

“But... you aren’t me, Tony. You act like you are. Nothing you’ve done comes close to even my smallest mistakes.”

“How do you know?”

Loki stared at the fork he had been holding for about a minute now with no success.

“When I look at you and you talk to me about deserving,” Tony said, picking at the hot food, “it reminds me of something. And it isn’t the same, but it makes the way you say it make a little more sense to me. I have a story for you. Tell me if it sounds familiar.

“A powerful empire gains an heir, and that heir, unsurprisingly, has inherited not just the throne, but most of the skills and talents that raised its founder so high in the first place. As a result, this guy, the heir, develops what you might call a superiority complex from early on. No one can say it’s not rightfully earned. I mean, he’s got everything: looks, intelligence, humour. Status. Girls. Kid’s a friggin’ prodigy, and maybe someone else gets there before he does, maybe something goes wrong along the way, but as far as he’s concerned”—Tony shrugged, smiled a little—“he’s also still got a throne waiting on him. His whole life’s been laid on one giant silver platter; it’s impossible to stay humble with all that. So he goes out into the world knowing pretty much from the day he learned how to speak that he’s big, he’s important, he’s a genuine no-one-fucks-with-me-and-gets-away-with-it kind of person, and seriously, he is: the only actual problem he has ever had is that his father, admittedly, is kind of a douche. Just a little bit.

“And then,” Tony said, “something awful happens. Doesn’t matter what it is, whether it was one event or dozens all lined up in a row, only that it’s a horrible, nasty thing that no one prepared him for, that no one could have prepared him for, and that he never could have even imagined might

happen. He barely makes it back, and when he does, there's a fundamental part of him that gets left behind. Nothing is the same. Nothing will ever be the same.

"His entire worldview is shattered, and he shatters with it.

"Whatever terrible thing it was that happened was hard enough on its own, but it's the aftermath that gets him. He realizes he was never that strong, that smart, that whatever, and after all those years of believing to his very core that everyone was beneath him, he ends up going from one extreme to the other: that superiority complex turns into a million sleepless nights spent thinking what an absolute fucking failure he is. It's all he can do. He thinks all those years he spent at the top were because he's a good liar; he thinks, no matter what anyone tells him, that by not coming out the victor this one time, he's betrayed all of his past successes. Those successes, he is still so very convinced, were a fluke. He wouldn't have gotten screwed over like this if he was ever as good as they said he was.

"So what use is he now? Might as well die, right?"

Just like that: no sugarcoating, no beating around the bush. For a second, Loki almost wasn't sure if he ought to respond. He almost wanted to. Then he decided no, he shouldn't, and Tony gave him that distant, bittersweet smile, crossed his legs, and carried on.

"The simple truth," he softly finished, "the truth that no one wants to have to admit and that pains him to even think about, is that everything he ever knew, everything that ever brought him joy and meaning and a reason for his existence, was intrinsically linked to his ego, and now that that's gone, there's just... nothing. It was all so ingrained in him that the belief comes naturally: if he's not the absolute best, he figures, then there's no point. He's just a waste of space. All he has left, no matter how well he hides it or how many people he keeps from suspecting or how good the world might say he is, is self-loathing."

Well... Loki didn't know what to say to that.

"I don't think we're that different," Tony said. "Not where it matters. Not when you look at it like this. When I say I know what it's like, believe me, I mean it. Eat the food, Loki. You're not that undeserving."

After all that, there wasn't much else he could do. He took a long, shaky breath, swallowed back his tears, and started chipping away. "I still failed them," he muttered between a bite. "I deserve death for what I did."

"And what was that?"

"Asgard. I led Thanos to us. I'm the reason they died. I told you this, didn't I?"

"You did."

"Do you know what it's like?"

"I do. It's the worst feeling in the universe."

"How can you believe I'm worthy of anything after this?"

Tony seemed to think about it for a while. Loki turned away.

“Because,” Tony said, “you never meant for what you did to result in anyone’s death. You might have considered the possibility, but you probably didn’t think it was *actually* possible: how likely was it that after all those years of radio silence some guy would come track you down? Or maybe you did. Maybe you suspected it. Either way, you tried your best to right what happened. You saved as many as you could, you killed Thanos, and you still feel so goddamn guilty all the time that I know you don’t deserve to be punished for any of it. You’re one man, Loki. Every now and then you’re going to fuck up, and that’s okay. None of this should be held against you.”

He couldn’t even respond. He simply pulled the bowl closer and kept eating, wondering how they had ever come to be there in that moment.

Tony shoved the rest of the papers off the table.

“Weren’t those important?” Loki muttered.

“Nope,” Tony said, taking his lunch in one hand. “Dumb photocopies of dumber things. I don’t need them.”

Those musicians must have had it so easy in comparison. Loki sullenly picked at the vegetables piled up in one corner.

The weather was lovely and he was sure if he tried that he would be able to drag himself outside, but this wasn’t that kind of day. This was one of those days when all he ought to do was sit by the window and daydream until evening and, as the two of them ate there and said nothing beneath the sound of another era, he truly considered it. Tony shouldn’t mind: it wasn’t suicide or self-injury, so what would it hurt? Time-killing just the way they said it. Stalling until something changed. It seemed simple enough.

“There’s just so much,” Loki found himself saying after a while. “The…” Torture? “… You know. Everything that came before that. More pain. Worse pain. Shame. Grief; there’s a lot I haven’t told you about my past. I don’t think you could even imagine some of the things I’ve gone through over the years. There were so many burdens on me already, and this… all this. It’s just… too much. I’m spent.”

“You need to rest,” Tony said with a nod, “but you’ve never had the chance.”

“No. Not once.”

“What does that chance look like for you?”

“Peace. Time to think. I can’t resolve my troubles if there are always new ones.”

“Are there, though?”

“Pardon?”

“I mean”—Tony shifted, switched the cross of his legs—“there’s nothing new right now, is there? Keep the same routine, the same environment, and most of what you’re currently dealing with, at least, as far as I can see, has peaked. Am I wrong?”

“I hope not.”

“So do I. But I’ll take that as a no, then. What that means is that you’ve met the first requirement to start sorting all this out because you’re right: you can’t heal from something while it’s still happening. If we maintain things as they are now, that is, everything stays relatively safe, stable, and free of additional stress, then you can afford to move some of the energy you’ve got poured into constant alertness and keeping yourself alive into resolving what’s bothering you. Right?”

“Right. But...”

“But?”

“Where do I even begin?”

Tony pondered it.

“Well, consider this,” he said. “You start small. You deal with the first thing that sticks out, the simplest thing, and then you move on to the next, and I think—I think you’re going to hate me for this, actually—but I think right now, that’s your guilt from the attack. Not the nightmares. Not—”

He did know: what was that pause otherwise? Loki waited.

“The fear,” Tony finished, still sounding a little like he’d meant to say something else. “Flashbacks. All that. That’s big. It’s not going to go away easy. But I think you can start with the guilt. Start with eating properly; I know that comes from it. Lack of appetite’s a different story, obviously, but you can try to eat when possible. Call it step one.”

“And then what?”

“Then...”

Then the water. Or maybe startling every time he heard a loud noise, a loud voice, a loud anything that didn’t quite belong. Maybe it was something closer: maybe what they needed most, Loki figured, was to soothe the tension between the two of them. The unease; the distrust that still, in spite of everything, weighed down each second they spent together. What good was such an endeavour if they couldn’t even do that?

“I don’t think it matters,” Tony eventually said. “I think if you try to figure it out this early on, you’ll just end up discouraging yourself. We’ll see when we get there.”

The bowl was empty, Loki realized. He set it on the table. “And what now?” he asked.

“Now? I’d take some time to cool down before you try anything. It’s been a rough week.”

“How do you expect me to do that?”

“Distraction?”

“From this? What could possibly distract me?”

Tony seemed very deep in thought. Many seconds passed and Loki began to regret asking. At least the music was nice.

“Thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle?” Tony boldly suggested.

“On second thought, never mind,” Loki said, getting up. “I’ll go read a book.”

“Nuh-uh. Get back here. I’ve been meaning to do it.”

“You can’t be serious!”

“Can’t I?”

“But—”

Tony got up and went to leave their dishes in the kitchen and then disappeared to his bedroom to find the puzzle. The music seemed louder with no conversation to drown it out. Loki sat back down and tried to come to terms with the situation. He couldn’t. This was a fate worse than death if he ever saw one. By the time Tony returned, which didn’t take long, Loki still wasn’t sure exactly what had happened: there was that look, that “what I’m doing is ridiculous, I know, and I don’t care” look, and then Tony opened the box, dumped its entirety onto the table, and started sifting for end pieces without a care.

Time-killing. Oh... Loki moved to sit a little closer, picked a section of the pile, and joined him.

The box showed the finished product, an old, colourful painting of a seaside town at dusk, but, as Tony said, “That’s cheating.” It was kicked face-down under the table among all of the scattered papers and that was the last Loki saw of it. Neither of them really said anything after that. There were a few questions, a few more answers, and a dozen little commentaries by Tony on the rarity of whichever piece, all varying in passion, but not much else. Loki, admittedly, found no issue: the conversation was tiring to maintain anyway and the music, which was still such a charming deviation from Tony’s usual choices, sufficed to fill the silence.

The puzzle was infuriating but easy to get invested in maybe just out of spite and finding where something fit, for a while, was satisfying enough to subdue the empty boredom whispering that there was no point to this. Loki tried to keep track of time by the songs that had passed but didn’t know why or how to stop. It felt like they were here too long. They finished the border within a half hour and it was another one when, too interested in knowing and too detached to fear offending, he asked what awful thing it was that Tony had gone through.

“I thought you knew,” Tony said in response, not looking up from the lopsided island he had begun constructing in one of the corners. “Figured someone who knows my full first name and what I used to do for a living would have at least heard. No?”

“No,” Loki said, and he stopped to slide him a similar-coloured piece before continuing, “Those are basics. Everyone knows. Surely something like what you described goes a little deeper than that?”

“To a degree.” Tony took the piece and inspected it. “I guess what I mean”—he pressed it into the island’s tip—“is nothing really stays private when you get to be this big, so stuff like that’s about as easy to learn as, I don’t know, how I like my coffee. Black, obviously; you know that. So I just find it funny.”

“Well,” Loki said, “if it’s alright with you. I don’t want to intrude. You just seemed so open earlier...”

“Oh.” Tony looked up. “Oh, no, I’m fine with sharing. I’m over it. It’s actually what led to the whole Iron Man thing, too, so I think it’s pretty cool in hindsight.”

“In that case...” Loki set another piece by Tony’s section. “Hm. Maybe you’d tell me?”

Sure would. Tony paused to locate the piece’s spot and then jumped right into the story. It was an odd one, maybe a bit outlandish or cliché, but it was his. The trip, he began, a simple business thing that shouldn’t have held any grander meaning; the presentation and the accident following it, how he’d panicked, how the little vehicle wasn’t holding and he was no less exposed there than outside. The rocket with his name on it, the bulletproof vest that hadn’t kept the shrapnel from his chest, and the man who’d saved his life with an electromagnet and a car battery. The cave, in which they were held captive, and a promise that if they built the weapon demonstrated earlier, they would be set free—but no, Tony said: neither would have happened. So the plan changed, and then there was a crude suit of armour built in the shadows, a daring escape, and a sacrifice: this other man who only wanted to see his family again, who didn’t mind dying to save another. Revenge. A rescue. And, he finished, a change of heart: no more weapons. Not after this. No good could come out of it.

Then he decided to upgrade the armour and find out for himself.

The rest, he said with another smile, was history.

Most of the time Loki had found him too annoying to stop and wonder about it and so it had never occurred to him how exactly people wound up in these sorts of ridiculous positions; whatever he’d expected, it had been much less interesting. He found himself asking clarifications and continuations, all the big and small details that had been missed, until there was nothing left. And then, still a little bored with only good music and a puzzle, he asked to hear something else.

Tony believed it was Peter who would take over the company someday, not the child he wanted to have with Pepper; he wanted a simpler life for his own than this and Peter, he figured, was exactly the kind of bright and energetic young inventor the world deserved after him. Of course they would keep their ties to everything, keep their input and advice and otherwise, hell, maybe offer the kid a position growing up, but not much else. It was better like that, he said. All he wanted was to cash his fortune and raise a family. Maybe the grass really was greener.

It seemed so quaint to Loki, especially when the topic of a lakeside cabin came up, that for a moment all he could wonder was how: how could this man be so at peace with life and what would it take to be like him? Was this enough? Jigsaw puzzles and half-century-old music? Or was there something else? He thought he might have gotten an answer if he asked, if he dared to interrupt what still sounded like such an endearing reverie that Tony was describing, but these things were always so complex: it would have taken hours, same as every other time, and he doubted it would help. By the end of it all he did was smile to himself, a distant, nostalgic tug at his lips that felt a little too much like he was fighting tears again, and continue searching for pieces.

Eventually, he stopped tracking the songs.

“You couldn’t have been so worried,” he muttered at some point, almost to himself. “Not for me. Never for me. I don’t believe it.”

“No,” Tony said, shaking his head; Loki glanced at him. “You have no idea. I didn’t leave your side at all that first night. Passed out after a while and woke up the next morning exactly where I sat down: on the floor, back to the wall, trying to use a steel bedframe as a pillow. I mean... I guess people got worried. Brought me food and coffee on their rounds. They *offered* to take over but if I wasn’t in the room I was right outside.”

“Not for the whole three days,” Loki said, “right? Please tell me you didn’t.”

The look on Tony's face then was remarkably like that of a child caught somewhere they weren't supposed to be. Yes, it said; yes, I did. But then he clarified: "Pepper dragged me out for most of yesterday. She told me... jeez. Something about how it didn't really matter if I stayed there or not, how you were strong enough to pull through on your own, and no, apparently I couldn't spend my birthday curled in the fetal position in a hospital room. Fuck that, I guess, but I think I might have ended up your neighbour if she hadn't intervened. Good thing I have her to look after my self-destructive ass."

"It was your birthday?" Loki quietly asked.

"Yeah," Tony said. "May twenty-ninth."

"... Oh. Happy birthday?"

Tony tried to smile. "Loki, man," he sighed, setting a puzzle piece back down on the table. "We were all worried. Me and everyone else pitching in making sure you were okay. I know you think you're still that guy and I understand that but... you've grown on us. And a lot of people would have missed you. If I still thought of you as that guy I wouldn't have bothered and neither would anyone else. It felt empty without you."

Loki wanted to say that it didn't but felt like he'd just been stripped raw. This man? The one he'd thrown out of a window with intent to kill, made to watch as everything around went up in flames? Where was this coming from?

"You don't have to believe me," Tony said behind another piece. "I know."

Loki said nothing and kept searching.

Tony had a sharp eye, so it came as no surprise that he soon finished that entire corner. A little more determination, a little more deliberate cooperation, and they might have even completed the puzzle before the end of the day. It seemed less than ideal for then they'd need to find something else for tomorrow's time-killing, but at least it would bring some sense of accomplishment. Some meaning; maybe they could glue it down and frame it when they were done, just to be sure. But it was all the same to Loki: pointless. These things always were.

They were about a third of the way through when the door opened, and they both looked up.

"You!" Tony exclaimed.

"Me," Pepper responded, turning to ease the door shut. "Are you still—oh. I didn't... am I interrupting?"

Loki blushed.

"No," Tony said. "No, of course not. Hey. What brings you to our humble abode so early?"

"Extended break. I have a meeting in an hour and felt like showering."

"Ah."

She stopped to hang her bag on the coat rack and then took another look at Loki.

"Um... hello," he quietly said.

“Hi. It’s nice to see you.”

His face grew even hotter.

“Hey,” Tony said, “come here for a sec.”

“I’m kind of in a hurry,” Pepper said, making for the bathroom.

“No, I know. It won’t take long.”

She sighed and walked over.

“Kiss?” Tony asked, smiling hopefully up at her.

“Really?”

“Please?”

She sighed once more and then bent to reach him. It was a sweet thing, light and a little too brief, and the starry-eyed look on Tony’s face as she pulled away, if only for a moment, brought Loki back to that image of a cabin far from everything. He wondered again what it was like.

“Now go take that shower,” Tony all but whispered to her. “You smell like sweat.”

She acted offended, but Loki caught her smiling as she turned towards the bathroom. Tony waited until the door had closed before resuming his work along the puzzle’s bottom edge.

“You’re lucky,” Loki said. “Very, very lucky. Cherish her.”

“I do,” Tony answered. “Every day.”

Loki reached to take a piece from the table’s far end.

“You’ve given up on all that,” Tony said, “haven’t you?”

“I have.” Loki pressed the piece into a gap by Tony’s hand. “It’s not worth it. Not anymore. It’s easier to let these things burn.”

“Sorry to hear. But I guess you know what’s best for you; it’s not my place to try and convince you otherwise.”

“Thank you. Others have been less polite.”

A few minutes passed without conversation.

“What time is it?” Loki asked, not looking up.

“Four-ish.”

Then nothing.

Pepper left shortly after, sparing only a goodbye and some kind regards, and then it was just them again. Tony moved to sit on the floor so he could better reach the puzzle’s centre, Loki sighed and did the same, and they continued working. It still wasn’t enough. Loki still wanted to rub the marks

from his skin, run off, and make that third attempt; he still wanted to cry and keep crying. For all that apathy, though, or maybe just because of how awful he felt every time Tony glanced at him with that tender smile, he couldn't find the strength. This was all he had: a meaningless distraction and some music. It wasn't so much different from his usual activities.

The hour was brief.

"I think Pepper made dinner tonight," Tony said at some point, "but... I'm not sure. Do you want to come down and check?"

"Looking like this?" Loki muttered as he stole a piece from him.

"Looks fine to me."

"I can barely walk."

"Cane looks pretty cool, though. Looks expensive. Where'd you get it?"

"I'm not going out there."

"Will you go with me?"

"No."

They stared each other down.

"I'm sure you realize this," Tony gently said, "but... most of the people here know. And I think they'll be happy to see you up and walking instead of comatose in a bed regardless of how you're doing it. If anyone says anything mean I'll kick their ass."

"But they'll still be thinking it."

"Probably surprised you made it out in one piece. It sounds like almost no one has done that."

"I didn't want to make it out!"

"Okay."

They stared at the puzzle.

"There's a part of me right now," Tony said, leaning back against the couch, "that's telling me to go all tough love on you and drag you out by the wrist, but I know that'll do more harm than good. I know that's the last thing you need right now. But I also know that it's better to get it over with now than keep avoiding everyone because all that's going to happen is you'll just start dreading it more and more. What do you think?"

"I think you're right. I know you're right. It's just... um... humiliating."

"Okay, but you do know you're still Loki, right? No matter what happens, you're still stronger than all of us combined. Own it."

"I can't."

“Bullshit. I remember when I first met you and you walked around like you owned the place and everyone was your servant. You didn’t owe them a thing. It was the worst. It made my arrogance streak look like nothing in comparison. But after all of this”—Tony gestured between them—“I’d be happy to see that again. Be that guy.”

“Weren’t you just saying something about not letting your ego rule you?”

“Hey, hold on. There’s a middle ground and I know you know what it looks like. Accept that you’re just as imperfect as everyone else and that your ultimate goal in life is not being the best at everything but allow yourself to still feel that confidence. That’s it. It’s not that complicated. Well, maybe it is. Maybe in practice. You know what I mean, though.”

“I... think you’re rambling again, but yes, I see what you’re saying.”

“Also, don’t tell Steve how much I’ve been swearing lately, would you? He’s allergic to bad language.”

Loki snorted.

“Yeah, I think you’re good,” Tony said, standing. “Come on.”

No. No, no, no. But Tony wouldn’t leave him; at best they’d both just stay here until one of them proved to be less stubborn than the other, which would take no fewer than several hours. So, reluctantly, Loki hauled himself to his feet, grabbed the walking stick, and limped after him. There was none of what Tony said there should be: not that haughty self-love he had always held in front of him like a dagger, not a sway in his step, no “I am better than you” no matter how false. He wasn’t. He felt so, so small. He couldn’t even walk right.

“I’m sorry for being annoying,” Tony said. “Someone had to do it.”

“You are... incredibly bothersome.”

“I’ve been told.”

Halfway down the hall Loki stumbled as what felt like a bolt of lightning shot through him. He caught himself on the walking stick with a wince.

“Hey, you okay?” Tony asked, offering a hand.

“Ow.”

They slowly continued down the hall.

“Should we be worried about that?” Tony asked.

“It was a heavy spell,” Loki muttered. “That felt... magical. It should settle.”

It did not happen again.

If that exhausted and embarrassed look Loki knew was written all over him was good for anything, it was to keep conversations away. He caught some glances but not much else: no one said a word as he claimed the nearer couch in the kitchen area, close enough to the end that it was only

somewhat obvious he was trying to hide and far enough that he didn't feel like curling up on the floor and crying.

"Oh," Tony said, reaching into the pantry. "We also got these." He held up a bag of buns. "Gluten-free. Want one?"

"No th—"

"Wait, no, sorry. That wasn't a question. You're definitely getting one. You need calories."

Loki shut his mouth, sank a little deeper into the couch, and waited. Bounced the walking stick from one hand to the other. They weren't talking about him. No. He glanced over the couch's back and then away again. They weren't talking about him. "Can't we eat in your room?" he asked, looking at Tony.

"If you want to," Tony said. "You're already here, though. Might as well stay."

"They're talking about me."

"Sounds like a pretty heated political debate to me. I think everyone is too focused on not killing each other to talk about you."

"Well, they're... staring."

"They're not."

"What makes you so certain?"

"You're in a blind spot. The only way to stare at you would be from there"—Tony pointed down the hall—"or from one of the adjacent areas. No one is staring at you."

Loki scooted a cushion's length to his left, away from the armrest.

"See, especially now," Tony said. "You're good. No one can see you from here. Uh, other than me. I'm okay, right?"

"Why wouldn't you be? You've seen everything at this point."

"Not quite everything, have I?"

"Have you?"

Tony snickered.

"Really, what are you trying to do? Out-flirt me? I mean, congrats: I certainly caught that and it certainly almost made me smile for a quarter of a second just now. But for goodness' sake, Tony, I'm not in the mood. Just give me the food. Please."

"Alright. Sorry." He grabbed two forks and then went to set them and the plates down on the coffee table. "I'm just trying to make you laugh," he said, sitting next to Loki—armrest-side, as if to further shield him from view. "You never laugh anymore. It kills me to see you like this."

"I know." Loki took his plate. "I'm not upset. Never. Just... don't bother."

Tony nearly said something in reply—another sorry, maybe, or simply an okay—but he only sighed and got to eating.

Loki peered behind them once more. Nothing. He turned, very slowly, and picked up the fork. It looked decent: an average sweet and savoury sort of dinner containing a complete assortment of food groups. Nothing he truly felt like eating, but it would do. There wasn't much of a choice regardless.

He couldn't quite say what he felt when he eventually glanced up again and saw Peter sprint in from the stairs, clad from the neck down in his spider suit, carrying his backpack one-shouldered, and rattling off something about how he just got back from a thing and the compound was closer than Aunt May's oh my gosh please tell me you have food because I am starving and hi Mr. Stark it's so good to see you. Relief, in part, and nostalgia, for it had been weeks since they last talked, but mostly, Loki found, it was cold, sudden panic. There was nothing to be said after a thing like this. What, a hello? An apology? No. He looked at his plate.

"Hey, kid," Tony said, waving. "Where've you been?"

"Finals!" Peter called, chucking his bag by one of the tables. "And Spider-Man stuff, but mostly finals. I swear. Holy crap, guess what I got on my math exam!"

"Sixty-nine?" Sam suggested from the corner; Tony snorted.

"I got—oh my *gosh* I need food—I got"—he ran into the kitchen—"a hundred percent! I think a few other people in the school got that much but I don't care because I got one hundred"—he looked at Tony—"percent on my math final do you know how hard that was I can't—"

"Hey," Tony said.

"—believe I did that! Do you even understand the gravity of this situation because I don't think you do—"

"No, I get it, but seriously, breathe. Ever heard of commas?"

"Mr. Stark, I am telling you there was a trick question on that exam and no one else in the entire school got it but I did and I am so proud of myself please let me be excited about this—"

"Good job," Loki said. "You always struck me as the clever kind. I'm glad it paid off."

"Wh—" Peter stopped, plate in hand, and turned. "Hey! Hey, I didn't even see you there, wow, I'm—hey. Jeez, it's been ages. What's happening?"

"Things," Loki said. "Tony forced me to do a jigsaw puzzle with him."

"I did not," Tony retorted. "You joined me of your own volition, thank you very much."

"Mm. Perhaps."

"Oh—wow, I love your hair," Peter said, and then he turned again to dump a triple serving of the meal onto his plate. "Did you do something different?"

Two weeks of forgetting to abuse the curls out of it; maybe it was finally recovering. "I don't control what it does," Loki said.

“Oh. Oh, okay. It looks nice today. Curlier than usual. You look nice in curls.”

Loki doubted it but said nothing. Peter... wasn't handling acting normal very well. Still, it seemed like a sweet gesture; blowing these things up only made it more stressful and they had talked enough for it to seem deliberate. Better they move on quick and focus on the good instead of drowning someone in concern. Peter took his food and leapt to the adjacent couch.

Most of the conversation was lost on Loki. He answered what his focus caught, politely listened to the rest, but otherwise just kept his head down and ate. No one talked about him. Sometimes it sounded like they did but they didn't. He didn't know what he was afraid of; would they mock what happened or only lament that it had failed? Maybe if he dared to believe Tony all they would do was shower him with support, but that was terrifying too. At least mockery was familiar.

Thor and Bucky coming in after some time almost startled him, but Loki had expected it.

“Supply run?” Tony asked.

“Something like that,” Bucky said. “We'll be out in a bit. Hey, Pete.”

Loki sank even deeper into the couch and pretended he wasn't in the room. They sat with Sam and went straight to some discussion on something somewhere, which he did not hear because he ignored them and continued eating. Damn this. Damn it all. He thought he heard someone discussing him again, but if he did then he decided it didn't matter: right now there was only good food and today's fantasy, something halfway between an old memory and a nonexistent future, and nothing else. All he truly noticed was Tony moving to sit at his other side when Pepper joined them a little later. One, two, three, four, five. One, two, three, four, five. Easy enough.

Loki finished his dinner at some point and then quietly went to leave what had to be cleaned in the dishwasher and quietly returned to the couch to keep fake-listening. No one was staring. He glanced over the backrest, just in case, and then leaned into the cushions and tried to lose himself in the conversation.

The room emptied over time because of course it did: Sam and Bucky disappeared somewhere down the hall, Steve made for the dorms, Peter probably went back home. People had things to do and not everyone could stay after dinner. Thor did. Awkward and alone at the table with his food. Loki glanced at him to check if he was staring and they made excruciating split-second eye contact before Loki immediately looked right back down at the floor and pretended it hadn't happened. Not existing was starting to fail.

They were both quiet for a long and painful while.

Again, Loki might have said, smiling his tight and teary-eyed smile up at him. How unsurprising these things were; how many times they had to happen for them both to look at each other without so much as faltering. Again and again until they couldn't even flinch anymore: one blade here, another here, something subtler, once, thrice, too many times a leap, and then back to the blades. Always just as faithful, always just as bold, always stopping just short. It was a routine at this point and that an entire vial of something intended for slow death by a few drops still hadn't sufficed fit well enough. Prone to melancholy, he'd been called. Prone to suicidal ideation. Nothing unusual. Nothing: that was just how he was, people had said. Tony couldn't even pretend to know the full extent of it.

Thor must have been thinking everything, but he never said a word. He passed them leaving his things in the kitchen and then walked over, a little slowly, a little cautiously, and reached out a tentative hand, and, finding no reaction, laid it on Loki's shoulder. It felt like he wanted to go for a hug but didn't know if it was allowed. "I missed you," he said with a gentle smile.

"I missed you, too, brother," Loki quietly responded. This was always the worst part. He wondered if the tears he was stifling were obvious.

They didn't say anything else, though. Thor left too and so did Pepper for other reasons.

The silence that followed was brief, and it was Tony who broke it, asking, "Do you want to go finish that puzzle?"

"Sure," Loki muttered, pushing himself to his feet to follow.

It was quiet, nothing heavy, and they put the music back on. Not much more conversation happened between them either: there was a joke or two, a curious remark on Thor's underwhelming reaction, and nothing else. Loki promised this was normal and didn't mean that he didn't care, just that these things were easier to process when they didn't turn it into an exhibit of grief. Peter had figured it out. Others probably had. All it did was make Loki feel even more at fault; Tony seemed to understand that part.

Pepper came in about an hour later and Tony, after some half-serious pleading, convinced her to come search for a missing piece. Though it was amusing to watch, Loki still couldn't quite settle. He felt himself drifting again, and every time he asked the hour, seven, seven-thirty, eight, all he could do was wonder what that night would look like: had they even planned that far?

He didn't know.

"I think I should go cast those wards," he quietly said.

Tony looked up.

"It's getting late, isn't it? And I'd... rather sleep in my room... um..." Loki glanced at Pepper, then back at Tony, and then, looking down at the floor, he added just as softly, "It shouldn't take long."

"Alright," Tony said, standing. "Come on."

Loki paused to retrieve the marker, which had fallen by the table, and then followed him out of the room.

The wards, he distantly knew, wouldn't do much more than what was already there. Maybe they'd stave off minor harm, maybe hinder someone with ill intent from coming in or ease a hex or bad dream, but if someone wanted him they would find a way. All he could do was try to make things easier for himself: a good combination would facilitate strength and healing within its reach and that was more useful to him.

Tony closed the door behind them. "I should probably preface this," he began, "by saying that I'm not the sorcerer here. I only trust you right now because I know you're too weak to do anything major."

“How kind of you,” Loki muttered. “But...” He walked to the table and sat, leaving the cane against the side of his chair. “I suppose you’re right.”

Tony sat opposite him. “How do you ward a room?”

“However you want. There are too many ways to list.”

“Well, how would Loki ward a room?”

“The boring way.”

“Really?”

He stopped to summon a small bowl and a drawstring satchel of dry herbs, which, as earlier, took him a moment; he sighed. “Really,” he said, loosening the string. “This one, anyway. Maybe you can tell, but”—he dumped the herbs into the bowl—“I mixed these ages ago and just kept them for future need. That’s how boring it is. So if you were expecting a barrier around the place vaporizing anyone who tries to come in without my permission, then... sorry. Though I admit I’ve done that.”

“But consider,” Tony said, holding up a finger, “that I am a boring mortal who is utterly fascinated by even the most boring of spells. Vaporization or otherwise.”

“Mm... you know what would be useful right now... I don’t think I can get a flame going myself. Do you have anything I could use?”

Tony reached into a pocket. “I have this,” he said, flipping open that multi-tool he always carried around. Unsurprisingly, there was a compact fire starter hooked to the back, shielded in a clear, spark-proof casing.

“Is there anything you don’t have?” Loki asked.

“Not if I can help it.”

Loki took the multi-tool and examined it. Nothing special: just a small flint and steel sort of thing that was probably reserved for emergencies, of which Tony must have had many. He removed the casing. “Hopefully,” he said, reaching to spark it over the bowl, “I prepared these well enough. If I did, they should—”

The herbs caught fire instantly.

“Talk about flammable,” Tony said, watching the bowl. He looked up. “Now what?”

“Now”—Loki set the multi-tool in front of him and sighed—“I... try to remember the other steps while waiting for ash.”

“Don’t you have it written somewhere?”

“Not this one. It’s not that complex. I just need to...”

The fire died abruptly. Peering inside the bowl, Loki saw only a tiny pile of grey.

“That was quick,” Tony said.

Which brought them to the hard part: Loki took a long, deep breath, pressed a hand to the bowl's edge, and tried for a measure of raw energy. One. Two. He didn't move. The pile lit up briefly and then faded to a soft phosphorescence. He sighed and let go. "Not the best," he said, taking the bowl with both hands, "but it should be fine. Can you sit here for a minute? I honestly think I'll just get nervous if you follow me around watching me write on the walls."

"Do what you need to," Tony said, and then he tucked the multi-tool in its spot, leaned back, and waited. Read some things on his phone just to confirm he wasn't staring.

Loki went to one corner of the room and held a thumb to the ash. The spell had worked, thankfully, which meant that it didn't quite behave as ash so much as a feathery, smoke-like substance of a hazy intermediate between ink and pure light, which was easier to write with than one would expect: it followed his motions fluidly and cleanly, stayed on the wall's surface for a few seconds, and then faded into a green glow before vanishing entirely. He repeated this at the other corners, the main door, and each pane of glass in the window, and then returned to sit at the table.

"I still don't know if you'll survive the night," Tony said.

"Suppose you'll find out."

"Hey."

Loki incinerated what remained in the bowl and then stored it and the satchel.

"Hey," Tony said, louder.

"Mm?"

"You're telling me you won't just grab another knife and off yourself in the night?"

"I won't."

"How do I know that?"

He didn't.

Loki took the marker he'd pocketed and turned to his other forearm, to that same area along his inner wrist, and, after a long several seconds of hesitation, after wondering why he was doing this, he began writing something different: a binding sigil that prevented any and all dimensional magic. No storage. No teleportation. Nothing. He capped the marker and rolled it across the table to Tony.

"Surely you realize," Tony said, sticking the marker in his other pocket, "that I don't know what you just did."

"I can't access my stored items with this."

"How do I prove that?"

He couldn't.

"Isn't Thor still here?" Loki quietly offered. "You could just ask him. He's seen this one before."

Tony seemed to think about it. He leaned in, turned Loki's arm towards the light, and took a photo, which he sent to Bucky. It was about a minute before he received an affirmative: yes, that was a binding sigil, yes, it prevented magical storage, and yes, there could be no teleporting, either.

"No teleporting?"

Loki said nothing.

"I mean"—Tony stuck the phone in his pocket—"that just makes all this easier, doesn't it?"

Loki still said nothing.

"Here's something else I'd like to ask: I want you to clear the magic around this room's tech."

"Excuse me?"

"FRIDAY."

"No."

"No?"

"You heard me."

Tony crossed his arms and leaned back. "I don't think you understand," he said. "You are a danger to yourself and I feel completely and utterly unsafe leaving you on your own for more than five minutes, let alone a whole night. I know you're resourceful and you don't need your personal stock to try something, and I know you will."

"No."

"There's a kitchen across from me, Loki. You're not stupid."

"Most Earth weapons can't pierce my skin."

"Okay, part of me believes you, but the other part seriously doubts that."

"Do you want to check?"

"What? No."

"Fine. If I'm wrong, I give you permission to physically restrain me."

That one caught Tony off guard. He made to answer, found nothing, and then simply sat and considered it for a moment. Loki didn't know why he had offered it at all and panicked at the possibility of proving his bluff.

"Didn't you not want me to do that?" Tony asked while Loki tried to even out his breathing.

"Under no circumstances," Loki muttered. "Not as I am now. Not ever. Please. But you won't agree otherwise, will you?"

"Probably not."

Loki stood and went to the kitchen, and Tony, not knowing what else to do, followed him.

“I imagine you’d want to try this yourself,” Loki said, leaning against the counter. “You’d feel safer, anyway.”

“Sorry, you’re asking me to prove that Earth weapons can’t pierce your skin and my dumb ass”—Tony reached into one of the drawers—“is agreeing. Why?”

“Because you’re as stubborn as I am,” Loki said with a smile.

“I will neither confirm nor deny that.” Tony took out a small paring knife, closed the drawer, and then stopped to test it on his arm hair. “I can’t believe you,” he muttered, taking Loki’s arm in one hand. “I cannot”—he dragged the knife across the skin—“believe you. I feel like I’m aiding and abetting.”

“Harder,” Loki said. “You won’t hurt me.”

Tony gave a little more force, but there was still nothing. Loki couldn’t even feel it.

“I’m serious. You won’t hurt me.”

“Ridiculous,” Tony muttered, and then he pressed down some more, pressed until the skin was going a bit red and the friction’s slowing him was getting to be too much, but he simply couldn’t make a mark.

“I told you,” Loki said, “you can’t hurt me with this.”

Tony drew back and tried on his own arm. A few seconds passed. Loki saw blood welling along where the knife had been.

“Point taken,” Tony said, rubbing it off with his free hand. “I, uh—ow.”

Loki reached to heal the cut. “Do you believe me yet?” he asked, looking up.

“I think so.” Tony cleaned the knife on his pant leg and then placed it on the counter. “Thanks.”

Loki returned to the table.

“But,” Tony said, and Loki glanced at him, “I still don’t trust you to stay alive.”

“What is there left for me to attempt?”

“Blunt force?”

“I think you’re underestimating how durable I am.”

“Am I, though?”

“Vastly.”

Tony walked over. “You won’t do what I asked you to, will you?”

“It won’t help.”

“No?”

Loki shook his head.

“I still don’t feel safe,” Tony said. “Is there nothing else you can offer me?”

There were so many things. How much he didn’t want to; how much he would rather lie and say no, no, there aren’t. He knew, though, that Tony wouldn’t leave him, and he knew that he wasn’t capable of any harm, so it would change nothing to add another defence. It was all he could do.

“Alright,” he said. “Tell me if this is good enough for you.” He sat up. “I swear”—his right hand gained a green sparkle—“on my mother’s soul, my beloved Frigga in the afterworld, that I will not willingly and consciously cause any physical harm to myself tonight, you are my witness”—he reached to shake Tony’s hand, which summoned a shower of fresh sparks—“and I hereby bid the universe to take its due should I renege on my terms. Are my eyes glowing yet?”

“Thought we weren’t swearing on our loved ones,” Tony said.

“For a good cause,” Loki admitted: the sparks flickered away and he withdrew his hand. “I’m sure she’d rather not see me soon.”

“Your terms, not mine,” Tony said. “I think... yeah, that’s definitely enough.”

“Good,” Loki said, and then he stood, grabbed the cane, and made for the bed.

“So is that it?”

“More or less.”

“Okay.”

Loki stuck the cane by the nightstand and kicked his shoes off and then crawled under the covers. Maybe he was still lying. Maybe he still believed that this would never work, that they were both fools and that they ought to just give in and part ways. Maybe. If nothing else, though, there was this night: he had no choice.

“Come see me if you can’t sleep,” Tony said as he opened the door, “okay?”

“I will,” Loki softly answered. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Then he was gone.

Loki turned onto his side and pulled the covers taut. How sick he was of his heart: this would have been so much simpler had he bothered to maintain its walls. No hasty vows; no days spent in quiet agony because he was too scared to disappoint, to hurt, to merely transfer everything from one mind to another. This, no matter how many years passed or how vehemently he claimed he felt nothing for those around him, would always be his downfall. Maybe someday would be different. Maybe. He still didn’t know.

He closed his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

We don't deserve Tony

Empty Bliss

Chapter Summary

Loki and Tony continue their baby steps.

Chapter Notes

Yes, I reappeared from my unplanned hiatus on April Fools' Day. No, this was not intentional. Yes, this is hilarious. My apologies for any double-takes this may have caused.

So the short answer is 2020 was really fucking weird and my life did a 1080 and a half, which meant, among other absurdity, writing this fanfiction became a bizarre, sitcom-esque ordeal. Many mental breakdowns were had! I am quite possibly still not okay! However, things have gotten a lot better for me these past few months and they are only looking up. Very cool! Rest assured, I am still adamant about finishing this fanfiction if it's the last thing I do.

Other things I did before I finally got this chapter done:

- made a cover and illustrated the chapter "Mother Earth's Delicate Tightrope" and also redid the illustration in "A Dish Served Cold"
- rewrote a ton of stuff, which was mostly the entire early chapters but also a lot of stray awkward paragraphs, weird dialogue, and other such remnants of the fact that everything was kind of a rough draft
- merged a few early chapters because the chronology was ridiculous and I couldn't find another way to fix it, oops lol that won't happen again
- fixed a bunch of plot holes, characterization problems, and other shenanigans (although there are definitely still some issues; bearing in mind that existence is a clusterfuck, however, I have decided not to care)
- redid some dumb shit including but not limited to Loki shattering Thanos's armour (that was stupid and I replaced it with more sarcasm), how he even got to Titan, and the entire segment where he and Svala meet for the first time
- fixed the famously fucked up CSS in the chapter "Starless" although I still need to go through another chapter or two, so please continue being mindful
- increased sarcasm by approximately 76%
- made flashbacks approximately 47% flashbackier (or: stopped using them as an excuse to infodump)
- added a bunch of other minor details that I had planned but never added for a variety of reasons, including "I forgot" and "I was lazy"

This chapter is a little shitposty but you cannot make me edit it if you held a gun to my head. This whole story is a shitpost. Life is a shitpost. I refuse to edit anything ever again until the fic is completed.

Thank you all for being patient with me! I hope the absolute shitload of sarcasm and gay nonsense makes up for it. 🤪

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

It was a cold, quiet sort of morning when Loki awoke, and though the sheets were tangled around him again and his hair fell in knots, he felt a little more rested than usual. He could almost say for certain that it was Tony who woke him, but by the time he heard Tony ask if he was up yet, he was lucid enough to groan out something about how it was too early, no, asking every ten minutes wouldn't make him get up any faster, and please go away.

“Nine isn't too early,” Tony said, leaning against the wall. “Is it?”

Loki rolled onto his back and groaned even louder.

“When did you fall asleep?”

“Last night.”

Tony laughed. “I meant what time.”

“Midnight?”

“That's not too bad. That's at least eight hours.”

Loki struggled upright, which sent his hair directly into his face. “It's cold,” he lied, pushing the mass back with a hand.

“Do you want a sweater?”

Loki sighed and moved to sit on the side of the bed. “No,” he said, reaching to unroll his one pant leg, “but thank you.” Then he stopped, tried to gauge exactly how matted his hair was, and frowned: no storage meant nothing with which to tie it down. “This ought to be fun,” he muttered.

“You look fine,” Tony said.

“I look like I have small animals living here.”

“No, you don't.”

“Then what's with you trying not to laugh?”

“I'm not—”

“Tony.”

“Okay,” he admitted, hands raised, “maybe I am. It's not bad! It totally suits you. But I could probably harass someone for an elastic or something if it'll make you feel better.”

“Please don't. I'll... manage.”

“If you say so.”

Loki flipped his hair forward and tried to finger-comb the tangles out.

“If it’s always bothering you so much,” Tony said, “why don’t you just cut it?”

“I like having long hair.”

“Oh. Yeah, fair enough. Maybe some of the other long-haired folk here could give you some advice.”

“They’d tell me”—Loki winced as he accidentally pulled a knot—“to stop tossing and turning.”

“Why don’t you just sleep with it tied back, then?”

Loki sat up and tucked everything behind his ears, careful he didn’t tear something again. “I might try that,” he said, and then he stepped off the bed, grabbed the walking stick, and wandered to where he’d draped his coat on the couch at some point. “Is Thor still here?”

“He left a little after you went to bed,” Tony said. “Why?”

“I’m just curious.” Loki paused to examine his arms, whether the writing was holding, and then slid the coat on. “You look well,” he said as he smoothed the sleeves: bright eyes, tidy waves, and a charming red button-down and navy two-piece combo the likes of which he hadn’t seen in ages, disrupted only slightly by the gleaming tech where there might have been a necktie.

“Crazy what sleep does to you,” Tony said, smiling.

“Mm. I’m assuming you want to have breakfast together.”

“It would be nice.”

Loki looked around the room, at all the spells he couldn’t see, and then back at Tony, who was still patiently waiting beside him. Then, slowly, soundlessly, he walked out. It was one of those days again. He thought he should give in and continue sleeping, but he was already up and he doubted Tony would let him, anyway. Not this time. Not after everything. How the hours would hurt; what, though, could he do?

“Your room?” he asked.

“Most likely,” Tony said.

Loki kept his gaze on the floor.

The building seemed even emptier than usual, and although it was just as comforting, he had to finally wonder when and why it had gotten like this: save for scattered meetings and events in the lower floors, it looked to be down to just him, Tony, and the few others in their group. No researchers, no trainees, no loose associates. Nothing. He figured it was one of those things he would simply never understand and decided not to question it.

There was a bar-type counter and a few high chairs bordering the kitchen, and, not knowing what else to do and still hoping to settle things between them, Loki chose to sit there instead of in his couch corner. He pulled his coat out from under him so it fell loosely behind the backrest and waited. It wasn’t just lost sleep, he thought distantly as he watched Tony dig through the spice cabinet. Tony looked so much calmer now, so much more like himself; those few days, that whole week and whatever else truly must have been the nightmare they’d been said to be. How ironic that

this should happen when all the two of them had once bothered themselves with was who would attack first.

Generosity. Loki rested his arms on the counter. None of this would ever make sense. “What’s the occasion?” he asked.

“For what?”

“The outfit.”

“Oh. No occasion. I just felt like it, y’know?”

“It’s nice.”

Tony glanced over his shoulder. “Thanks,” he said, and then he closed the cabinet and turned to properly face him. “Okay, so I don’t actually know what you want to eat and I was hoping maybe you’d have somewhat of an idea. Anything?”

“I don’t care,” Loki said. “I’ll take whatever you give me.”

“Alright, lemme rephrase that: I don’t have any ideas, period, and that’s why I’m asking you.”

“An entire steak intended solely to spite Pepper’s narrow beliefs on what constitutes a breakfast.”

Tony snickered. “A wise choice,” he said, “but unfortunately”—he opened the fridge—“there’s no steak.” He closed it and checked the freezer. “Nope. The spiting will have to wait.”

“How tragic,” Loki said, mock gloom in his voice. “Then may I suggest a slightly less dry omelette?”

“Oh, no, was it dry last time?” Tony exclaimed. “Oh, no. I’m so sorry.” He turned away, head in his hands, and muttered, “I’ve disgraced myself.”

“It wasn’t that noticeable.”

“I’m never cooking again!”

“It was fine, Tony.”

He groaned. “Okay, so”—he looked up—“this happened, I’m fairly certain, because I didn’t add milk. I usually add a very little bit of milk so it doesn’t get dry and I obviously didn’t want to do that with you because, I don’t know, maybe it would have set you off, and anyway, I didn’t have any substitutes, so I just, uh, didn’t.”

Ah: that. Always that.

“You’ve got good judgment, then,” Loki said, trying not to let the fact sadden him. “I don’t think I would have noticed, actually, but I do appreciate it.”

“But the good news is,” Tony said, raising a hand, “we do currently have a full carton of soy milk or something and soy is presumably fine with you and I’m therefore totally going to make you the sexiest omelette ever as an apology.”

Loki laughed into his arms. “How kind,” he managed to say. “Will it be trying to seduce me?”

“Maybe,” Tony said, and then he shot him a sly look and added, “Why, do you want it to? What, you got a thing for omelettes, Loki? Scandalous.”

He only laughed even harder.

“Hey, it’s the twenty-first century,” Tony said, reaching into the fridge. “I’m not judging. Be attracted to omelettes and don’t let anyone try to change you, alright? You were born that way.”

“Stop,” Loki said between the laughter.

“I’m just—” Tony broke into a chuckle of his own. “That’s it. I’ll never look at you the same again.”

“Don’t make me come over there,” Loki said, glaring as well as he could from behind a smile.

“Yes, sir. No more references to your sexuality.”

“Tony, please. My face hurts from laughing.”

“Oh, score! I haven’t done that in a while, I think. Enjoy your face muscle workout.”

This man would be the death of him, Loki thought as he sat up, still struggling to compose himself, and brushed the hair from his eyes.

“Alright, what do you want in here?” Tony asked, looking back at him.

“Whatever.”

“You sure?”

“Uh, no onion.”

“Ham? We got ham.”

“Go ahead.”

“Spices?”

“Same as last time.”

“Funky.”

Loki watched him pile everything by the stove and then close the fridge. Maybe he was imagining it; maybe he was just being paranoid again. For a moment, though, he could swear that was hesitation he saw as Tony set out the last package of something or other and then went to wash his hands.

No.

“You have good taste in music,” Loki quietly said, hoping to distract himself. “You should play me something.”

“Queen?” Tony offered, not looking up.

“That works.”

He nudged the taps off with his elbow and then turned, gave him a curious squint. “Do you even know who they are?”

“A little.”

“What? How?”

“Visits. Earthly matters. You learn things.”

“Huh.” Tony fished his glasses out of his breast pocket and slid them on with one hand. “Thor doesn’t know anything,” he muttered, tapping something on the side.

“Thor hasn’t spent nearly as much time here as I have over the years.”

“That explains a lot. Best of?”

“Sure.”

The music came on a few seconds later at a comfortably mid-range volume.

“I’m never forgetting,” Tony whispered as he cracked the first egg.

“If I had something to throw at you, I would.”

“Duly noted.”

Loki hopped from the chair and went to sit at the couch.

“Wait, you’re not actually mad, are you?” Tony called.

“Oh, goodness, no. I’m still trying not to laugh.”

“Ah. You had me worried.”

Loki moved to get a better view of the puzzle. It seemed fuller than when he’d last seen it, but there was a sizable area in its one end that remained largely untouched, even after all they’d done the previous night.

What did Tony know?

Loki took a piece and examined it. The water; that was obvious. Sudden noises. Physical contact, or at least most of it. Those, he knew, were all painfully clear by now, and if anyone had noticed, it would be Tony. But was that all? Or was there something more? He still couldn’t comfortably call everything by name. Did that count? He glanced over the backrest. It was a small comfort to know that even if Tony was aware of these little quirks and sensitivities, he wouldn’t find them, say, silly, but it was just that: small. They were still meaningless things that shouldn’t have ever become such

inconveniences, and they were still, no matter what Tony might have said or believed, the most pitiful part of any of this.

He wanted that hot shower.

Frustrated, he set the piece on the table, sat up, and cleaned himself the usual way, starting with his hair and finishing with the rest of him. The sigils, as expected, resisted the spell: they didn't fade even slightly when he passed over them.

He cleared the magic and then cast another glance behind him. This was taking too long.

"You want anything to drink?" Tony asked.

"No, thank you."

"Alright."

Loki kicked his feet up and turned to lie on his back. This, he thought again, was taking too long. Maybe they could go out today; if they started early enough, the inertia might keep him going and he wouldn't find himself so dreadfully close to just shutting his eyes and resuming his slumber there on the couch. He doubted it would work. He knew it wouldn't work. If they only tried, though, maybe they could accomplish something.

He tugged his sleeves to the elbow and re-examined the sigils. Four days. Five, if he wanted to be sure.

He could do that.

The music was alright and the unease, though present, wasn't quite overwhelming, so he didn't mind waiting. He rolled his sleeves down, turned onto his side, and watched what he could see of the city from this angle.

Tony hadn't yet had his own breakfast, it seemed, because when he came back, it was with two plates. Loki sat up to take one and then watched him swing around to sit at the other couch.

"Maybe we should move," Tony said. "Go sit in the kitchen. Pepper says I always get crumbs everywhere when I eat here."

"I'll be careful," Loki said. "As for you, I have no idea."

"Careful-ish?"

"Perhaps."

Tony kept his glasses on. It was a little discomfiting to sit like that, Loki found; a little vulnerable, the way Tony could see in one glance how barely he was keeping today's fear behind a pristine poker face. Maybe Tony could tell anyway: something about suicide and sunshine and how few such lies could pass at this point. Didn't matter.

Things were easier back when all they concerned themselves with was who would attack first.

The problem now wasn't that he felt afraid: it was that, as always, he just didn't feel like doing anything, and he was honestly curious what the two of them could do today. They couldn't keep

stagnating like this. There were options, he knew, and there wasn't anything especially difficult, but his problem, the eternal problem, was that nothing appealed. Tony would say something else to that—call it depression or some other clinical euphemism that downplayed the breadth of his madness, that, owing to such clinical treatments and titles, could almost make it sound like he could be helped at this point. How sweet; how genuinely heartwarming it was to see that kind of continued hope. It was nice, but it didn't do much. It did nothing.

Was he spiralling again? He was spiralling. He looked up from his plate, paused there for a second, and then slowly resumed eating.

"I don't understand," he said after some time, "how you can stay busy all day. You don't seem to tire of anything. How do you manage that?"

Tony considered it briefly. "Well, not always," he said. "Not tiring. I get bored sometimes."

"Sometimes," Loki pointed out. "You usually have something to do, don't you?"

"Something that doesn't make me want to fall asleep? Yeah. Often."

"Like what?"

"Stuff. Back before the whole Avengers thing sort of collapsed in on itself, that took up a lot of my time. There's still, uh, business matters. These days, Pepper deals with most of that, but I do pop in every now and then. Terrible overseas conferences and even worse quasi-mandatory cocktail dinners. I still work on tech a lot."

"Why?"

"Why? I don't know." Tony stopped, nudged the glasses up for an instant to rub an eye. He didn't bother readjusting them: they stayed about halfway on his nose, low enough that he was looking over them as he rather cluelessly answered, "I just like making things. Fixing things. Always have, always will. It's satisfying. It gives me a nice short-term goal, whether that's 'what cool new AI can I add to the family?' or 'can I revive this small and sundry device that I accidentally dropped down an entire flight of stairs?'"

"Can you?"

"Sometimes."

"So it's just goals."

"Yeah, mostly. Like this puzzle." Tony gestured towards the unfinished image. "Screw this puzzle. It's horrible. Some of the colours look so alike that you can't even tell what's what. But it's nice to finish it. It gives you something to work for. Most things in life are like that. You just gotta find something you sort of vaguely enjoy doing and go from there."

"Well, that's what I'm asking you," Loki said. "I don't *enjoy* anything."

"Presumably, yeah. You just tried to kill yourself twice in one week. Fuck life and everything in it, right?"

When he put it like that, yes, a little; Loki frowned.

“What did you do before this?”

“I don’t remember.”

“No?”

Loki shrugged.

“Tell me if you do, I guess. No rush.”

Sure—but what would they do in the meantime? Tony still hadn’t answered that question. Loki watched him for a moment, expecting to hear something more, but there was nothing. He sighed and ate the last few bites of his breakfast, then set the plate in his lap. There was no point to this. There was just that empty, inexorable hopelessness and some half-convinced faith in himself that he looked alright—that maybe, for at least as long as it mattered, Tony couldn’t tell he felt like reality itself was crumbling around him. Either he was triumphantly back to square one or he had never left.

He stared down at his plate.

“I think we should go out,” Tony said. “Maybe just a walk around the park. You haven’t had fresh air in what, a week?”

“Four days,” Loki quietly corrected. Four like how long he was waiting; what were the odds?

“Four days is a lot,” Tony said, “even if, alright, you were unconscious for most of that. It gets you into this rut where you end up feeling terrible no matter what you do and then it only gets worse and I know you’re probably over there thinking wow, this guy sounds like one of those crazy alternative healers who think you can cure terminal cancer with yoga alone, but no, I’m serious, depression fucking loves ruts and you’re gonna feel like garbage for as long as you’re stewing indoors all day. You will feel marginally less like garbage if you start spending more time outside, even if it’s just walking to and from the driveway, and marginally, I think, is better than nothing. Am I wrong?”

Loki considered it, and then, finding no other argument, he spared a sullen glance from his plate and said, “I panic when I’m outside.”

“You panic when you’re inside, too,” Tony calmly countered, crossing his arms.

“Yes,” Loki said, “but it’s worse outside.”

“Is it?”

“Yes!”

“Okay. I believe you. Why, though?”

There was no real explanation.

Tony carefully removed the glasses and folded them. “Just because?” he suggested, sliding them into their pocket.

Not quite. There were reasons, little bits here and there that might have justified the hesitation, but they all seemed so silly that as far as Loki was concerned, they were better left unsaid. Outside felt too unfamiliar, too exposed, and beneath that sleepy veil that kept refusing to lighten, something about it all just felt so... off. Tony, admittedly, was right, and most days weren't much of an issue regardless, but what else could he do? Lie? Say he didn't feel like he was losing his mind every time he stepped beyond his bedroom?

"Just because," Loki eventually said. "I don't know why."

"Does it help if I'm around?"

"Not really."

"Oh."

Loki looked back down at his plate. Not knowing what else to do, he let a brief surge of magic wash over it and the cutlery, leaving them each sparkling clean.

"Cool," Tony said. "Maybe you can clear out the sink while you're at it. Save some time."

"I'm not your servant," Loki muttered.

"No. No one's forcing you."

But that tone of voice—damn it; Loki breathed in hard, got out of his seat, and trudged to the kitchen.

There was a dishwasher by the sink, the sort of standard-issue model ubiquitous throughout the building, but it seemed like there just wasn't enough waste between Tony and Pepper's already infrequent meals here to justify its use, hence the small scattering of items in one of the two basins. None of it was even that dirty: it was all a day or two's worth at most and missing only a quick rinse. Somehow, though, they just hadn't found the time.

"Slob," Loki called as he stuck that morning's plate in the cupboard.

"I know," Tony responded, a half-hidden chortle lining the words. "Shame me for it, please. I keep meaning to stop."

"Ugh."

That made Tony laugh for real. Loki ignored him; he returned the cutlery and then, one by one, he cleaned and put away each item in the pile. It all took him no more than a few minutes, and, after a brief look to see if he'd missed something, he returned to the couch and plunked himself down with a sigh.

"Thanks," Tony said. "That was nice of you."

"Whatever," Loki muttered in response, and then he scooted towards the couch's edge, picked a random section, and started sorting pieces.

"You mad?"

"No."

“You seem mad.”

“No, look, I’m just—” Loki sat up straight. “See, you know me, and I think you know what I’m like, I’m this, uh”—he breathed in—“royalty, prince, something like that, on two fronts, in fact, biological and adopted, look at me, extra royal, and a god, or at least I’m supposed to be, and on a good day, like, an average day, not me sitting here with weeks of compounded sleep deprivation and pseudo-starvation on top of a suicide attempt and a half, I could easily level, say”—he gestured around them—“an entire building like this without breaking a sweat. A whole city block. I don’t ever really need to do that, so I don’t, because, shockingly, I’m not the flashy type when it comes to magic and I generally have better things to waste my energy on than incinerating a street. But I could do that. And I just think”—he swallowed, took another sharp breath—“that, that, uh, isn’t it so sad that someone like that’s been resigned to all this, to killing time with *you*, no offence, and busying myself with all these mundanities when I could be out there being and doing something greater. Not... listening to classic rock and trying to keep from sobbing hysterically. I’m sorry. I figured it was obvious.”

“Hm.” Tony leaned forward, rested his arms on his knees. “Yeah, a little. To be completely honest, I thought you were too caught up in self-loathing to give a shit either way, but yeah, no, I get where you’re coming from.”

“Right, then you’ll forgive me if I find you pestering me to do your chores somewhat demeaning. I’m not mad. I get it, and, actually, I’m thrilled to help your sorry ass, but it’s just frustrating. Funny, isn’t it? Self-loathing or not, it seems my ego’s still kicking.”

“Eh. I’m pretty sure self-loathing is just a wounded ego, so it makes sense. Hey, don’t take it personally, by the way: I harass everyone to do my chores, royalty or otherwise.”

“Maybe you should harass yourself to do your chores.”

“Absolutely. In fact”—Tony stood and grabbed his plate—“I’m gonna go wash this myself like a functioning adult.”

“I believe in you,” Loki called, not looking up, as Tony jogged to the kitchen, and then he moved to sit on the floor and continued glaring at the puzzle.

There looked to be about two, three hundred pieces left, which would keep them busy for another few hours, and then... nothing. Unless Tony did the unspeakable and brought out a fresh puzzle to agonize over, they’d need to find some other way to waste time. Good luck. It wasn’t like they didn’t have options. Given the choice, Loki was fairly certain he would find the biggest and loudest pub the city had to offer, grab some drinks, grab an attractive person or several, and recall the utter lunacy that was Sakaar. He could; cities like these never lacked such excitement and he thought a little extravagance might help him remember himself. A little chaos. Something like what he’d been missing. If only he didn’t panic so easily. Maybe then he would have dared to try.

Tony sat across from him. “You think my ass is sorry?” he muttered, reaching to snatch a piece from the table’s other end.

“It’s a figure of speech, Tony. Your ass is fine.”

“Oh. Okay.”

A few seconds passed.

“Just fine?” Tony asked, glancing up with an almost hurt expression.

In response, Loki waved a hand, turning the music a little louder, and kept picking at the stray pieces around one of the corners.

“Okay,” Tony said again, and that was it.

Don’t stare into the void, Loki wearily told himself, and then something else: four days. Another four; that unsubtle reminder that he was avoiding outings still stuck out in his mind. Four days. It was rather poetic, honestly, this arbitrary countdown that, for better or for worse, was probably on the short side. Four—maybe five. He shouldn’t have been thinking about it at all, but it helped to have some kind of contingency in place.

The music quickly became background noise, and the hours faded along with it. Then everything else.

Like most other times this happened, there was no way of knowing exactly when or for how long he’d slid himself into some indiscernible daydream and made to wonder what was what, only that, when he finally realized he was drifting again, the Queen montage had ended and been replaced with something he couldn’t recognize, the puzzle was about twenty pieces shy of complete, and Tony had magically acquired a stripy mug filled with fresh coffee.

“Hey there,” Tony said, catching a brief and unintentional glance from behind the mug. “Did you find that piece?”

“... Uh. No.”

“Psst. Hey.”

“... Uh... I don’t know.”

“What?”

“Wait, did you ask me something?”

“Yeah, I said, ‘Can you check under the couch?’”

“Oh. Uh.” Loki bent to a crawl and felt around. “No,” he said, squinting at the floor. “It’s not here.”

“Can you even see like that?”

“Perfectly, yes.”

“Not there, huh?”

“Not there.”

“Hmm.”

Loki sat up, dusted his shirt off, and watched as Tony took a long, thoughtful sip of coffee, scrutinized the puzzle a little further, and continued poking pieces, apparently unperturbed by the straggler's unknown whereabouts.

The weather did look nice: blue sky, comfortable sunlight. But no; better not.

It was an odd and mostly maddening paradox to feel so in need of exhilaration and yet so reluctant to even step outside, and, in fact, nothing new: over the years, Loki had acquainted himself with as many such contradictions as he had with everything else. All that he craved right now made him disastrously nervous, and that included, unsurprisingly, leaving the familiarity of sitting and doing nothing in favour of going somewhere and talking to someone. No wonder he was miserable; if he couldn't do what he enjoyed, what else was there?

Four whole bloody days. Probably a week; he was being far too optimistic about the rate at which his body would break down some surface-level ink.

He thought about scavenging the bathroom to see if, by some kind of cosmic luck, Tony used an alcohol-based aftershave, which would have immediately solved the problem, but he wasn't that desperate, was he? And speaking of: had he forgotten the state he'd left Tony in? Tony, who had greeted a birthday distraught and terrified half to death on a hospital floor, who was doing so much for him, who was the one and only reason, Loki could say with certainty, they were still here together—why?

He leaned back against the couch and nervously crossed his arms. "May I... um... have something to eat?"

Tony paused mid-sip, narrowed his eyes at him over the mug. "Steal my food, you mean?"

"Uh." Loki blushed. "No. No, that's why I'm—that's why I'm asking."

"I'm kidding, Loki. You don't need permission. Take whatever you want."

"Oh. Alright," he quietly said, pushing himself to his feet. "Thank you."

"Mhm."

What the fuck.

He tiptoed around to the kitchen, opened the fridge, and bent to examine its contents. What—he dug through a pile of miscellaneous items—the fuck. He never needed someone's permission for anything, let alone for eating their food; when had he sunk so low?

"I'm stealing your peas," he announced, hoping to lighten the mood, as he grabbed a package of sugar snaps.

"Oh no," Tony said, "not the peas. Anything but the peas. I'm begging you."

"Too late." Loki closed the fridge. "They've been claimed."

"Burgled, more like. How dare you burgle my peas?"

Loki returned to his seat in front of the couch and set the bag atop the puzzle, on a finished section. "I dare," he said, removing the little clip holding it shut. "I shall feast most gloriously upon the

burgled peas. Seethe, Tony.”

“Seething.”

Loki took a few peas and looked at what was left of the puzzle: sixteen inner pieces, all an identical sea-blue mottle. Absolutely nothing set them apart from each other.

“Maybe we should get an actual lunch,” Tony said as he lifted a random piece. “It is sort of lunchtimey.”

Loki thoughtfully munched his peas.

“Expensive seafood place?” Tony offered with a hopeful smile.

“You have food here,” Loki said, reaching for another handful of peas. “I don’t see why we can’t just make something.”

“I can’t cook!” Tony whined.

“Oh, woe. What a tragedy. Don’t be so dramatic; I know you’re not as inept as you claim.”

Apparently defeated, Tony sighed, finished his coffee, and then got up, saying, “Fine. But I want this abomination”—he pointed at the puzzle—“complete when I get back.”

“Fair,” Loki said, and then he stuck another pod in his mouth and leaned to inspect the hole in the image’s sea. He almost added that Tony need not cook a large meal, but, well, that would be a lie: his appetite had obviously returned at least somewhat and Tony would argue either way.

The puzzle.

Loki took a piece and tried fitting it into every available edge, in every possible orientation, and, eventually, found its spot. Then the next one. It was a little tedious, the way he only had pure trial and error to rely on, but it didn’t take too long and the missing piece, it turned out, hadn’t even been missing: by the time the music shifted, he was done.

He closed the bag of peas and moved it to the couch, then stood to get a better look at the image.

There was something satisfying about it, admittedly. He found the whole thing rather unremarkable, to be honest, and he thought that this past day and a half or however much had been a complete and utter waste of time, but it had never been meant as anything more in the first place and it wasn’t like he’d had an alternative, so there wasn’t much to complain about. All he could do was wonder: now what?

He considered taking the worn playing cards gathering dust in his storage, remembered he couldn’t, and then sat back down and kept wondering.

Aftershave—or, alternately, hand sanitizer, or any kind of generic rubbing alcohol, most of which he might have found here: should he become so desperate, which he certainly wasn’t, wouldn’t, and, despite his obsessive rumination, altogether didn’t plan on for the foreseeable short-term, he had his options. He just appreciated the benefits of having a fail-safe or several, like that if he couldn’t get away with hastening the runes’ natural wear, he still only had another week at best. Patience, he could tell himself, a prestigious virtue he’d never quite had the honour of meeting; patience and some nearly genuine smiles and half-truths, and maybe he’d turn out alright. Maybe,

by some blessed miracle from above, it would never even come to that. Either way, he liked his contingencies. He liked being prepared.

But sure: he wasn't desperate.

Not one bit.

Loki took the peas and returned to the kitchen. "You're not upset, right?" he asked, tossing them into the fridge in about a second and then glancing back at Tony: that didn't sound nervous, he hoped, as he quickly clarified, "Us staying here all day, I mean. Inside."

"Well, it's kind of boring, isn't it?" Tony said from where he was fiddling with the stove. "But I don't care that much. I've got things I can do."

"Are you sure?"

"Yep."

"Tony."

"No, really. I don't care."

"But—"

"You think I'm gonna scream at you for sitting indoors all day?"

"No, I think you'll scream at me for—"

Tony looked up.

"For—for d-dragging you down with me or—"

"Why would I do that?" Tony softly asked.

—right: because there was no excuse after everything. Because it would have been a step entirely in the wrong direction. But Tony had screamed at him before; it could have happened, couldn't it?

"I mean"—Loki leaned against the counter—"you've got a healthy temper. Surely—"

"Surely I don't get pissed at someone just for not wanting to go outside on a given day."

"*Tony—*"

"Loki."

He pressed his lips into a tight, uncomfortable line.

"Why don't you go sit back down," Tony said, turning to grab something from a drawer, "and I'll try to keep my streak of not setting whatever I try to cook on fire? Unless you'd rather give it a shot."

"I just think—"

"You breathing?"

“Am I—of course I’m—”

“Hey.”

Loki took a deep breath.

“Alternatively,” Tony said, “if you go to the bedroom, you will find a large flat-screen television, and this large flat-screen television, you will probably notice, is resting on a stand with a great many compartments. You are free to peruse them at your leisure.”

“All of them?”

“Every single one.”

Loki stepped away from the counter. “Just there?” he quietly asked.

“If you don’t mind. I mean, if you want to look through the rest of the room, go ahead, but I don’t advise it.”

“Corpses?”

“Yes, there are currently sixteen dead bodies hidden in various locations. Whatever you do, do not open the closet: one of them is cursed and will immediately begin singing horrible Dolly Parton covers and refuse to stop until you take his hat, put it on, and do a ten-minute jig while pledging your allegiance to suede jackets.”

“What’s his name?”

“Billy Bob Jones the third.”

“Oh. Well, I’ll... try not to disturb him.”

Tony smiled, a look that seemed like he was barely holding back a fit of hysterical laughter, and then resumed his sorting utensils.

Loki wordlessly tiptoed to the bedroom.

It was rather cozy, this tiny alcove that, though open to the rest of the suite and facing the same wall-spanning windows, was its own space. The music was set to play at a lower volume and there was still a kind of late morning shade hanging over the bed, which was comfortably ruffled and had, as promised, a TV across from it, perched on a long, cabinet-style stand just in front of the window. Loki knelt there, mindful of his coat, and inspected the shelves. Not much: a few books, a few board games, and some assorted novelties gathering dust between them, which, given that this wasn’t exactly Tony and Pepper’s permanent dwelling, wasn’t surprising. In fact, he had expected less. He did find a chessboard buried under everything, but he was almost certainly too distracted for a good session: it wasn’t worth it, he figured, and he sighed and moved on to the other compartments.

He thought it was just his ridiculous and unpredictable luck that the first thing he saw in one of the drawers was a generic pack of playing cards—a little dusty, a little worn around the box’s edges, but still in endlessly better condition than those sitting locked up in his storage. Probably the only worthwhile thing he would find here, too; he skimmed the other spaces, realized, to no particular shock, that he was right, and then tucked the cards in his pocket and wandered back to the couch.

He wondered again what he was doing.

There were at least a hundred games he knew, each of varying complexity and absurdity, and, if nothing else, he might have taught some to Tony: they were good for whiling away the hours and it wouldn't be the first time he'd spent all day lost in one. Otherwise, he would go sit in the corner and build a castle, citing something about how no activity was too pointless so long as it served to occupy his mind. Either worked.

But no, really: he had no idea what he was doing. He dumped the cards into his hand and stared them down.

Whatever Tony was trying not to burn didn't take long: he was back in his seat more or less by the time Loki had decided on something they could attempt, balancing two bowls in one hand and a refill of coffee in the other. He unloaded the items onto a free portion of the table, straightened everything out, and got to eating.

"So does caffeine just mysteriously have no effect on you?" Loki asked, setting the cards beside him.

"Kind of," Tony said. "Depends how much I have, but it usually just calms me down."

"Interesting."

"Very."

The meal was average, something basic and reasonably nutritious like breakfast. Loki did not offer more than a passing glance and did not want to. He stared the puzzle down.

"Wanna frame that?" Tony said; the question was sudden enough that Loki jolted.

"I'm... not sure," he answered.

"Mm. Well, I'll leave it for a bit, so we've got time to think about it."

What was that expression? Discomfort? Doubt? Did Tony mean to say something else? Add something? Loki ate slowly. There was nothing particular that he could see and he suspected that the pitch in his heart rate was another false alarm, but for the duration of their lunch, he could not shake the feeling that Tony was hiding something. He tried. He tried to decipher the cause and found none. He tried reasoning with himself. Nothing.

He poured the cards into his hand and shuffled them, silent, while Tony sipped his coffee.

"We should go buy a steak," Tony said, "and have it for breakfast tomorrow."

"We?" Loki said, not looking up.

"I trust you to help me pick out a good one."

"Or you don't want to leave me unattended?"

"I don't want to buy a crappy steak."

"Everything is good if you prepare it right."

“Please?”

Loki stopped shuffling. “When?”

“Now? Later? Dunno. Sometime today.”

Let me think about it. He fiddled with the top card, briefly tuned his attention to the music, and then said, “I’d like to teach you a game.”

Tony frowned; Loki expected to hear something about avoiding the question, but he instead asked, “What kind of game?”

“The complicated kind,” Loki said, sliding some cards onto the table. “But I think you’ll manage.”

“Is it from Earth?”

“Could be. I can’t recall.”

Tony seemed unsatisfied, but he leaned back with his coffee and waited, watching the cards as they were carefully arranged on the table, and said nothing more.

It was one of those obscure games that couldn’t really be adequately described in less than a paragraph, and, judging from the setup alone, anything longer still wouldn’t be enough. Get these cards, avoid these cards, and here are some modifiers, except it went on forever—which, of course, was why Loki liked it so much; what fun was something that didn’t leave you scratching your head the entire time?

Tony still looked like he wanted to argue, but he refrained.

Like earlier—like most of what they’d been doing so far and most of the past week—the minutes faded into a vague impression of something that might have but could not be said with certainty to have happened. The conversation felt one-sided and a little detached. The music stopped at some point; neither of them bothered restarting it. The game was a little hectic, in part because describing complex steps and techniques while distracted had never been a very easy task, although, for whatever reason, Tony acquainted himself with the rules without issue.

Perhaps the only remarkable point in all of this was when, right as he drew a winning card, Tony mentioned that he would love to hear some poetry and that someone so good with words must be masterful with a pen. Loki, flustered, replied that this was very much not the case and most of his poetry was rough, hasty, with no real thought or planning—messy scrawls that he never read twice. No rhyme. No reason. It was his place to be a little improper. Tony said that free verse was rising in popularity these days and a cleverly named anthology would make a fortune; the world did adore messy scrawls, and even if that weren’t the case, they were no less valuable. Loki resisted the urge to call him a smartass and said no, thank you.

Then Tony claimed his third victory.

There was no word on acquiring a steak, nor how or when Tony had devised so many high-level strategies for a card game he’d just learned mere hours ago. No comment on who felt what or who was going outside. Outside? No. This was fine. This was fine.

(It wasn’t, but that wasn’t important.)

Loki eventually made the mistake of shifting to another position and wincing as something in his back caught, which, of course, Tony noticed, because when did anything ever go under Tony's radar anymore? He glanced up: "Mm?"

"Nothing," Loki muttered. "I'm just sore."

"Oh. Sleep problems?"

"Most likely."

"Want a massage?"

"A what? No. Don't be ridiculous."

"I mean, I don't mind. If you think it'll help."

"I think it'll be weird."

"Nah. Lie down."

There was a brief stretch of silence, and Loki considered it, considered it some more, and then sighed, left the cards he was picking at—abandoned, face-up, because he'd lost any and all investment in the game around the time he decided everything was rigged—and crept, somewhat reluctantly, to lie on his stomach. "But it's not that bad," he muttered, leaning into his arms, as Tony walked over. "I'm used to this."

"Used to back pain? Gross." Tony sat beside him. "Life's too short for stuff to hurt."

Maybe.

Tony's grip was soft, if hesitant, and there was something soothing in its familiarity. "Tell me where," he said, daring some slight pressure.

"I don't know."

"Shoulders?"

"Sure."

Tony moved to just under. "See, this isn't weird," he said. "Is it?"

"It's a little weird."

"We've slept in the same bed."

"Not as weird as it could be, then."

"You're tensing."

"I'm not—ow!"

"Ease up," Tony said, lightening some of the weight. "You're still tensing. Is it me?"

Well, maybe it was. Maybe it was just how hilariously awkward it seemed to Loki, who couldn't stop thinking about all those unsubtle jabs and jokes they'd shared in the past few weeks. Maybe it was that fear again: what could go wrong in this particular scenario and how worried should he be? But it always felt good to have such gentle physical contact—physical contact that he'd calmly and graciously accepted with no panic, no flits of one memory or another—and after whatever nerves he couldn't get over, there was nothing more to it.

He took a deep breath and held it, quietly acknowledged how taut everything was, and let himself relax as he breathed out.

“Oh, that's better,” Tony said. “Much better. Hey, that doesn't feel so bad, does it?”

“It's nice,” Loki answered, leaning a little deeper into an elbow's crook. “Thank you.”

“Whatever helps.”

Ah—don't toss and turn, perhaps. But that would take ages to overcome, and for now, then, he was stuck with a mild to moderate case of chronic pain that he'd honestly normalized: it wouldn't have even occurred to him if Tony hadn't inquired.

“What do you want to do later?”

“Wallow in fear and self-loathing.”

“Hey.”

Loki turned to watch the opposite couch's backrest. “You asked,” he said. “I suppose you wanted something more productive.”

“Yeah, ideally.”

He wasn't sure why, after everything, he was alright with this. Wasn't it too vulnerable? Didn't he panic nine out of ten times someone touched him—or wasn't he already panicking the other one? It was lucky; he wondered when it would happen again.

“I don't know,” he said. “I might just nap for a bit. I swear this is doing something.”

“Really? You've got all these sleep problems but this is what knocks you out?”

“Mhm.”

Tony, of course, did not believe this, but he was silent just long enough. By the time he insisted that ten minutes and a tender back rub were no match for a chronic case of insomnia, well, whoops: looks like they were.

Which was a funny thing for him to realize.

Here was another one of those things that Loki would never know, starting with a freeze, a sharp pause and check, and then what nearly could have been a disbelieving laugh: between the stifling, though, and between the fact that no, really, was it honestly that funny?—no, it wasn't—there was only more silence. Tony pulled away, sat up, and wondered. What was to be done about them?

He thought Loki would say that they should part ways and leave each other to live or die however desired, and truly, it wasn't far off the mark. Maybe something else: maybe they'd need a kiss or two first just to ease all the jokes, which, while amusing, were getting a little old. Whatever.

He slid his glasses back on. Sixty.

He stood and nervously hobbled to the other couch.

A minute passed, and then a few, and he leaned into the armrest and quietly asked, "What do I do?"

The voice that answered him was still FRIDAY's, because these days, that was who he liked to talk to, and these days, it didn't suit him to switch between a dozen different AIs. "What you're doing right now seems to be working," she said from within the frames, but Tony only frowned.

"Is it?"

"He looks content."

He did. He looked the same way he looked every other time he'd ended up passed out like this: peaceful. But these things were never so simple.

"I don't think I'm doing enough," Tony said.

"What more could you do?"

"A lot. Some more in-depth therapy. Actual therapy, probably. Something more careful; I still feel like we're moving too fast. Better support. Space to calm down. Space to, uh, I don't know. Get back into his hobbies. He's the artsy type, isn't he? I could get him some paints or something."

"There's a supply store a few blocks from here," FRIDAY informed.

"Is there? Maybe we could head down at some point. Probably not today, but... this week, I guess. It would be good."

FRIDAY did not say anything further, and Tony, not knowing what else to do, did what he normally did: he retrieved an old laptop and headphones (for, unfortunately, he could not link it with the glasses and didn't care enough to try, although he kept both equipped) and played a lecture on advanced quantum physics.

The hour carried on as usual.

It was not a very restful sleep, but it served its purpose well enough. If Tony hadn't believed this was possible, Loki definitely hadn't: he woke to his face pressed into the cushions, realized what had happened, and then bolted straight up, hot.

"Good morning," Tony said, slipping the headphones off. "Have any cool dreams?"

"I... don't remember."

"Did you reconsider heading down to the store with me?"

Loki squinted at him.

“Because I think,” he said, shutting the laptop, “it would be really awesome if we found a good steak and had it for breakfast tomorrow. To spite Pepper’s narrow ideas on breakfast food.”

“That’s not…”

“Not what? Comfortable?”

“I… think I’d use a different word, but—”

“You know you’re with me the whole time, right? Please. I just want to see you somewhere other than this building for a bit. It’ll be, like, twenty minutes.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Okay, it might be thirty. But, also, I’ve still got this.” Tony pointed to the glowing device on his chest.

“What if someone recognizes me?”

“What?”

“I’m still… all that, aren’t I? I mean, I know you said that was getting dealt with—”

“Yeah, it is. We’ve gotten people out of worse. Don’t worry.”

“Do you promise?”

Tony removed his glasses. “Yes.”

“Oh. I… see.”

“So you wanna head down now or not yet?”

Avoid the question again. Tony knew what he was doing, though; that much was obvious. He would get his answer one way or another.

“Come here,” Loki said. “I want to try something.”

“Or you’re avoiding the question again.”

Alright, that was a little uncanny.

“No,” Loki said. “I’m just… still trying to wake myself. I need a few minutes. I want to try something in the meantime.”

Tony set his things on the table and went to join him. “Yeah?”

“Turn your head,” Loki said. “Look in front of you.”

“Why?” Tony asked, although, after a brief moment of confused hesitation, he did so anyway.

“There’s still so much anger between us,” Loki said, reaching to gently feel Tony’s hair, to see how much length there was to the waves and whether it would suffice for a braid; enough, he had already decided. “It bothers me.”

Tony picked up on it all fairly quickly, and he then asked, “Isn’t my hair too short?”

“Not really,” Loki said. “I’ve got more than enough to work with. It just takes some dexterity.”

“Oh.”

It wasn’t much: just a simple row edging the point where the longer curls up faded into what was, in fact, too short, which happened to be the overgrown buzz that now covered most of Tony’s upper ear. Out of direct light, it wasn’t even visible, but it was as calming as usual and it served as an excuse to sit together for a moment and do nothing, and that was honestly all it was supposed to do.

“Maybe I should get a haircut,” Tony said.

“I think you should grow it out a bit more,” Loki offered in response. “Just a bit. This length suits you.”

“Isn’t it…”

“Unprofessional?”

“Well, is it?”

“Not if you keep wearing suits everywhere. Since when do you care about Earth’s horrid double standards, anyway? Stop that.”

“Oh.” Tony blushed. “Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

Loki moved to sit at Tony’s other side and did the same there.

“Wanna go to the store so I can show this off?” Tony asked, turning to face him.

Loki held the eye contact and said nothing.

“You’re cute from this angle,” Tony said with an obnoxiously innocent smile.

“Alright, I’m out,” Loki said, heaving himself up from the couch. He grabbed the walking stick and made for the door without another word. Behind him, as he dipped into his room to get the shoes he never equipped that morning, he could hear Tony holding back triumphant laughter.

(Because Tony was Tony, he also insisted they take the most ostentatious and impractical of the several cars he had stowed away in the compound garage. No, criticism was not allowed.)

“We could walk,” Loki said, watching him fiddle with the car lock.

“We could walk!” Tony gasped, looking back in horror. “You have a friggin’ cane and I have some frozen stuff I need to get. Also, it takes like an hour to walk to this store.”

“There’s a nearer one.”

“Yes, but this one has a really nice bakery *and* I get a loyalty discount.”

“What does Tony Stark need a discount for?”

“Hey, don’t sass me, Reindeer Games.”

He snickered and hopped into shotgun.

“Seatbelt,” Tony said.

“I’m not that fragile.”

“Seatbelt.”

Loki rolled his eyes. “Seatbelt,” he mimed, fastening it.

“Yeah, safety!” Tony switched the engine on. “Pick some tunes for me, will you?”

“Pick your own tunes,” Loki said, although he leaned to scroll through radio stations as Tony rolled into the driveway.

“I got you out of the building!” Tony said, smug.

“Yes, congratulations.”

“We’re going on a quest!”

“It’s not a quest.”

“It’s a quest to find a good steak!”

“Alright, it’s a quest.”

“Are you excited?”

“Extremely. I have never been this excited in my entire life.”

“Yeah! Steak time.”

The rest of the drive—five or so minutes, nothing much—was mostly just listening to the music. Loki twiddled the walking stick between both hands and Tony watched the road and that was it.

They parked close to the entrance.

Tony glanced at him. “You good?”

“Great, thank you.”

“Honestly, I don’t want to see you have a panic attack or something, so, um. You sure?”

Loki stared down at his hands.

“Think someone’s gonna attack you?”

“I do.”

“Ah.” Tony switched the engine off. “Just whack ’em if they try,” he said with a wink. “You’ve got a hell of a good weapon there.”

“Is that legal?”

“Uh-huh! Self-defense.”

Loki considered this.

“Y’know,” Tony said, flipping open the little storage between them, “people don’t just go around grocery stores looking for people to fight. They, uh—” He pulled a tightly folded tote bag from under some miscellaneous junk. “Yeah, they don’t do that. In fact”—he shook the folds out—“I am almost certain I have run into people who otherwise want to kill me in stores on multiple occasions and they just... look away and continue buying their bread or whatever. Kind of a common courtesy thing, sort of like how you don’t go kick someone’s ass while they’re using the bathroom. Doesn’t happen.”

“They must not have wanted to kill you badly enough,” Loki said.

“Yeah, and who do you know here who wants to kill *you* that badly?”

“Steve Rogers?”

“Okay—” Tony stopped, breathed in. He unbuckled himself and opened his door. “Okay, look: he does not want to kill you. He’s a little cautious around you, yes, but he does not want to kill you. Do you know he helped me carry your unconscious body after you tried to off yourself? Does that scream murderous intentions?”

No answer.

“Come on,” Tony said, getting out. He kned the door shut.

Loki sat there for a few seconds before following.

“Just stick with me, yeah?” Tony said as they walked in. “Solves the danger problem.”

“I thought you said there was no danger,” Loki said.

“There isn’t. I’m providing a sound solution to your worries.”

“Oh. Yes, it’s... very reassuring. What danger, right?”

“Exactly!”

Where in the world did Tony get all this energy?

Loki did not pay much attention to their route, nor to the small talk, really: he followed at Tony’s side, tap, tap with the walking stick just in case, and focused on something benign like how his coat fell. There wasn’t actually a lot on Tony’s list, whatever it was. Some vegetables, some fruit, a spice that had apparently run out, and a bag of oats, and, lest they forget, a steak to cook for

breakfast tomorrow. As was their luck, there was nothing in stock but the worst cuts, although Loki stood firm by his belief that there was no such thing.

“Horrible,” Tony said, trudging off to the bakery. “Disgusting. I feel robbed and cheated. I’m leaving an angry review online! I’m never coming back here again. This is a crime against me personally. How dare they.”

“My heart goes out to you,” Loki said.

“Ugh. Hey, come here.” Tony beckoned him to a corner titled Gluten-Free. “They’re out of what I usually get and I am bestowing upon you the honour of choosing a replacement.”

“For you or for me?” Loki asked, walking over.

“Yes.”

He sighed and looked up and down the shelves. “I don’t know,” he muttered. “Just grab something.”

“Are you sure? Because I totally can, but also, look, we’re shopping together, I have a metric fuck-ton of disposable income, and you’ve been eyeing that marble loaf for like ten seconds straight.”

“I am not.”

Tony stepped away, hands on his hips.

“I’m really not,” Loki said. “I don’t care. Just get something. I probably won’t even try it.”

“Okay, fair,” Tony said, “and I do believe you, kind of, but, um, if you actually feel like something, just... tell me. Because I see you there and, I’m guessing, I don’t know, but I’m guessing that right now you’ve got an internal monologue going sort of like”—he switched to an impression of Loki’s accent—“oh no, I have a healthy appetite that includes a healthy like for sweets but I’m a horrible person who doesn’t deserve to indulge in anything that I enjoy ever because how could I?”

Loki frowned.

“And Tony doesn’t know anything about how I feel, which is true to a degree, but he’s also had multiple bouts of self-hatred and problematic eating habits throughout his life and definitely understands at least this one thing and”—Tony switched back—“please just let yourself enjoy things.”

“I don’t sound like that,” Loki said.

“Nonsense. That sounded exactly like you.”

Loki sighed and took the marble loaf. “Oh no,” he said in a perfect impression of Tony, “I’m just trying to make Loki smile and I know he can tell but it’s not working.”

Tony snort-giggled.

“Six out of ten,” Loki said in his regular voice. “Needs practice.”

“Okay. Hey, that’s dairy-free too, right?”

Loki checked. "Yes," he said, still skimming the label.

"Oh, because most of the stuff in here is also made for other sensitivities but not all of it, so I just wanted to be sure."

"It's really not that bad," Loki said, looking up, although it occurred to him that maybe it was: those parts of his glamour had always been fickle and it wouldn't be unlikely as he got his strength back.

"Doesn't hurt to be careful." Tony took the loaf in his free hand and left the bakery; Loki followed. "Anything else? Cool tea? Snacks?"

"No, thank you."

They went to the self-checkout.

"I think we should go set up dinner tonight," Tony said as he scanned the items.

"I thought you can't cook," Loki said, leaning on the walking stick.

"Have I let that stop me?"

"Mm. No. Your tenacity is admirable."

Tony spent almost a full minute riffling through his wallet for the loyalty card.

"Why?"

"Monkey brain said number going down good."

Fair enough. Loki waited quietly for him to finish paying and tuck everything into the tote.

Their drive back was uneventful. It was getting late and there was nothing on, so it looked like they'd be preparing dinner after all. Loki wondered how much they ought to make; what would the turnout be tonight? He figured Tony knew.

"Okay, so these," Tony said, setting some items on the kitchen island in the common space, "are for us. Can you go deliver them?"

"You can't?"

"If you go, I won't make you help me cook. Please?"

"Oh, well... since you're so polite."

Tony smiled. "Thanks, Lokes."

Always that smile. It killed him.

Loki piled the items into one arm, against his chest, and padded down to Tony's room. It was odd to be on his own again after the week's events and he would be lying if he said that, for a moment as he set the items on the kitchen counter, he didn't just stand there, lost. He placed each item in its

spot. He left the marble loaf on the counter because, as far as he could tell, it had no spot. He stayed and stared at it. The stupid marble loaf. He didn't want to eat it. They shouldn't have gotten it.

He went into the bathroom. Stared at the mirror. Tony. Ugh.

The mirror opened to a medicine cabinet, and, picking through some other bottles and packages, he did find aftershave and it was alcohol-based. He held it just to prove to himself that he could. He squinted at the percentage on the back: certainly high enough to clean something. Right? Right. He stuck it back in the cabinet and closed it. Not like this. No. He was better than that. He gave his reflection a last look and then went to his room for the novel he never finished; now was as good a time as ever.

“That wasn't too bad,” Tony said when he eventually returned, “was it?”

“It was fine. What are you making?”

“Dunno. Food, I think.”

Loki sat with the book.

“Good work today,” Tony said. “I'm proud of you.”

Oh. There was a lot Loki could have said to that, like, for example: good work on what? Was it eating two full meals and a snack? Putting up with a shopping trip in spite of the transient dread stabbing at his insides? Or was it just that he had made it through the night? And, by the way—hadn't it been made clear that he hated being treated like some helpless child? But the truth was it felt nice to hear and he didn't want to pick a fight; why bother?

He could have said a thank you, actually. But, in the end, he only smiled and opened the book.

Whatever Tony was cooking didn't take too long and the regulars came in shortly. Peter was among the crowd, for one reason or another, and he claimed the other half of the couch. They waited together. They shared some small talk—and my, was it forced, and Loki was splitting his attention between him and the novel, too, but it was close enough.

Tony's praise lingered. At the table, it was all Loki could think about. He made himself eat because of it. And, truly, it was alright.

Chapter End Notes

[seductively] omelette du fromage

On the Topic of Serenity

Chapter Summary

Loki doesn't understand why Tony is doing so much for him.

Chapter Notes

It's been so long since I looked at the source material or worked with a character other than Tony or Loki that everything has just devolved into an echo of an echo of an echo of half an idea of a headcanon or several so now I've got all these barely coherent rough drafts that make sense in neither plot progression nor in-characterness (not to mention I am convinced I accidentally created more plot holes by pulling random lore out of my ass) and I KNOW I will inevitably very soon need to force myself to rewatch a bunch of MCU movies to jog my memory and I am so mad about it because the concept of "research" and "taking notes" and "you can't just make [character] do [completely out-of-character thing] and hope that no one will notice" is an attack against me personally

Anyway here's uhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh Uhhh uh stuff. Is it a shitpost again? I don't know! It may be. See above (I REFUSE to research or properly edit). It's I am and I am overthinking everything! It may be broken! Yes I am sacrificing my buffer no I don't care because honestly a buffer is useless at this point let's just post things when they're done 🥰

(Edit: I forgot to mention this but I am also taking requests for illustrations! I can't promise I'll get to them but if I like the idea and find the time I'll try my best.)

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

As these sorts of things went, it was not so simple as a hello, look, I'm magically all better now and there will be no further problems, nor did Loki expect it to be. He expected that Tony thought the same: on no occasion did such a matter ever resolve itself any quicker than very slowly. He expected something to go wrong; didn't it always? One good omen couldn't stretch forever.

Still, the morning was uneventful.

He was sure when he woke that the sigils had rubbed off and, frantic under the last threads of sleep, he checked, but they were just as legible as before. The arbitrary number in his mind fell flat; four-five days suddenly seemed hopelessly improbable. And, to be honest, he didn't mind. Or at least he didn't mind as much as he thought he would.

Tony, maybe realizing by now that he wasn't a morning person given the choice, let him sleep until noon, and then, like it had been planned, opened with, "Good morning! How do you feel about brunch at that seafood place?"

Knowing he would never hear the last of it until he agreed, Loki gave him the world's most unenthusiastic, "Thrilled. I'd be happy to."

"Hey, that's the spirit!"

The truth was he wasn't hungry—that he was fighting some distant nausea and that he felt like the very last of the potion's aftereffects were trying to enact their revenge—and, if briefly, he was sure Tony could tell, but what a valiant effort nonetheless; there had to be something worthwhile in facing the day like this. Despite the cluster of mild physical symptoms, he felt lighter on his feet: he left the walking stick where it was leaned against the nightstand.

He waited for Tony to give something in his workshop a cursory double-check.

"I picked up an old convertible earlier," Tony mentioned as he shut the door behind him, "if you felt like riding around with the top down. Nice weather today."

"It is."

"Yeah? I'll take it just in case. Gives you the option."

There was no guarantee, of course, that they would ever get to that (how likely was it that he would start panicking for no reason and want nothing to do with fresh air or sunshine?) but fair enough: it was good to have options.

They did not drive with the top down.

"Any interesting happenings?" Loki asked, leaning on the car door.

"Steve said fuck," Tony said. "I saw him. He smacked his hand on a table edge and yelled it at the top of his lungs. He thinks no one heard but I did. I was there. I'll never forget."

"Wow."

The drive was as short as it had always been—ten minutes, give or take—but it somehow felt longer. It felt wrong. It felt like they should not be doing this at all, and, watching the traffic, it occurred to Loki that yes, actually, this was very odd of him and it was worrying how utterly ordinary it was to be picking at his weeks-old nail polish in the front seat of a simple little Earth vehicle while some dead musician sang about a lover. Yet Tony seemed chipper enough; he was well-dressed again, Iron Man at his chest like a tie, and he still had that distant smile. There was no reason to fret. Nothing.

The parking lot was mostly empty. The restaurant was also mostly empty.

"Why don't you go pick us a seat?" Tony asked; Loki glanced behind them. "I'll join you in a minute."

"Alright," Loki said, and then he made his way directly to one of the window booths.

This was weird.

He leaned back and fiddled with the salt. When was the last time he had eaten somewhere like this? Did he remember his table etiquette? Had centuries of royal feasts meant nothing? He was very glad this was only a slightly fancier than usual restaurant and not one of those uncomfortably high-

end ones where a waiter breathed down your neck the entire time and every single move you made was of the utmost importance because he probably would have cried.

Tony slid a menu across the table and sat. “So! What do you feel like?”

“Surprise me,” Loki said.

“No, really? Come on.”

“You’ve been here before, haven’t you? I’m sure there’s something you can recommend.”

“Hmm.” Tony opened the menu and took a dramatic look at it. “Hmmmmmm. You got any allergies? Like, other than the gluten-dairy thing.”

“Not to my knowledge.”

Tony shut the menu. “Anything to drink? Coffee, tea?”

“Coffee?”

“Cream, no sugar?”

“Ah... I think I want sugar today.”

“Oh! I never asked: is your issue with dairy as a whole or is it just the lactose? ’Cause I think they have lactose-free cream here, if you’re up for an experiment.”

“That would be fine.”

“Cool.”

This was very weird.

There was a waitress at their table shortly. She was tall, with thin glasses and hair past her waist, and she said, “Hello, what can I get for you two gentlemen?”

“Hi!” Tony said. “Two coffees, one black, one with sugar and lactose-free cream? And”—he flipped the menu open once more—“two of these.” He pointed.

“Maintaining the suspense?” Loki said.

“Hey, you said surprise you.”

“Anything else?” the waitress asked.

“I don’t think so. Yo, Lokes, you want anything else?”

“Not particularly,” he said.

“Alright,” the waitress said. “I’ll bring the coffee down.”

“Thank you,” Tony said.

She smiled as she left.

“She’s pretty,” Loki said, sliding the salt shaker back into its place.

“Oh my god, she’s *so* pretty.”

They said nothing else until she returned, a tiny tray with two mugs in hand. She set it between them.

“Thank you,” Tony said again.

“You’re welcome,” she said with another smile. Then she was gone.

Loki took his coffee.

“So here’s the plan,” Tony said.

“Oh no—there’s a plan?”

“Yes, horrible, I know. No, listen: there’s an art supply store nearby with literally everything you could possibly think of and I want to take you there.”

Loki gave him a skeptical look. “Do I strike you as an artist?”

“Yes, actually,” Tony said. “And it’s not just visual art stuff, right? I bet you’d find some really nice stationery to write me a sappy poem on.”

“I don’t want to write you a sappy poem,” Loki said.

“Then write a normal, average poem,” Tony said. “Write about how much shit sucks. I’m sure it’s very cathartic.”

“I want to carve.”

Tony smiled sadly. “Well,” he said, “I don’t think that’s a good idea right now.”

There was the urge to tell him that, like most other objects on Earth that could be used for harm, the physical makeup simply wasn’t strong enough to leave a mark, but Loki refrained. He cooled his coffee.

“I think you’ll like it,” Tony said.

“I might,” Loki said.

They did not say much else.

The same woman brought their food. She smiled and said, “Let me know if you need anything else.”

“Your number?” Tony tried.

Loki choked on his coffee.

“Other than that,” she said, although she didn’t seem too offended.

“Uh, nope. Thanks.”

She turned and left.

The meal was nothing exceptional: fish and a very rich assortment of vegetables. But it looked carefully prepared and far too nicely presented, so Loki assumed it was anything but. He finished his coffee while waiting for it to cool and then he took a bite.

“How is it?”

“Good.”

“Only good?”

Loki sighed. “It’s the best food I’ve had in months.”

“Months! Wow.”

Understandably, Loki did not mention the little prick of guilt he felt upon tasting it, nor did Tony, who looked like he could tell. There was no point spoiling the mood with something they both already knew, and so they ate as normal. This took some effort, but it went well enough: they kept up the jokes and they kept up the planning and, for the most part, were able to distract themselves. Because Tony was still Tony, he tipped several thousand dollars. *Sorry for flirting!* he wrote; *Thank you for the amazing food. :)*

Then they left.

The art store was nearby, so it didn’t take long. It was mid-sized, nothing too extravagant but certainly nothing small, either, and, luckily, there weren’t many people inside. Loki pretended he wasn’t interested and went to look at the paints. It was worth noting that he had not painted in perhaps a century or more and that he had no idea what he was looking for. He didn’t know what colours he wanted or what tools he would use; he didn’t remember what types of paint he preferred and he was sure the compositions had changed enough over the years that it wouldn’t even matter anyway. Still, if only to humour Tony, he took his time.

“Hey, check this out,” Tony said, holding up a tube of pearlescent blue paint.

Loki took it. “That is nice,” he said, looking it over.

“You gonna paint something neat with it?”

“Maybe.”

Tony went to grab a basket and tossed it in.

They got a few dozen more colours, some brushes, various-sized canvases, and an easel and palette, as well as a notebook and pack of ornate stationery: Tony insisted on it. It was still very early in the day when they left and Tony was adamant about making the most of it, so they continued exploring the city. They went to some of the farther bookstores that Loki had never found a reason to visit; they went to some clothing stores, although they did not actually buy anything; they stopped by some of the many parks and trails in the area and discussed current events, none of which were particularly interesting, and then they went back to the art store because, according to Tony, it was only fair to also get an expensive fountain pen and fancy ink in various colours to go with the nice paper—and no, the tattered quill did not count.

In an unsurprising but still highly unexpected move, one of their last stops was a small, relatively empty arcade. This was supposedly for Loki's sake, but by the looks of it, Tony had just been looking for an excuse for himself. They did not spend much time inside, but notable events in that time included: Tony performing what was probably some borderline illegal mental math on the algorithm of one of the older cabinets and winning approximately way too many times in a row and thenceforth growing bored and abandoning it; Tony convincing Loki to cheese a generic ball-throwing game with his very overpowered aim, which went a little too well; and, with all the many tickets they semi-legitimately collected, the acquisition of a rainbow slinky, the gaudiest LED sunglasses in the universe, and a giant velvety dragon plushie the consistency of a marshmallow, which, to his great dismay, Loki immediately fell in love with.

They took the long way back, and they did, eventually, take the top down.

"What do you want for dinner tonight?" Tony asked.

"Food," Loki said.

"Ah! With a side of... food."

Loki turned to rest his arms on the door.

"How shall the food taste?" Tony asked.

"Like food."

"Sounds delicious!"

The music was nice; Loki sat up briefly to adjust the volume and then went back to leaning out the window.

Tony looked like he was having the time of his life. "You know this song?"

"It's familiar."

"I like it. It's a good song."

So did Tony really like spending all this time with him? Did he want to be here right now or was it just to ease the guilt from what had happened? He seemed genuine enough.

"You ever sing?" he asked.

"Sometimes," Loki said.

"Cool! Check this out." And then, in a rugged, fantastically pitch-perfect voice that came seemingly out of nowhere, Tony joined in for the chorus: "Hold me closer, tiny dancer!" he sang. "Count the headlights on the highway! Lay me down in sheets of linen! You had a busy day today!"

What the heck!

"Lay me dooooooooooown! You! Had! A! Busy! Daaaaaaaaaaaaaay!"

Loki laughed so hard he couldn't breathe for a moment.

So maybe this was still just generosity; maybe, even after everything, there was still nothing more to it than that big heart, bigger wallet sense of kindness that Tony swore by. But there were reasons to be wary, and no matter what happened, they weren't going. Why would they?

"Am I ever gonna hear you sing?" Tony asked as he settled down, laughter on the words.

"No," Loki said.

This was a tragic revelation, but Tony accepted it and said nothing more on the matter. The song ended; what followed was average and forgettable and simply didn't get the same joy out of him. Things carried on as usual.

"You can't keep doing this," Loki said.

"Doing what?"

"This. Spending the whole day with me. Putting every little thing in your life on hold for my sake. You can't keep doing that."

"Why not?"

Loki glanced at him.

"No, really," Tony said as he turned down a side road. "Why can't I keep doing this? I don't mind. It's not causing any issues, is it? I'm happy. You're happy-ish. That's all I need."

"It's not causing issues?" Loki sat up straight. "Cancelling your entire schedule is an issue, isn't it? Ignoring Pepper? I'm sure you've had at least a mention of some hero-related duty somewhere; that hasn't been an issue, either? Tony."

"For the record," he said, "most of the Iron Man thing is volunteer work. Most of the time, there's no actual obligation. There are other capable folks out there that can take my place if I'm wanted somewhere. I'm also fairly certain I'm still on some kind of leave right now and that I'm automatically excused from all that. I'm allowed to take breaks. I'm allowed to goof off and do absolutely nothing." He turned again: the road started dipping down into a soft, greenery-filled route along the side of a beach, with the rest of the city up behind a small cliff. "I'm not ignoring Pepper. This past week or two aside, we've never been closer."

"But you're still neglecting various business matters," Loki said. "I know you are."

"I am. I'll admit that. But none of what I've been, uh, neglecting, is anything major. Pepper takes care of it. She has for years. I appreciate your concern, but I do know what I'm doing. Don't worry about me."

"You need to stop putting my life before your own."

"Why? Because you think you're not worth the effort? Or, no, because you think it's too much and you're just inconveniencing me."

Oh. There it was.

"This isn't the first time I've done something like this," Tony said. "You're not the first person I've gone out of my way to help. I like helping. It feels nice. This feels nice. Seeing you smile makes

my day. Why do you think I took up the whole superhero business?"

Loki said nothing.

"You're not too much," Tony said. "None of this is too much. I know you're thinking it and I promise it's not like that."

The air smelled like seawater.

"You still don't trust me, do you?"

Seawater and vegetation; were those flowers?

"I don't know how," Loki said. "Even now. I'm..." Sorry. He squinted up at where the cliff ended in shrubs and sky. "Does that upset you?"

"No," Tony answered. "Not really. I don't blame you, anyway. It's hard to trust someone after something like what happened between us."

"But you clearly don't want me dead," Loki argued, looking at him again. "Why shouldn't I trust you?"

"Maybe you think I have other plans. I don't know. Does it matter?"

"Yes."

"No, it doesn't. We used to be enemies and at least part of you is convinced that we still are. It's not complicated. It's really not. That kind of unease is totally normal and I know you already have trust problems to begin with; why *should* you trust me?"

"Because you've been—you're doing all these things and I'm just—it makes me come off as ungrateful and I'm just saying—"

"I know what you're saying," Tony calmly interrupted. "And people who are ungrateful don't worry about being ungrateful."

"But I'm—"

"Someone who is completely justified in not trusting me. Loki, no one can trust people after going through a situation like yours. It's really, really difficult. I know that. I don't expect you to trust me and I won't hate you if you don't."

"... But... no."

Because maybe that wasn't the only problem: it still felt like that distrust wasn't just him being too cautious. It still felt like Tony was lying—like there truly was a reason to feel this uneasy. Like all that goodwill was something darker than generosity. Or maybe not.

"I think I'm paranoid," he muttered, moving away from the open window. "Am I paranoid?"

"Sometimes," Tony said. "Nothing excessive. I'll tell you if it gets worse."

Loki leaned back in his seat and turned to watch the beach.

Tony was too impatient for that kind of long wait, late payoff game. Too careful; there was no reward worth the risk and if there was, it would be sorely unattainable. Teamwork? The Avengers were scattered. The world didn't need another wayward Asgardian defending it, and no matter what anyone thought or said was being done regarding his reputation, it certainly didn't need him. Never him. So what was there left? There had to be something, right? ... Right?

He looked at Tony. No one could do all this and expect nothing.

"It's always the people I trust who hurt me the most," he eventually said, staring into the distant waves; he saw Tony glance at him. "I can't do that again. I can't let my guard down. I'm too scared."

"I know," Tony responded, and there was no further conversation between them.

The music was still nice: soft 60s and 70s gems from some obscure radio station that only appeared on the AM frequencies. The air, even as it began to fade into the city, was nice. Kneading the dragon's marshmallowy body somehow sufficed to stave off another fit.

When they got back, Tony helped carry everything to Loki's room. They set up the easel and neatly sorted all the supplies in the corner of the room, by the couch, and Tony got a little crate from his workshop to keep them in. "It's finally starting to look like someone lives here!" he said when they were finished, and Loki supposed it was true: with all the books and art supplies and the giant pelt on the couch, it seemed rather homey.

Dinner, as hoped, was very foodlike.

They spent the rest of the evening in Loki's room, on the couch, where Tony insisted as he marvelled at how squishable the dragon was that he be taught something about the Asgardian language and how they were speaking to each other. It was still an odd spell and, like before, Loki couldn't explain a thing other than it just worked for some reason he did not understand, but he offered to describe his true tongue happily and even got them some tea.

There was really nothing much to the spoken language, for it was virtually identical to modern Icelandic by some funny happenstance and Tony had heard it before anyway, but the script was a different matter. "I only know it's similar to what they used to use in Scandinavia," he recalled, scrutinizing his tea as it cooled.

"A bit," Loki said. "It's a little more complex, but the alphabets are mostly interchangeable."

"They've got magical properties, right?"

"They do. Some of the most powerful written magic in the universe was crafted in runes."

"Can you show me?"

Sure; why not? Loki set his tea down and grabbed the empty notebook and a pen.

Tony scooted closer to look. "How do you always have such nice writing?" he asked as Loki wrote down the letters.

"Steady hands," Loki said. "Patience, I suppose. I don't rush when I write."

“Think it’s got anything to do with you being able to catch tiny thrown objects and braid short hair?”

“Perhaps.”

“And the way you shuffle cards! And carving probably takes a lot of dexterity too, right?”

“I can also do this,” Loki added as he finished, and then he slid the pen between each finger on each hand in a way that almost looked like it was floating.

“Wow,” Tony said. “You really are pretty good with your hands, huh?”

“Oh, you have no idea,” Loki said, and then he smiled gently, and then Tony, who had not seen himself jump headfirst into the exchange, immediately went beet-red and laughed.

Most of it continued like this. Tony was a quick learner and had an easy time with the names, sounds, and, incidentally, the magical purposes of each letter, which were not of much use to him but interesting nonetheless. He learned how to write his name and how Loki wrote his, and then, because he was just so damn persistent, he learned some common words and phrases. When they parted ways for the night, Tony thanked him in Asgardian, and Loki, charmed, lowered the Allspeak for a moment to say you’re welcome.

They continued after breakfast the next morning. There was only so much they could get done in such a short time and Tony was content with functionally useless knowledge of yet another language, so it wasn’t for too long; the rest of the morning into the afternoon was just their usual nonsense. The next day was similar: slow and unexceptional. Once, while they were sharing a lunch in his room, Tony realized in a fit of urgency that he had never asked whether Loki could perform any card tricks despite the very astute observations on the wonderful shuffling, which of course led to an inevitable yes and a demonstration. Theatrics and all, this went like so:

“Pick a card!” Loki said, offering the deck to Tony beside him.

“Any card?” Tony suspiciously returned.

“Any card. Do not show me the card, do not tell me the card; just memorize it and put it back.”

Tony slipped a card from the middle and then slipped it into the middle once more.

Loki shuffled and then handed him the top card. “Is that your card?”

“Uh... no.”

“Oh—no? That’s odd. I... I haven’t done this one in a while, I suppose. I must have misplaced it. Could you check your pockets?”

Tony patted himself down and pulled the card out of a pocket. “I can’t believe it. I’ve been tricked! Bamboozled, even. You really got me.”

This was a monumental achievement and Loki, true to his bamboozling trickster self, could not hold back a triumphant laugh, and then Tony laughed as well, and then they went back to their lunch as usual.

There was no honest way of knowing what it was they did that day that set him off, nor why it happened now—why after so many smiles he found himself suddenly lost for words as he fiddled with the cards again on his own, alone there on the couch while Tony went to clean up. Was it that he had the time to linger? Or did he just get unlucky? Never; there was no warning for these things and sometimes they simply happened, and the thin paper could not ground him and the room did not protect him. There were his hands again. His throat. The breaths he couldn't take. The drowning feeling he couldn't shake—the that and the those and the everything that went like sure, he was safe here, sure, but it had never changed anything; what did it matter if it still felt real? The

—the never mind: there were his itchy wrists again, and then he set the cards on the table and ~~tried to breathe~~ and tried to

Tony? Tony—

oh no oh no not again

and he laid himself down on his side and breathed in hard, his nails scraping at something somewhere, his teary eyes shut tight because the room was too bright, bare and vulnerable and—and was Tony saying something to him? The noise was so loud: there was no hope deciphering some outside dialogue.

He scooted his knees up towards his chest. “Don't touch me.”

“What?”

“Don't—”

“Loki, you're speaking Asgardian.”

He pinned his hands between his thighs in a weak attempt to relieve the pressure. “Don't,” he repeated, quietly, pointedly, watching each sound, “touch”—he breathed in—“me.”

Tony stepped away. “I... guess I didn't learn enough.”

Can't think, Loki almost added, can't think, can't think, and maybe something else about how the room was spinning again and—and?—he couldn't recognize either of their voices and

“You're not breathing.”

He pressed his face to his knees and broke into a full sob.

“Where are you right now?”

“Everything hurts,” he choked through the tears.

“Everything?”

He could still feel all of it; he moved his hands to his chest and tried to ease the sensation, but nothing happened. They

“You need to breathe,” Tony said, kneeling before him. “I know it's hard, but it's going to get worse like this.”

the c

“I can’t,” he sobbed.

the chains? his

“Look at me.”

—his skin burning; someone—someone?—was it him screaming or

“Stop,” he sobbed as the knife was pulled away. “Please.”

I don’t think you see how much you can truly do.

—and maybe then he heard more about how selfish he was, how—he didn’t remember—how weak he was and how much stronger he could be and thought maybe they’re right, maybe this is just their way of making me realize my potential, maybe it’s just—maybe—or maybe he was just desperate and searching for a reason behind the madness.

I don’t think you see how much you can truly do. I don’t think you see how much you can truly do. I don’t think you see how much you can truly do. I don’t think you see how much you can truly do. I don’t think you see how much you can truly do.

“When will you see your glorious purpose?”

He swallowed down the blood and tears in his mouth and counted. One, two, three, four, five. One, two, three, four, five.

“There is no purpose,” he said, trembling. “You’re wasting your time. Kill me. Kill me! Just kill me. Please. We’re both”—he coughed—“we’re both—stop.” Another cough wracked him: he tasted fresh blood against his tongue. “Stop this,” he whispered. “Please. There’s no point.”

No. Not that; never that.

The chains around his wrists dropped abruptly and he stumbled forward, startled, and winced as he was grabbed by the neck. Was he—no—no he didn’t—no no no no no—it was only (~~fight the pain, see what they did to you, look, look what you can be, don’t be so stubborn, little god, we’re only trying to help, wasn’t that what you wanted?~~) they were only—and then he found himself hit from behind, held tight with an arm, and such a large measure of steaming water was dumped on him that the weight alone knocked him to the floor.

This should not have hurt. This should not have hurt. This, he swore, wasn’t even close to scalding, and the one glance he caught of his skin showed it had barely even flushed from the heat; this, he told himself, shouldn’t have hurt. But it did.

That—

He couldn’t scream: he only curled up on his side, face pressed to the stone, and let out a ragged, splintered grunt, and then a sob—another quiet wail that cracked halfway through—feeling but not caring that his clawing at the floor was bloodying his fingertips; it was nothing compared to the fire burning him up from the inside. That imperfect glamour again, wasn’t it? That—that with the cuffs and everything of course it was enough to short the spells and trip every single pain receptor beneath his ice skin but not enough to actually harm him; right, that made sense. That—

Then something else.

Then.

“Please no,” he breathed, barely audible between the sobs. “No. Please don’t hurt me. Don’t hurt me. Don’t hurt me anymore. Please. I can’t take it. Don’t hurt me. Don’t hurt me. Please. Please. Please...”

Then they grabbed him again, and maybe they asked him something, maybe they wondered how he felt about everything now, maybe, but it didn’t matter: for all those hundreds of years perfecting his lies, they saw through him just as easily.

Then nothing.

Then he was staring wide-eyed and breathless at Tony, whose magpie irises still carried a glint of emerald light. Bruises. The smell of cold concrete and steel. A shivering hand to his lips; he couldn’t tell if the wetness he felt was from picking them or his fingers. He couldn’t move.

“Loki,” Tony quietly said.

No fire. No smoke. No bodies. Nothing was burning.

“I just...” He tried to swallow. “It was—” He tried again. “Unfair,” he whispered. He couldn’t feel his chest, the hand he was holding, the room around him. Nothing. “So unfair. I wanted—” Yet another dry gulp; he was nearly choking. “Rest.” One, two, three, four, five. One, two, three, four, five. One, two, three, four, five. One, two, three, four, five. “Respite. Not this. I never asked for this.” The taste of salt: he swallowed that down, too, and breathed. One, two, three, four, five. One two, three, four, five. “It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t fair.”

“Your lips are bleeding.”

He didn’t remove his fingers.

“Loki.”

“Don’t speak,” he whispered, tears on his voice. “Please don’t. Please, Tony.” He closed his eyes. “I can’t take it. Don’t say anything. Just stay there. Keep holding my hand. Please. That’s all I ask.”

He feared, briefly, that Tony would ignore him and continue on about the nails buried deep into his lips as if it were the most important thing here: cry all you want, scream all you want, but don’t you hurt yourself. Yet there was nothing. Nothing; Tony maintained his gentle hold and said nothing. There was no telling how long they both stayed there, him on the couch, Tony knelt before him, listening to the silence. A minute. Five. The breaths eased a little and the tears dried, but that was it.

“I can’t do this,” he muttered.

“Why do you think that?”

“I’m tired. I’m so tired. This will always happen.”

“I don’t believe that.”

Loki glanced up at him. “Did you feel it?” he quietly asked.

A few seconds passed, which seemed so obviously like Tony trying to decipher the question without prodding for clarification. He took a deep breath and said, “I did.”

“All of it?”

“I think so.”

“I’m sorry.”

Then that other look: don’t apologize, please, you don’t need to apologize, not to me, not to anyone, and it was all Loki could do to jerk out of Tony’s grip, retreat farther into the couch, and resume his scratching at his hands, where the protective sigil did just as little to keep the skin in one piece.

“I’m not mad at you,” Tony softly said. “It just hurts to know it feels so necessary. I can never get mad at someone for apologizing. Why would I do that?”

“I don’t know,” Loki answered, his voice half-muffled by the hands pressed to his mouth. “I don’t know.”

“Well, I guess you don’t need to.” Tony moved to sit with his back against the table. “You’re just careful, right? You can never really be sure. That’s fair. I’d be cautious too.”

“Tony—”

“Loki. Hi. What do you feel right now?”

“I can’t—I don’t know, I’m—”

“No, it’s okay. Take as long as you need. Take a few seconds to catch your breath. I don’t mind.”

There was the pressure around his wrists, the way his skin was still crawling and the fuzzy burning sensation all along him: old pain, pain that wasn’t there, pain that felt a million times weaker than the real thing because it didn’t and shouldn’t exist. No air; a slight headache and a saltwater taste in his mouth. Terror.

He rubbed the tears away, turned his gaze to the floor, and kept scratching at his knuckles.

“What do you feel when you do that?”

“I don’t know.”

“It hurts, doesn’t it?”

“A little. It doesn’t—it goes numb after some time. It’s not that bad.”

“What’s the draw, though? Because I guess it’s not pain, then. Not mainly. Is it just a restlessness sort of thing?”

“I don’t know. I—I do it when I’m overwhelmed.”

“So release. Or distraction?”

“Both.”

“Mm. Makes sense.” Tony shifted again, such that he could prop his arm up on a knee and lean on it. “Can you taste anything right now?”

“Tears. Blood.”

“What about smell?”

“Um... smoke.”

“Smoke? Where from?”

“The ship.”

“That’s pretty unrelated, isn’t it? Why that?”

“I don’t know! Everything’s tangled. Sometimes things just... cross over.”

“Stuff that’s bothering you, right? I guess your brain doesn’t care: as far as it’s concerned, it’s all trauma. It doesn’t seem too crazy for a bunch of unrelated stuff to just hit you at once.”

Loki turned onto his back.

“What do you see?” Tony asked.

“The ceiling,” Loki said.

“Cool. Focus on that. What colour is it?”

“Grey. I don’t like it.”

Tony chuckled.

“I would, um... paint it blue.”

“What kind of blue?”

“Like a sky.”

“Mm. Maybe. It’s pretty high, though. It would take forever. You think it’s worth it?”

“Not really.”

Tony looked up. “You know what would be cooler than that, though,” he said, “is if I turn it into a big screen showing, like, the actual sky or something. Live feed.”

“That would be nice.”

“Not worth it, though.”

“No.”

Tony moved to sit on the table.

“Thank you for being here with me,” Loki said.

“Of course,” Tony said. “I’m happy to keep you company.”

“Are you still afraid of me?”

Tony considered this. “No,” he said. “Not really.”

“Thank you.”

Does he know what you really are? Does he know the rage that runs through your veins? You are a killer. You will always be a killer. Stop pretending, boy.

He closed his eyes and tried not to cry.

“Are you afraid of me?” Tony asked.

“Only a little,” Loki said.

“Thank you for trying. I don’t want to be your enemy.”

“You’re very kind.”

“I try my best.”

Loki licked the dry blood off his lips.

“What do you want to do now?” Tony asked.

“I think I’ll go write,” Loki said.

“Do you need anything from me?”

“I’ll come find you if I do.”

Tony smiled. “Sounds like you got a plan,” he said. “I’m gonna go see if I can get some work done. I’ll be in my usual location.”

Loki sat up with a wince.

“Okay?”

“Yes,” Loki said, “I think so.”

Tony stood. “Okay,” he said, and then they walked out together.

The truth was Loki had not written anything meaningful in years and barely even remembered what sounded good and what, say, a sonnet was, because he knew he had written at least one of those at some point and might have liked to do so again (although on second thought, actually, no), and even if he did remember, his focus wouldn’t let him try: he was much more fit to doodle in the margins in this state. But he had some decent enough fun fiddling with everything he had acquired and when it eventually became too much of a pain to think, he switched to sketching out some kind of something on one of the canvases, and things were fine. He tidied the room and moved the giant marshmallow dragon to the bed. He fixed his hair and he fixed his clothes. He went to make some

tea and realized he'd run out of the kind he wanted, and, silent on his toes, he went to see if there was any in the lounge, but there was none there either, and when he dared to check Tony's room as well, there was still nothing.

He went down to Tony's workshop to ask if, by any chance, there was something in storage.

"Maybe," Tony said. "I'll go check."

There was not any tea in storage.

Tony, of course, was still a bit of a madman and insisted they go to the store and get more. This was an unreasonable amount of effort just for some tea and certainly not at this hour, and wasn't it a waste of resources? But they could walk; it was good to get some fresh air, anyway.

So, reluctantly, Loki followed him to the nearest grocery store and they got some tea.

This was all so much that by the time they got back, Loki was fighting tears. There were too many favours; how could Tony keep doing this? Had he honestly just dropped his current task to walk to the store with him? They didn't need to go together: this was a one-person task. Tony didn't need to come. Oh, pulling that stupid little trick with the gold coins and hoping the cashier had enough of a sense of humour to let it pass wouldn't work forever, but it wasn't such a grand risk; offering proper payment wasn't a reason either. There was no reason for any of this.

Unsurprisingly, the kettle was empty as well, and before he could be stopped, Tony filled it himself. "Do you mind if I sneak a cup?" he asked as he clicked it on. "I kinda like this tea too."

"Go ahead," Loki said. He breathed in hard. He tried not to make a sound. If there had ever been a sliver of a chance Tony hadn't realized by now, it was gone; Tony wasn't a perfect liar and it was easy to read the look on his face when he turned the sink on. There went everything—so much for keeping up some sort of image.

Tony sat beside him while the water boiled. "Any plans for tomorrow?"

"None," Loki said. Then he steadied his voice and added, "You didn't need to do this."

"Hey, it's fine. I like going out. I'll take every excuse to go run somewhere."

"But you don't need to."

"So? I don't need to do a lot of the things I do."

"Then why bother?"

"You are not undeserving of random kindness, Loki."

This was true, but as much as he needed to hear it, he thought it was quite possibly the last thing Tony should have said to him because he immediately started sobbing. "That's not what I meant!" he said above the tears. "Why is all the random kindness coming from you?"

"I've got the time and money to blow," Tony said. "I can afford to look out for you. I feel awful knowing what you've been through and it wouldn't be right to leave you now."

"Why? What am I to you?"

“I don’t know. But I think of you in good terms. I’ve called you a friend before, I guess; maybe a friend? Does it matter?”

“Yes! Yes, it matters! How could you think of me as a friend after everything I’ve done?”

“Well, what have you done? Blown up a city, thrown an army at me?” Tony waved a hand like a shrug; he looked like he was grasping for responses. “Who cares? I like who you are now. I don’t think about that a lot.”

“You’re not like this with everyone else!” Loki said.

“Everyone else didn’t give me a reason to be like this,” Tony said. “Do you know how many people I just tolerate? I didn’t want to see them again. I still struggle to deal with everything sometimes. I’m okay with Natasha because she’s been kind to you. I try to be okay with Bucky because I know it isn’t right to give you a second chance but not him. The rest is a wild card. You? You’re not like that. I like you a lot. I always liked you. You’re smart and funny and your sarcasm drives me up the fucking walls in the best way and I see myself in you so often that I knew we would get along really, really well if I just sat down and got to know you, you, the actual you, without all the death and destruction, and I did that! And I’m really glad I did it. And I’m happy to shower you in random kindness if that’s what’ll make you smile again because you’ve earned it.”

In the sudden silence, Loki heard the kettle click off. He pressed a hand to his mouth and tried not to cry but only started sobbing even harder.

“Maybe there is no reason,” Tony said. “Maybe I just wanted to be kind for once. Is that okay?”

“No! I—no, you can’t because I just—I ruined your life and—”

“You didn’t ruin my life.”

“I know what you’ve been through because of me!” Loki yelled.

“Sure,” Tony said. “But it didn’t ruin my life.”

“Tony—”

“I don’t think it was you, anyway. Not really. What were you? The weapon? You had a part in it, sure, but it wasn’t you. And I could be wrong. Damn it, maybe I am. I know you knew what you were doing and I know a lot of people would say you’re guilty. Whatever, though; I don’t really care anymore.”

“But I—”

“No, look at me. It’s okay. You didn’t ruin my life and I don’t mind spending time with you.”

“Tony!”

He laid a hand on Loki’s shoulder. “It’s okay.”

This didn’t help the intermittent sobbing, and, breathless, Loki abandoned his train of thought and broke down completely in Tony’s arms. He shut his eyes and tried not to think. He let himself sink into the embrace; the warm touch around him as he cried was everything.

“You’re good,” Tony murmured. “You’ve apologized enough. You’ve suffered enough. You’ve done so much; I can never be mad about what happened before. All I can say at this point is that I’m proud of you.”

“I don’t deserve you,” Loki softly spoke into Tony’s shoulder.

“No,” Tony said. “You deserve better.”

Chapter End Notes

This just in on don't fucking trust the author when they pull a bunch of suspiciously wholesome shit out of nowhere because they'll inevitably follow it up with some depressing crap again!

The Hedgehog's Dilemma

Chapter Summary

Like the weather, trust is not constant. But maybe it doesn't matter.

Chapter Notes

Folks I'm gonna be honest I wrote this chapter like two and a half years ago and I've been working on it ever since and I'm still not totally happy with it and I'm 90% positive I superbungled the execution but it's MY therapy fic that I use to cope with life and I make the rules ❤️

Things I have discovered so far:

- I actually legitimately do not remember a single thing from the MCU other than the entirety of the Iron Man trilogy which I have watched too many times and I'm just blindly trusting everything I've written so far without knowing what I was talking about because the gremlin in my brain said we are NOT rewatching the movies because they create bad mood chemicals and I CONTINUE to be super mad about this because at the very bare minimum I do need to rewatch at least a couple movies to remember some characterization as well as research a bunch of wacky geography things
- this chapter was uhhhhhhhhhhh it was going to be uhh how do I say this More Detailed in places but 2020 was absolutely bizarro and I did not do that and you will have to forgive me

Anyway here's Wonderwall! Stick around for the most fucked up rollercoaster you've ever been on 🤪

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

It was raining again.

It was early, Loki also realized after a moment, and he was squeezing the dragon tight under the covers, and, for all their supposed durability, for want of another disaster, one of the sigils on him had been severed. He knew this without looking: even in that blurry, half-awake state, he felt more free, more powerful, and he thought that if he found the strength to move his arm and inspect it, he would see it had rubbed clean right between his inner elbow and bicep, where he had already suspected the constant panic-induced sweat would prove too much.

He thought he should reline the runes—that Tony would want him to. But maybe not. He turned a little and kept watching the streaks of rain along the windows.

Perhaps he should have simply gone back to sleep and worry about it later; there was no telling how early it was, seven or six or five, only that it was a terrible hour and that, although he didn't quite feel exhausted, he could do with a bit more rest. But he could hear the rain through the glass,

even if just barely, and that was enough. Not today. He got up slowly, struggling against the parts of him that were still asleep and the parts that wanted to stay warm under the covers, and sat there on the side of the bed, turned his arm palm-up, and examined the sigil. There was no urgency in either direction: fix it or don't. Nothing. He just felt... empty. What did he do now? He glanced at the windows, at the hazy dawning sky, and then grabbed his coat and tugged it on, thinking that maybe hiding his arms was the second best he could do if he couldn't decide on something. Then, with a quick reach, he vanished the walking stick propped up against the nightstand.

Wait, he thought. Take some time. Clear your head.

What he could really do now was do what he did the last time he felt this lost: disappear to another country with only his magic and the clothes on his back, make like a tourist, and wander. Another planet, another galaxy—anything. He wasn't choosy. Hell, he could go visit New Asgard; he'd been meaning to for so long and he was sure they'd welcome him with open arms, especially now. But, as with everything, he found himself paralyzed with the indecision and able only to walk around the bed to the bathroom, where he would presumably glare at his reflection for the next hour or so. He glanced at the sink, then back up.

Peter deserved this even less. This—

This.

Loki formed a comb and carefully untangled his hair, one lock at a time, and then walked out. It was five thirty-eight when he passed the clock down the hall, early enough that even the early birds were nowhere to be found. He checked: there were no signs of life.

He thought he should make himself a small breakfast and leave. Those days like yesterday were precious. Those days when all he did was laugh with Tony or any of the other kindred souls in the building, even briefly, were precious. He liked those; he still smiled when he remembered Tony singing along to the radio. He wanted more such moments. But at what cost? He stopped in the lounge kitchen and checked the fridge, and, finding nothing of interest, he sighed and tiptoed back to his room. He might have been overreacting, and he was sure, in fact, that he was. Tony would tell him this; what rush was there? Wait for another flashback, he'd say—and then keep waiting. Think. Take some time. Realize it's not worth it.

But Tony didn't know what he was talking about. Tony didn't know shit.

Loki returned to the bathroom, turned the sink on, and stared it down. Cold water. Pressurized water; those bouts had always been too haphazard for anything more than a hasty soak. It wasn't the same. It wasn't the same, he thought, and then he stuck both hands under the stream and held them there. One second. Two. In, he breathed, and out, and he managed to stay there; there was no sudden memory, no jolt of pain. This was fine. This was perfectly fine. Nothing was burning.

He was sure that if he stayed a little longer, something somewhere would shift and he'd turn out fine: this would never bother him again. But it was never that simple, and the truth, he found, the eternal truth that he could feel creeping up inside his throat, was that it was just taking some more time than usual—slow panic, gradual panic, but panic all the same. Still, he didn't move. He pushed the other knob and waited, jaw tight and eyes narrowed, as the water pouring along his hands went from ice-cold to tepid.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five. In and out.

Loki rolled his sleeves up and leaned in, pressing his forearms to the basin and letting the water run over the sigils. He could do this. He turned the cold knob slightly off—hot, but not scalding. That worked. That was harmless. It felt lovely; the last time he'd let anything touch his skin had been months ago and it was such a refreshing sensation that all could really do for a moment was savour it. The fading ink fell easily when he passed a hand over it and it was nice to have the night's sweat gone; the warmth was so comforting he would have stayed there forever given the chance. But then he started crying. And then it got worse.

He pulled away and shut the water off.

So he couldn't do this after all; even if he lasted longer this time, even if there was some vague impression of progress since his last attempt, he couldn't take it. The panic wasn't leaving. His cheeks were still wet with fresh tears. There was no—

—no pain yet, no memories, but scratch that, no: there they were. There

and he sat down in the middle of the floor, knees up

and kept crying.

There was no way he'd make it through this. Patience, Tony would tell him, but patience through this kind of thing was impossible. He wasn't that strong.

Minutes passed there, alone on the tiles with his face pressed into his knees. He calmed himself eventually, eased his sobs long enough to breathe and stumbled to his feet with a hand on the counter, and then, finding nothing else, he dimly examined the pale reflection staring back at him. Tired eyes. Tired everything. He found it a little reassuring, honestly—here you are, here is your pain: you're not imagining it all. He thought the tear-soaked hair stuck to his cheeks made him look terrible, but he looked real, or at least as real as he could see through the dreamy haze. He looked miserable.

He stored the comb, which he'd nearly forgotten there, and then went to the dresser and did the same with every stray article of clothing. It was never really his style to use magic for such menial tasks as changing, nor for keeping his entire wardrobe on hand, but with everything as it was, he realized now that it would be easiest. He already dealt with a dozen other trivialities via spell; what was one more? His boots, which he'd similarly tucked away at some point, formed neatly around his socked feet as he turned and walked into the kitchen.

He wanted to be alone somewhere.

Norway, as predictable as it was, was still nice. He liked the rural areas and he could always find his way down to New Asgard if the mood came to that, and he was sure, on some level or another, that it would. But Tony would worry. Tony would do more than worry; if those three days had rattled him so much, what would an outright disappearance do?

Well. Loki clicked the kettle on and grabbed a mug.

There was a nagging voice in the back of his mind that went like this: he was sick of his heart ruling him, he had been thinking so strongly how sick he was just days ago, and this was another such time where he could either do what pleased *him*, as he had done countless times before, or he could keep playing slave to the feelings of others. It all sounded so harsh when he considered it like

that, but wasn't it true? He couldn't spend every decision agonizing over what kind of pain he would and wouldn't cause. Sooner or later, it had to stop.

The kettle looked close to empty when the bubbles settled, but the mug was small and he didn't care much anyway. He dug through the tea drawer and pulled out his usual two bags of chamomile, which, though never really quite as efficient as they could have been, would probably ease the lingering tears in his eyes, and then he poured in his usual measure of something that wasn't really milk while trying not to listen, tidied everything, and tiptoed to the table.

Tony.

Tony was too kind for this—him and Peter and every other person who only seemed to want to help him, who took every little incident so personally; they wouldn't be alright. For all he preached to himself about apathy, it was never any easier, and for all he wanted to forget everyone and leave, he kept coming back to the thought. Better to let sentiment burn, he'd said, but sometimes these things just happened. When did this become so complicated?

If it stopped raining, he might have simply gone and sat by the dock, but looking at the solid grey sky outside, this would continue for a while. Maybe it was better to just pack up and warp somewhere: it seemed, after everything, like his best option. But that feeling wasn't leaving him—guilt and a special sort of secondhand grief and a thousand other emotions; he couldn't cope with it all. He thought he might have an easier time this if he were under something's influence, but, for better or for worse, all he had was an undersized serving of medium-strong chamomile tea; he sighed and kept slowly sipping at it.

It seemed simpler now that he thought about it—not this moral dilemma that kept pestering him, but rather what, exactly, had led up to this moment. Asgard fucked him over; in response, in a desperate slip of the mind, he did what he always did and attempted suicide, and, as he always did, he failed. Ah, he'd wanted payback, but it didn't seem worth the effort until Thanos found him. Thanos convinced him it was a good thing: that the pain they caused was just a means to the end. Thanos was a liar, and a poor one at that, but, presumably, hearing the same nonsense between a million large and larger injuries spread across a year had sufficed to break him anyway. Somewhere among the blithe self-preservation and knowledge that maybe he should just swallow his pride and do what he was told, he'd believed in the whole glorious-purpose, kneel-before-me bull: why wouldn't he? He liked this kind of attention. He liked the power. He had never quite forgotten the danger he'd put himself in, nor how two-faced his saviours were, but for most of the invasion, most of that time he'd spent half-lucid and feverish under unhealed wounds, his zeal had been genuine. His rage had been genuine. Didn't matter; that fear had stuck with him then and it stuck with him now, even after however long he'd managed to repress what happened. Not knowing what else to do, he favoured his traditional fallback of suicide.

It wasn't that complex, was it? Sure—with a little effort, there was no reason any of this shouldn't go.

Tony had been there through all of it. Tony, staring him down with cold complacency and an unyielding drive so very unlike now—no sympathy, no sentiment: only plain logic. And then... what? Six years and a sob story and they were suddenly friends? That couldn't be right.

The rain abruptly picked up intensity, turning to a loud and violent deluge, and Loki glanced from his tea with a frown.

So he had his tea and, although he still wanted to leave, it seemed odd to leave before finishing it; it was his little anchor to the room and it kept him warm behind the soaked windows. He drank slowly, and by the time he was done, he realized he didn't want to leave without finishing his painting—and then, under the same obligation, he sat at the couch and continued where he'd left off, which was sketching with a pencil he'd stolen from the lounge. This carried on for hours: when he was done the outline, he needed to paint over it, and when he painted all the solid colours, he needed to shade it. But the day was long and he had time to burn.

Unused to going without breakfast, he eventually became hungry. It was a familiar feeling, though, and he ignored it without much difficulty.

The rain eased a bit by the time Tony came to ask about him, but it never went entirely. “Good morning!” he said, poking his head around the door. “Have you eaten anything yet?”

“Tea,” Loki said, not looking from the canvas.

“Oh! Okay, so, I need to go run down to the post office real quick. Do you want to come with me? We can grab something on the way back.”

“I'm busy.”

“I gathered. You good with, like, coffee and a muffin? Two muffins, maybe? Specially made, of course.”

“One will do. Thank you.”

“I'll be back in twenty minutes or so. Good luck with that.”

Then Tony was gone.

Loki stopped and stared at the canvas.

Every little favour. Every moment like this. Every night like last night; every awkward day spent together. Why? Was it still just generosity? It had to be. It was just generosity. Right. He had already decided there was no good reason for anything else—that every possible end goal was just him trying to scare himself. There was nothing.

Nothing, right?

Tony returned some time later. “I got caught up in something, so that took a little longer than expected,” he said. “Hope you don't mind.”

“Not at all,” Loki said. He thought for a moment that he was awful for doubting any of this, and then he set his things down just as Tony sat beside him.

“Okay, so”—Tony held up one of the little paper packages—“based on the fact that you seem to have no issue with grains as long as there's no gluten, this should be fine.”

“Should be,” Loki said, taking it from him. “I suppose we'll find out.”

“Any big plans today?” Tony asked, offering one of the coffees; Loki took that as well.

“None.”

Tony glanced at the painting. “What the heck! You told me you weren’t an artist. Where did you pull this from?”

“My ass,” Loki deadpanned over a sip of coffee.

“Ah, the source of all great inspiration. I see.”

What was he doing with himself?

“Are you cool if I head out?” Tony asked, setting his things in his lap. “I have a lot of stuff I need to do today. But I’ll probably pop in later this evening.”

“That’s fine.”

Tony looked worried; would something happen again? What about eating properly? What about lunch? He squinted at the painting like it would make him less obvious.

“I’ll find something to eat,” Loki said.

“Oh. Okay. That’s good.”

Loki placed the paper package on the couch arm. “Are you stalling?”

“No,” Tony confidently announced.

“Go deal with your responsibilities, Tony.”

He took his things and got up with a sigh. “Okay,” he said, making for the door. “See ya.”

The soft rain against the window was quiet, but it wasn’t silent; in the absence of any conversation, it was suddenly all Loki could hear. The coffee tasted expensive. The muffin would probably be good if he tried it.

Lowering the coffee, he found he felt very alone.

The last time someone had done something like this for him, it had ended in disaster. He had barely made it out with his life; his wounds were stubborn to heal and his energy so sapped he was out for weeks. He was graceful around death, never without an emergency plan or several, but grace called for a warning. Grace called for preparation—unseen practice and careful rehearsals. Grace called for caution, and he had laid himself so willingly into a chasm of vulnerability that he had never had the chance: by the time he saw the danger, it was too late.

The last time someone had abused his trust, it had started very much like this. As the rain drummed at the window, he could not shake the knowledge: this was too familiar. Somehow, though, he got through breakfast and resumed his tired painting. The day carried on.

He never did actually get something for lunch, although he tried; there was nothing he felt like eating and it wasn’t worth the effort to search any further. It was just him, his art, and the rain until dinner, which happened in the lounge for once: there were a few people in and someone had

cooked a very nice meal. They discussed the state of things, including how New Asgard was faring—reasonably well, but maybe it would have gone better with a sorcerer on all the finer work. Tony thought so, anyway; telekinesis and the like must be rather useful for these sorts of things.

Maybe this was the wrong thing to discuss because it only made Loki uneasier. He felt lost in the conversation, and he slowly said less until he was saying nothing at all; he simply sat there, silent, and wondered if it was still raining.

Tony sat with him later while he tried to finish the painting, which he did. They had some tea and a few slices of the marble loaf and talked about some silly things and it was alright; the painting was nothing special, just a plain landscape crafted from memory, but it looked nice enough.

So maybe he could have believed it—that it was, indeed, only generosity, maybe a little kindness, because he'd certainly seen the proof: much of what Tony did, at the end of the day, benefited no more than his public image, and much of it didn't even do that. There was nothing to gain from this other than good karma and that special sort of gift-giving satisfaction. Things were exactly as they appeared to be, and every little suspicion, every continued reason to run, every sight and sound that begged some other answer was unfounded; as Loki went to put the mugs away, carefully cleaning them with the usual method, he knew this to be true.

But he couldn't help it.

He thought he was wrong: they did want to use him after all. On some level somewhere, all they wanted, eventually, was to capitalize on his skills. Like before. Like every time.

He thought he was a fool for buying into the kindness.

He thought he should have left.

“Did you ever really care about me?” he softly asked, paused halfway between the kitchen and the couch. “Or were you just hoping to get something out of it?”

Tony caught his gaze with an open mouth. “What?”

“Is it... really only generosity?”

The room was very quiet; Loki felt himself coming apart. His heartbeat in his ears. His heavy chest. His fingers crackling with surface energy. No—he couldn't have fallen for this again. This couldn't have happened again. He wasn't this stupid. He wasn't this blind. He would have caught it early. Tony was a poor liar. This couldn't be happening. This wasn't happening to him. Not again. This wasn't happening this wasn't happening this wasn't happening this wasn't happening

“Loki, yes,” Tony gently said. “I do care about you. I'm doing this because I care about you.”

No one did things like this just because they cared. No one did things like this without expecting something. There was always something.

Loki swallowed hard and tried to breathe. “I don't want your help anymore,” he said.

“Can I ask why?”

“I think you're lying to me.”

Tony, for once, had no response. He sat up straight and set his things beside him.

“Why would you—” Loki stepped back from the window and balled his glittering hands into painful fists. “Why would you do all this? You could have just—just left me alone after Titan and—I don’t—”

“I got invested in you,” Tony said. “I’m sorry if you didn’t want that.”

This—this?—no no no no no it couldn’t be. No one would put up with him for so long if not for some grander motive; no one would just—they couldn’t!—no—no; was his guilt misplaced? Should he have ever even grieved so deeply over himself and what he’d put Tony through? That one time and that other time and that—

(well, they would have come for him no matter what and he was only dealing the first blow)

Loki backed up and formed a knife in his hand.

Tony looked a bit startled; he glanced at both arms, their destroyed sigils hidden by the velvet sleeves, and then climbed out of the couch and said, “Shit.”

“Why?” Loki yelled. “What do you care?”

Tony joined him by the table but kept his distance. “Look at me,” he said. “Put the knife away.”

“You don’t understand! I—”

“What don’t I understand?”

—that he would never be safe, that he was running out of time, that this was all a mistake, that that that that that that

“I never should have trusted you,” Loki said, tears, rage in his voice, wild terror and fury flooding his eyes. “You just want to use me, don’t you? Why would you be keeping me alive? Why would you—”

“Hey, remember when you asked if you were being paranoid and I said I’d tell you if it gets bad? It’s bad. It’s bad, Loki. Take a seat.”

—but no, he thought, no no no no no, this wasn’t paranoia, he would die here, they would hold him forever, do something, anything—

“You’re telling me I’m wrong? You’re telling me—”

“Yes! Yes, you’re wrong! You’re not—”

“You don’t know anything!”

“Loki—”

“This keeps happening to me!” he yelled. “Every time. This—”

(chains around him and a boot across his soul, noise screaming

this is your purpose, this is what you will do for us, we own you, little god, he will never leave you alone, you will never be free—wasn't this what you wanted?

this)

“I need to die,” he muttered, turning to pace; the knife vanished from his hand but the emerald sparks didn't go. “This will never stop! That's the only way I'll ever be free of this. There will always be this—”

risk, this chasing fear that someone would hurt him again, control him, use him—

“—danger that I—”

“That someone will use you?” Tony said.

“Yes!” Loki cried, looking up. “And it's you and I know it's you and you keep swearing it's not but damn it, look at me, I know it's you because no one, not one person, not even you, I don't care how generous you say you are, would willingly put up with me for so long! Don't lie to me. I know how these things go. I know you expect something. Everyone expects something.”

“No, they don't,” Tony said; they were standing before each other. “No. Do you truly believe that? Are you really so filled with self-loathing that you can't fathom this concept of camaraderie for the sake of it?”

“There's no such thing! Are you really that naïve?”

“The whole world isn't out to get you. I know you've been hurt. I know you have a reason to believe that's the case. But it's not. It's really not. Not every good thing that happens to you is tied to some big scheme and I'm sorry that your experiences have shown you otherwise.”

“Oh, and you—what, you don't want to use me, then?” Loki growled.

“How the fuck would I use you?” Tony snapped, gesturing wildly with a hand. “You? You can't even hear running water without freaking out and you really think I could—”

Loki slapped him.

There it was. Here was a secret that should have stayed as such—pretend everything was fine, pretend neither one had noticed, and there might still have been some semblance of dignity left among the chaos.

That wide-eyed blush as Tony looked back up at him said it all: this was a mistake.

“I'm sorry,” he stammered, pressing a hand to his face. “I didn't—”

“Your apologies are cheap,” Loki coldly interrupted. “Do you have nothing more to offer me than a few words?”

“Reassurance?”

“What reassurance? That I'm safe? That I can't be harmed? That you haven't been lying to me this whole time?”

“Yes! And what—you can’t fight? What does it matter if I’m lying to you? What if I do try something? I can’t do anything you don’t want to do. You’re stronger than me.”

“Oh, Tony. What could someone who’s afraid of water possibly do to defend himself?”

That silenced him almost instantly.

“Right, good on you for bringing that up,” Loki hissed, turning to pace again. “Hello, yes, I’m afraid of water! I panic around water! I can’t even look at the bloody rain that’s been plaguing these past few weeks without bursting into tears! Fuck you.”

“Loki—”

“You don’t understand,” he loudly continued, “and you don’t want to understand—”

“Stop.”

Loki snarled; it was all he could do. “That could happen again!” he said. “It can and I know it will. If I—”

(a god, someone who never should have been caught so defenceless, someone who shouldn’t have been tied up and beaten and made into nothing short of a slave so easily—)

“—let that happen to me once, why couldn’t I let it happen again?” He resumed his pacing, hands taut with building magic, fingers burning; there was that itch under his skin, the feeling that he needed to tear himself apart—“Bad luck?” he asked, looking up suddenly. “Was it bad luck that I didn’t die? That they found me?”

“I don’t know,” Tony said.

“You don’t know! Of course—of course, so then: if it was all just chance, what’s to say it won’t happen again?”

“It won’t. Things like that don’t happen twice. You can’t—”

“What’s to say it’s not you?” Loki growled. “Are you still convinced there was some honest friendship between us? Trust? If I ask you now, will that still be your answer? That you honestly just wanted to help me? That there isn’t some ulterior motive?”

“There is not,” Tony firmly answered, “and you would have known by now if there was. I’m telling you—”

“What are you telling me?” Loki yelled. “You’re trying to explain your way out of this, but it’s not working. It’s really not. Do you know—”

“That you’re paranoid?” Tony suggested.

“That I can tell when people are lying,” Loki sharply corrected, “and that I can tell you’re not entirely convinced when you say that you haven’t been faking your concern for me and—”

“Or is it that your constant fear is clouding your lie-detecting skills?”

“Stop interrupting me!”

very much”—back, back a few feet, a few metres, still braced, ready to attack—“and—and I—I—”

“Loki, listen to me.”

(he drew his hands together, nails scraping at the skin, bleeding, trying to erase the damage, trying to take it out of him—)

“Loki!”

“Don’t touch me!” he snarled—screamed?—right as every ounce of magic in him flashed between them, green, gold, and rang through the room, sending a rain of stray drywall from the ceiling and shattering each of the lights and the entire window.

It was bulletproof glass, he thought, or he must have seen it in the way the panes frosted instantly into a million infinitesimal cracks from corner to corner of the wall; bulletproof, he thought, because what else would the windows here be? If not in the whole building, then surely, at least, in the dorms—and here was why Tony shouldn’t bother with him because next time, that blast would be directed somewhere else, next time, it wouldn’t be a window that took the brunt of it, next time—and Tony, maybe seeing this, stopped where he stood, speechless, and there was that moment where neither of them knew what to do, where

(the universe broke and the memories took over, that sweet agony took over, and he—he couldn’t breathe—he felt the burning shame of being so weak, so bare, letting them keep him like a pet and do these awful things to him)

—and ~~the anger wasn’t enough~~

he couldn’t breathe he couldn’t breathe he couldn’t breathe

breathe

breathe—

but there was nothing;
and he stepped back
and said, "Look at this!

How could I ever be okay?

How could I ever recover from

this? How—"

—and Tony?—what about that—that—he couldn't see, his heart and his chest and his throat hurt
and he still couldn't breathe and

there was still that

that

(that?)

and—

“Loki, look at me.”

“You’re hyperventilating.”

go away go away go away go away go away go away go away go away go away go away go away go away
go away

“Loki!”

“Loki, you’re going to pass out. You think there’s danger? Fine. If there’s something and you’re unconscious, what then?”

You're talking about defending yourself

but if you don't breathe right—”

One, two, three—one, two—one, two, three, four, five.

Hold.

Exhale: one, two, three—

Inhale: one, two, three, four, five.

Hold.

Repeat.

One, two, three, four, five.

Floor. Window. Knees up; hands around them.

One, two, three, four, five.

Inhale.

Hold.

Exhale.

Repeat.

“Loki.”

No panic. No shame, disgust, humiliation. Just anger.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” he growled.

“Thanks for proving that I have no reason to want to use you,” Tony said, looking down at him; the apathy with which he said it left its intentions unclear. Reassurance? Or was it just a frustrated gloat? Ah—Loki took it as an insult.

“*Ég drep þig og pissa á gröf þína,*” he said.

“Oh! See, that I understand.” Tony smiled. “Very mature of you. Are you gonna stop throwing a tantrum now and get your shit together for a minute?”

“You don’t know what I’ve been through,” Loki said, staggering to his feet. “What I’ve shown you”—his eyes flickered—“is nothing. You think there isn’t danger? I thought that too. I thought so many things. I thought that fall would kill me, for one; go figure, right? And then something like this happens and all that changes. Trust is a luxury.”

“You need to understand something,” Tony said. “There are always risks. There will always be worst-case scenarios. There will always be shit that can go wrong and shit that can go even more wrong and there will always be people who stab you in the back. I know. God, I know. I went through hell—and it wasn’t your hell, no, but bear with me—and I’m constantly waiting to be back. I never know if or when I’ll end up in another situation like that, if it’ll be even worse or if I’ll make it out alive—and do I let that fear get to me? No. Because then that’s all I’m doing: I’m just living in fear all day. That’s not life.”

“Isn’t the reason you’re still Iron Man because you’re scared of being defenceless?”

“That’s not—”

Loki narrowed his eyes, raised both brows. Waited calmly.

“... Okay, maybe a little bit.”

“You have no place telling me not to live in fear,” Loki said.

“Fine. Live in fear if you want. But please: don’t let it consume you.”

“As it’s consumed you?”

“Loki—”

“Tony.” He sneered. “You can’t help me, and even if you could, I don’t want your help.”

“Then what do you want?” Tony yelled. “What, if you don’t want my help? Will you help yourself?”

“I’ll leave,” Loki hissed, “and then I’ll kill myself, and that’ll be my help. I won’t have you hovering over me and keeping me from doing even that—”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake—”

“For whatever reason!” Loki snapped. “For whatever reason you want to keep someone like me alive because I don’t know why you’d ever bother if—”

“Someone like you?” Tony said, unamused. “What are you like?”

“What am I like? Do you want a list? Hey! Paranoiac with anger issues and a fear of water, how’s that? Cries all day, wastes your time? Knows you’re only sticking around because you don’t want my death on your reputation?”

“Does it matter?”

“Does it—” Loki stared. “Does it *matter*?”

“No, it doesn’t! I’m doing everything I can for you and all you’re concerned about is—”

“You can’t help me!”

“—why I’m—would you just stop?”

“Why?”

“Because—”

“Because nothing! Nothing you say or do will ever change what’s happened to me. I was still tortured.” Loki punctuated this with a thumb to his chest. “I was still used,” he said; jab, the same thing. “I still got all those people killed! I still—”

“Stop.”

“Again and again and again and again and again and again! It doesn’t end. I’ve still lost everyone I’ve ever loved. I’ve still been abandoned. I’m still a monster! I’m still a liar. I’m still the second son.”

“Stop,” Tony said, louder.

“I’ve still been torn apart by everyone I ever dared to trust!” Loki screamed, the floor beneath his feet erupting into a field of tiny flames. The furniture shifting with another quake. His mind ready to explode; he turned and magicked one of the two chairs against the far wall, where it left a giant hole before toppling back down the couch to the floor. He couldn’t breathe.

“Oh, we’re throwing things now?” Tony said, looking over his shoulder. “Great! Keep it up. I can keep going.”

“Get out,” Loki snarled.

“You don’t own this room and I’m not moving an inch,” Tony sharply countered. “Here’s the thing: if you don’t trust me, you can leave. If you don’t want my help, you can leave. If you think I’m using you, you can leave. Shall I talk slower?”

Loki flung a dagger at his ear.

The dagger missed by scarcely a millimetre: it hit the same wall and then bounced off one of the cushions, landing somewhere beside the chair. “So you did mean that!” Tony exclaimed, giving it a brief glance. “Gosh, I wonder: how are you going to piss on my grave if water freaks you out?”

Loki whipped another blade at him, this time slicing a lock of hair from the top of his head.

“What, are you scared to hurt me?” Tony said with a scowl. “Go ahead! Make my day.”

“You’re playing with fire,” Loki growled, forming yet another dagger. He aimed at Tony’s shoulder but didn’t release, saying, “I’m not scared: I pity you.”

“You pity me? You? After all that shit you pulled? Wow, talk about irony. And you know I could kill you if I wanted, right?”

“And I can’t?” Loki hissed. “I could kill you in a heartbeat.”

“Then kill me!” Tony hissed back, closing the distance between them. He lifted Loki’s hand so the blade’s edge was pressed to his neck. “Kill me now or drop the act.”

But there was nothing. Loki’s eyes went wide and he stared, suddenly lost, as the moment stretched thin and the silence became a roar. Nothing. Nothing at all. He couldn’t. He yanked his arm away and hurled the dagger at the nearest wall, where it lodged itself in the plaster with an unceremonious thud.

Tony breathed a sigh of relief.

“How pig-headed can you be?” Loki jeered.

“It’s a talent,” Tony said.

“Some talent! Are you trying to die?”

“Fuck no. I was bluffing. I figured it should be obvious to a god of lies.”

“Oh, sorry if I can’t think straight when someone’s daring me to slit their throat! How uncharacteristic of me. Now, what was that about fixing centuries worth of pain? Please, enlighten me.”

“Nothing I’d like to repeat if this is how you’ll act,” Tony answered. “And I never said I would fix anything: you can move past it, slowly, with a lot of effort. But if you’d rather throw sharp objects at my face then by all means, go ahead! It’s not like I actually know what I’m talking about.”

“No, you don’t,” Loki said. “You’re a child compared to me and just hearing you act like you do is insulting.”

“So you know everything, then, do you?”

“Of course not! What do you think?”

“What do I think? What do I think, Loki? I think—” Tony cut himself off, paced for a moment. “I think you’re an arrogant brat,” he said. “I think you’re letting your emotions get in the way of your

logic. I think—”

Loki grabbed him by the shirt. “Don’t you speak to me like that,” he growled. “I am a god and a prince, Stark, not someone you can just loose your tongue on however you please.”

Tony chuckled. “I think,” he continued with a wince, “you don’t know that genuinely struggling with a lot of fear and anger isn’t an excuse to act like a toddler.”

Loki shot another dagger at the floor and hammered it in with the heel of his boot. “Who will stop me? You?”

“There are lines,” Tony said. “You cannot keep doing this. Accidentally shattering a window because you’re panicking? Cool. I get that. I don’t think that was your fault. But trashing the room to spite me is different. Threatening me is different. I’m sorry that no one else has had the balls to tell you this.”

“What balls?” Loki spat, jerking the fabric. “You’re trembling with fear right now. Do you think I can’t see that?”

“Let go of me.”

“I’m not done!”

Tony took his wrist and shoved him off. “Yes, you are,” he said; oh, he was trembling, alright, but it was no obstacle. “Stop. You don’t want my help? Say so. Don’t go shooting knives at me.”

“I do what I want,” Loki said.

“No,” Tony said, “no, you don’t. You don’t do all this.” He motioned to the dagger jammed in the floor. “You don’t attack me. You don’t take all this courtesy and laugh at it.”

“Did you hear me?”

“You don’t do what you want,” Tony continued, unfazed. “Not in this building. Not while I’m here. Would you rather leave? Go. Leave. I can’t keep you here. But while you *are* here: you do not do what you want. There are rules. You’re not exempt.”

“Are you dense? I told you—”

“I know what you told me.”

“Don’t you ever roll your eyes at me,” Loki snarled, grabbing him again. “Never.”

Tony laughed abruptly. “Do your worst,” he said, smiling up at him. “I’m not scared of you.”

“Then you’ve either got a death wish”—Loki tightened his grip—“or you’re the dullest man I’ve ever met. You should be terrified. I could rip you apart at the atomic scale if I wanted to.”

“Do it! Do it. Prove to me you’ve got something more to offer than words. Or are you bluffing, too?”

Loki formed his largest knife and held it to the underside of Tony’s chin.

“Have fun explaining this,” Tony said; the smile hadn’t left him. “They finally regained their trust in you and you’re just going to turn around and kill me, are you? What are you going to say? What are you going to tell Peter? I forced some truth down your throat and it hurt your feelings? Cry me a fucking river.”

His talking was driving the tip into his skin: Loki caught a glint of blood shading the blade.

“Think about it,” Tony said. “You’ll really throw all that away over one argument? I know you’re not stupid. I know you’ve killed before. I know you’ve dealt with the consequences. Are you prepared to do that again over something this petty?”

Loki didn’t move.

“I hope you know you’re not just killing me: Pepper will never be the same. The others will hate you, but they’ll survive. Not her. She’ll never forgive herself.”

“You were dead the second you become Iron Man,” Loki said. “She should know that.”

“But is this me fighting right now?” Tony shot back, gesturing with a hand; the cut, though just as shallow, lengthened. “Did I die on-duty? A heroic sacrifice, maybe? Is that what this is?”

“This is you trading your life because you’re too stubborn to admit defeat.”

“I don’t care. Answer me, Loki: is this just a casualty? Is this the kind of thing she expects each and every day? Because I don’t think it is. This is avoidable. This is you letting your anger get in the way. Pepper is ready for me to die because I made a mistake while saving someone’s life. She’s prepared for the kind of accidents that happen in the heat of battle. She knows that’ll happen someday; it’s the cause of death we both accepted years ago. I will never live to die of old age. What she will not accept”—Tony raised his chin, drawing a fresh dribble of blood—“is that I died because one spoiled little boy who, my goodness, correct me if I’m wrong, never learned that trigger discipline doesn’t only apply to guns just decided he’d had enough of my goodwill.”

“I’m a thousand years older than you,” Loki coldly responded.

“Are you? Because right now, it really feels like I’m the older one here. Act your age, Loki. Put the knife away. Hey, third time’s the charm: maybe when you pull it out again in the next few seconds you’ll actually accomplish something.”

“Stop talking.”

“Make me.”

Loki pressed harder. “Stop talking,” he said again, expressionless.

“You can kill me in less than a second from here,” Tony calmly returned. “Angle it right and you’ll hit the spinal cord. One quick blow. That’s all it takes.”

“Oh, I know,” Loki said, narrowing his eyes. “It wouldn’t be the first time I’ve killed someone like that.”

“Isn’t it so easy? Look at me. Look at you. You’ve got me right where I need to be.”

“You’re very observant.”

“I will ask you again: why haven’t you killed me yet?”

“I’ve been waiting to see if you’ll somehow redeem yourself. Honestly”—Loki dragged the knife down—“I’m starting to lose my patience.”

“Really?” Tony said, wincing. “I thought you lost it back when you threw a chair at me.”

“Are you really still joking?”

“What do you want me to do? Scream? Oh no! You’re slowly slicing my neck open to the point where I’m wondering if you’re ever going to cut to the chase!” Tony just about cackled, which only deepened the wound; it was surface-level, but it was in a dangerous spot. “I’m terrified,” he said between the laughter. “You won’t kill me.”

Loki swept the blade to Tony’s shoulder and out; he yelped. “I won’t kill you?”

“Nope,” Tony hissed, darting a hand to the gash. “You won’t—”

“Bold words,” Loki said, flipping the knife into a reverse grip. “Then I wonder what you’ll think when I—”

Tony grabbed him with his other hand, pulled him in, and kned him in the crotch. Loki dropped the knife and then fell like a sack of bricks.

“I think you forgot,” Tony said, stepping around him with another little wince, “that I’m not afraid to fight dirty when necessary.”

“Go fuck yourself,” Loki wheezed.

“You first, sweetheart.”

Damn his paranoia, he managed to think between the static: he never should have shifted that part of him back after Sakaar. He curled into himself and tried to keep from vomiting.

Tony bent to take the knife from the floor and flung it to the other side of the room. “There’s an artery about an inch from here,” he said, crouching. “Right here.” He tapped the spot with a finger; Loki didn’t bother looking. “I guess I can understand not getting the spinal cord: that’s pretty darn precise, even for someone like you. But this? That’s a lot of surface area. I expected more out of you, honestly.”

“Shut up,” Loki hissed. “Shut up. Shut up…”

“Or what?”

“I’ll—”

“No, you won’t.”

Loki struggled to his feet, both hands on the floor, and then took a few steps back, propped himself up against the bedpost. “Why don’t you”—he breathed in hard—“come over here and find out?”

“If you’re so confident, why don’t you come, instead?”

“Maybe if you give me a moment to gather my bearings—”

“Fine. I’ll wait.”

Seconds passed; Loki took another deep breath, one, two, three, four, five, and then stepped away from the bed, slowly, shakily, and walked over. “You’re still bleeding,” he muttered.

“’Tis but a flesh wound,” Tony said with a wink.

“Mm. Half a dozen or more of those and you might think differently.”

“Perhaps.”

Loki stopped in front of him.

“We’re going in circles,” Tony said. “Why don’t we both admit we’re wrong and call it a night?”

“I’m not wrong,” Loki said.

“Ah. Neither am I.”

Loki examined the injury: the blood was soaking into Tony’s shirt. “Maybe I should just strangle you,” he said, “and actually follow through with it this time. It’s cleaner. Simpler.”

“Is it?”

He looked up.

“Go ahead. I’m still waiting.”

There was another pause, and then, finding nothing else, Loki decided yes: he would. But trying to get a grip only ended in them trying to disarm the other and knock him to the floor. Didn’t work, of course, because there was a massive power difference, and maybe Tony regretted it and in a last-ditch move grabbed him by wrist, yanked him in—

—and kissed him.

It was light. Close-mouthed. Emotionless; it was only a tactic and Loki could tell. But it seemed to do the trick to bring everything to a screeching halt. Three, four, five seconds frozen there against Tony’s chest and then the air started running out and he jolted awake, wrenched himself free, and kicked him off. Kicked him into the bedframe.

“That doesn’t work on me,” Loki hissed, dragging him up again by the wounded shoulder. “Did you honestly think—”

“Yes,” Tony managed above a grunt.

Loki threw him onto the bed. “You whore.”

“Yeah,” Tony wheezed, a hand to his shoulder; it was bleeding bad. Looked like the blow had torn something.

There was still a dagger trapped in the wall, just by the bed's headboard. "Tell me why I shouldn't kill you," Loki said as he went to retrieve it.

"There are a lot of people who would come after you," Tony said, struggling onto his side. He pressed a second hand to the wound. Pressed so hard his knuckles went white. "You can't take them all."

Loki ripped the blade out of the drywall. "Then I'll leave."

"Peter would be heartbroken. He really believed in you."

"I don't give a shit," Loki said, climbing onto the bed. He turned Tony supine once more and knelt over him with the dagger in a reverse grip.

"I believed in you," Tony whispered. His voice was cracking. "Please don't do this."

"You never believed in me," Loki said, raising the dagger above Tony's head.

"I did the best I could. I'm sorry it wasn't enough."

Loki brought the dagger down.

It punctured the sheets. Punctured the mattress. It was sharp enough to go in to the hilt; he held the grip for a moment, the pattern digging itself into his palm. He tried to understand what he was doing. He tried to understand why. Tony was still pressing on the wound with both hands and glanced briefly at the blade beside his head and then back up, motionless. They were silent.

Loki tore the dagger out, tossed it to the floor, and bent to kiss him again. Harder. Longer. He forced Tony's lips apart like it was nothing and held him there, not really thinking clearly, not wanting to, as he pulled the hands away with one of his own and healed the gash. "I don't like you," he muttered.

"Thanks," Tony said.

"For not liking you?"

Tony burst out laughing.

"Move," Loki growled. "Before I change my mind."

"See, I don't know if you realize, but—"

"Move!"

Tony scampered to the pillow; the sheets were covered with dust regardless, but he removed his shoes on the way. "I don't know how much blood I lost," he said, "so—"

"Oh, you think I've got it any better?" Loki snapped, stepping off the bed to remove his coat.

"You can't heal yourself?"

Loki threw the coat at him.

“Well, you do have good hands,” Tony recalled, pulling the mass of velvet from his face. “Jeez, you’re gonna get blood on this.”

“You don’t know when to shut your mouth,” Loki said.

“Come kiss me again, then,” Tony smugly retorted.

“In case you haven’t noticed”—Loki removed his shirt—“I’m still angry. It would serve you well to keep quiet.”

“A lot of people have said that to me! Unfortunately—”

Loki threw the shirt at him, too.

“—it has yet to work.” Tony threw the shirt back. “Stop throwing things at me,” he said.

Loki warped both of his boots into his hands and threw those, as well. Tony blocked them with a shriek.

“Dude! Stop.”

“I really don’t like you,” Loki said, climbing up to join him.

“I couldn’t tell,” Tony said. He tossed the boots on the floor and the coat atop them.

“I still want to kill you.”

“Do you?”

Loki kissed him. “You annoy me,” he said.

“Aw, thank you,” Tony said with a smile. “You have blood on your face. How the hell did you get blood on your face?”

“How the hell have you got so much nerve?”

“Probably from my dad’s side.”

Loki smacked him.

“Ow!”

“I can’t believe you put up with yourself,” Loki muttered, reaching for another kiss. He felt Tony’s hands around his bare waist. Wet blood as he leaned in a little too far; their chests touched. His mind burning up. How long had he wanted this? Two months? Or six years? Gods, oh—he didn’t know.

The rest was raw, wild; every time they kissed, he needed more. It got rougher. Someone started biting. Tony’s wit didn’t hide the frustration in his eyes and Loki could still feel his fingers crackling with uncontrolled magic. Nothing had really ended—only found another outlet. The rage didn’t go. The insults they’d exchanged didn’t go. But there were lines after all, and somewhere between all of this, he tore himself away, abrupt gravity overturning everything else, and cupped Tony’s face, and for all the violence stirring in his soul, he said, “Tell me to stop.”

“No,” Tony said, breathless. “Keep going.”

“Are you sure?”

“I want this. Please don’t stop.”

Loki warped his shirt off with a touch. “Sit up.”

“What?”

“Tony!” he growled. “I *am* out of patience now. Sit up.”

Tony pulled one of the pillows against the headboard. “You’re heavy,” he said, wincing, as Loki sat on his thighs.

“Stop talking,” Loki said.

“Seriously! What were you, like six hundred pounds? You’re cutting off my circulation.”

Loki kissed him again. “Stop,” he said, although he was mindful; as he pulled away, he eased some of the weight with a well-practiced spell.

“Do you do that often?”

“Don’t make me hit you again.”

“You’re very beautiful like this.”

Loki paused. “Thank you,” he said.

“Do you still want to kill me?”

It was a complicated question, wasn’t it? Clearly not—but what was to be said about everything else? Did this man want to hurt him or was he just overreacting? Was this merely false comfort? Him letting his guard down for no good reason? He didn’t really *want* to kill anyone: he just didn’t feel safe enough not to.

Tony pulled him in. “Well, I guess I’ll think about it later. How many more knives have you got?”

“Enough,” Loki said, warping their pants to the growing pile on the floor.

“We should have a knife fight! Gimme one.”

“I hope you choke on your tongue.”

Tony burst into another fit of laughter.

“I think you’re getting too confident,” Loki said, pushing Tony’s chin up with a hand. “Do you know how vulnerable you are like this? If I threw you back hard enough”—he pressed Tony against the top of the headboard—“I could snap your neck.”

“That wouldn’t be any fun,” Tony said, smiling down at him. “Hey, you got any lube?”

“You think I can do all this”—Loki warped Tony’s underwear off—“and that’s what’ll stop me?”

“Genuine question, do you just have a book of sex spells lying around somewhere?”

“Of course not,” Loki said, leaning in for another kiss. “I have them memorized.”

Tony picked at the waistband with a thumb. “Are you stalling?”

“Stop asking questions,” Loki said, and then he warped his underwear off too.

“Do you want me to warm you up?”

“What did I just say?”

“Oh, so you can ask questions but I can’t?”

“You’re insufferable,” Loki said, guiding a hand behind him—wringing the air’s moisture into a thick film around the fingers.

“The very best,” Tony said, obliging him with a wink.

“Every time you speak, I like you less.”

“Is there a limit to how little you like me?”

“Are you trying to die?”

“No, it’s just really turning me on listening to you like this.”

“You are an enigma.”

“Yeah. Do you want me to go faster?”

“I expect you to.”

Tony deepened the motion. Curved his fingers a bit. “Nice cock,” he said. “Are you sure you don’t want to switch?”

“How many of your lovers have tried to kill you?” Loki said above a wince.

“Shockingly, not many.”

“So you think—”

Tony pushed hard.

“Just because it hasn’t happened a lot,” Loki coughed out, struggling to compose himself, “it’s no reason to test your luck.”

“True,” Tony said. “But”—he pulled Loki close, switched angles—“what’s life but a series of risks?”

“Life is knowing when you should and shouldn’t make an idiot of yourself,” Loki said, leaning on Tony. “Oh—”

“Now who’s good with their hands?” Tony said with a chuckle. He was careful, a bit rough but kindly so. Like a testament to the situation, the blood left on his shoulder had still not dried.

“I suppose if you satisfy me,” Loki muttered over another wince, “I might let you live.” They were very close like this, pressed at the waist in such a way that every movement rubbed them against each other. It was planned; he knew the tricks and this was a good one.

“Is that a challenge?” Tony said, looking up at him.

“It’s a threat,” Loki said. His hands were still burning. The fire in his gut hadn’t gone. He was comfortable like this, no rush to pull out another sticker or two, but he knew himself well. His temper was the chaos he trode upon.

Tony, realizing by now that maybe he ought to stop making an idiot of himself, said, “I hope I’m to your liking, then,” and drew back so Loki could take him in. “Don’t kill me?”

“You feel good,” Loki murmured, sitting up.

“You feel better,” Tony said. What a shame about the limits of flexibility; they couldn’t stay pressed together like this. In compensation, he took Loki in a hand. “So is that a yes?”

“What?”

“Don’t kill me, please.”

“Fix your technique and we’ll see.”

Tony fixed his technique. “Did you know that cum leaves the body at approximately twenty-five miles per hour?”

“Please, please stop talking.”

“It’s true, though! I tested it once.”

Loki could not tell if the groan he let out was the sex or just his will to live exiting the building.

So maybe this was alright; it felt wonderful after all this time and he was always a sucker for fucking his way out of a fight. Or maybe that was just his body talking, just him putting up with this because he could. How long would it last? Ten minutes? An hour? Ah—as Tony was saying, they could think about it later.

“Do you ever think,” Tony asked above another kiss, “what would have happened if we did this instead of you throwing me out of a window?”

“I would have strangled you if you tried,” Loki said, brushing the hair from his eyes.

“Yes, but hypothetically.”

“Hypothetically, I would have strangled you.”

“In the kinky way?”

“In the murder way.”

Tony took a breath. “Well,” he said, thoughtful, as Loki gripped the headboard and picked up the pace a bit, “we would have missed this.”

“Don’t get any ideas,” Loki said, or maybe he slurred it; he wasn’t really thinking. “You”—he grunted—“you made the first move, and when someone does that with *me*, this is what happens. You don’t do that with me! This is common knowledge. I mean, Thor swears I’ll bed anything with a heartbeat, which, first of all, is not true—obviously I have more criteria than that—but, look, it has nothing to do with you.”

“Relatable,” Tony admitted with a wise nod. “So were you just mad because you were horny?”

“No, stop talking, please, no, I don’t want another word out of you, stop.” Loki clamped a hand over his mouth. “No.”

Tony, as always, was obnoxious about it, smiling as he pulled the hand away and said, “Yes, sir.”

This man! The nerve of him—damn it; anything more and Loki feared he would melt in his hands. He tried not to think.

“You’re so red!” Tony said, fighting a laugh. “Did I just discover a cheat code?”

“Shut up,” Loki muttered, and then, just to be sure, he locked them in a kiss. Leaning in, he felt the first threads of climax pawing at him; he felt Tony’s grip tighten a little, like it was obvious. Both of them struggling to stay steady. Unable to keep quiet—all the little moans and whimpers. He wondered briefly if he would regret this in the morning, and then, hardening the bucks, he decided fuck you, future self: truly, you are a bastard.

“You’re so warm,” Tony breathed, peering between them for an instant.

“That’s funny.”

“Is it?”

He kissed Tony again. “Mhm.”

It was hectic, all that blood on his hands as he brushed Tony’s shoulder and the unceasing smell of settling dust from the room, but it was, for an instant, bliss; there was no fear on his mind as he came, breathless there beneath a wash of ecstasy, and the rage that had brought him here seemed to dim. He felt Tony’s grip ease, and then he felt Tony, and for an instant, everything was well.

They remained together for half an eternity.

Tony was the first to speak. “Do you always sleep with your enemies?” he asked.

“Often,” Loki said. “You?”

“Mm... about the same.”

Loki shifted.

“Yeah,” Tony said, “it’s kinda been my thing for a while.”

“I see.” Pause. “I think... I’m going to get off now,” Loki said, quietly, almost to himself, and then he sat up, pushed the cock out of him.

“Are you still mad?”

“Keep asking me that and I will be.”

“Oh. Okay.”

Loki cleaned himself, and, although he didn’t really need to and perhaps shouldn’t have, he let the spell skirt what was inside him—just because.

“Would it be too weird if I licked this off?” Tony said, glancing at his very soaked hand.

“Why would it be?”

Tony shrugged and brought a finger to his mouth. Just the tip first, tentatively, a brief taste; then, a little more confidently, an actual stroke of his tongue, and then the whole thing, less like licking and more like slow, delicate sucking. He moved to the next finger, and the finger after that, and then his palm, eyes closed, the lightest trace of a moan—

“Alright, no,” Loki said. “Not with you looking at me like that and definitely not with noise involved.”

“Aw.”

He took Tony’s hand and cleaned it and the rest of him magically.

“So how about that weather, huh?” Tony exclaimed.

“The weather’s shit and I hate you.”

“Oh! I’ve been upgraded from dislike to hatred! What do I get?”

Loki breathed a reluctant chuckle. “Nothing,” he said. “I’m sorry to disappoint.”

“But I got you to laugh,” Tony said, holding up a freshly cleaned finger.

“Was that your goal?”

“Yeah, sort of.”

Loki sighed and crawled off him. “Is it late?” he muttered; there was no way of telling with the windows mostly nonfunctional and the sky a grey blur behind them. He rolled over and collapsed onto his back, as he was, on top of the covers. “Everything... hurts. I want to sleep.”

Tony pulled the pillow out from behind him and patted it flat in its usual spot. “Bedtime is what you make it,” he said, scooting to lie down beside Loki. “Don’t you want to get *under* the covers, though? You’ll get cold like that.”

“I don’t get cold.”

“Oh.”

They did not say anything further.

Tony, of course, did get cold, so he reached over Loki to pull the other end of the bedspread over them and tucked himself in. There wasn't much surface area left to it like that, but they were close enough that it didn't matter. Above them, the destroyed lights remained dark; the rain, nearly silent, was audible if they listened. Nothing else happened.

They fell asleep within seconds of each other.

Chapter End Notes

(And now I vanish off the face of the Earth because my dumb ass really just drafted like 30k words of the rest of the story EXCEPT for the chapter immediately following this one and I don't have a buffer! hee hoo hoo I have NOT learned my lesson regarding buffers please distract me from the impending doom that is reluctant research and writing by screaming at me about what a goblin bastard Tony is)

(Things get better)

(They apologize for both having awful tempers I promise it'll be okay)

(What the actual fuck is this chapter lmao)

(Please come scream with me)

Revivals

Chapter Summary

Mistakes are corrected. Maybe it's not all so bad.

Chapter Notes

Y'all I just hit 235k words on the rough draft and it's made me realize that I have no idea what the fuck is happening or how I even got this far or why it's that long and there's a very old Discord dm conversation hanging around somewhere where I go "teehee yes this story will be about 20k words I will end with Thanos getting yo mama'd" and it is Haunting Me Right Now. anyway here's more disclaimers:

- due to complicated reasons including "my mental health" and "2020 was weird" and "I'm afraid they did it better than me and that would be bad for my mental health" I am not watching any of the new Marvel shows or movies and if anything gets/has gotten jossed without my knowledge it's NOT my problem :)
- I rewatched a bunch of movies for like the bare minimum of characterization stuff but that's all I've done and I fully don't remember anything else (see: the entire plot of the Thor movies aside from what I've already written, whether or not any of the random plot points I keep pulling out of my ass conflict with anything, literally everything) and I actually DON'T trust my characterizations at all despite all that and I'm just winging it right now and I feel the need to bring that up because I feel bad about it lol I'm sorry
- also for some reason my brain isn't working and I think I missed a lot of weird shit while proofreading this O_O

Also! I'm still taking illustration requests if anyone cares! All of the other illustrations were requests from friends/acquaintances/readers and the story feels really bare right now so I'm happy to look at any ideas y'all have :)

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

There was never a more curious moment than when Loki, still so lost in the afterimages of his dream that he'd forgotten where he was or why, suddenly realized he was naked beside Tony, caught in a warm and sleepy embrace and all but nuzzling that morning's stubble. Warmer than anything, he could almost think as he acknowledged each little touch, every skin-on-skin sensation between them; so far from those detached, terrified nights and their weak attempts at distance. If he said he'd only missed this, he'd be lying: this, it turned out, was everything. He felt calmer here than he had in years.

The room was still a disaster. The window was completely fogged over with cracks, various furniture was misplaced, and the floor, though relatively untouched in comparison, had a thick layer of dust from whatever the blow had loosened above it—and, in fact, it seemed the whole room did:

he could feel it in every breath. On the table, the Iron Man's casing glowed as faithfully as always; given the surrounding chaos, it was almost amusing.

Loki thought he should kill Tony now and be done with it. He would have. As with everything, though, he couldn't, and as he remembered last night's warmth, every gentle touch they'd shared between then and now, all he felt at the thought was cold, aching loneliness. This, he found himself acknowledging for a millionth time, was why he was so loath to allow sentiment into his life: all it had ever done was complicate things. So there was his other option: leave. Just turn and walk out the door and never return, as he had been meaning to do for so long. It was neutral enough that it wouldn't end only in guilt and it would get him what he wanted, which was to be out of this mess he'd created for both himself and Tony because this hadn't been the plan, this had never been the plan, and for all he loved such reckless unpredictability, it was the last thing he needed. But was it? Or was it just his fear talking again?

He liked it here.

He crept away, catlike on his bare toes, and walked to the window, slowly, silently, and pressed a hand to the glass, where, with a faint wash of green light, the cracks vanished, leaving a clear view of the ocean-blue sky. Then, just as quietly, he went to retrieve all the blades: first the four strewn around the room and then the one he'd left sticking out from the floor, which hadn't budged. He fixed all the holes, including the one in the mattress, and he tried to fix the burn marks. He cleaned as much blood as he could. The chair he willed with a hand-wave, floating it to its usual spot at the table, and the dust, or the dust that had settled, anyway, because everything in the air would have been a little more complicated than he cared for, disappeared into nothing with a regular cleaning spell; the other debris vanished accordingly.

He never bothered lining up all the objects that had skewed from the quakes, nor lifting the easel he hadn't seen fall and the scuffed canvas at its feet. Not his problem, honestly; he didn't want to think about it. None of this.

He paused there, lost in the view for a moment, and then went to take his clothes, but it was just as he bent to pick them up that he heard Tony stir: "Loki?" he mumbled into the sheets.

"Go back to sleep," Loki said, not looking away from the pile.

"I thought we..."

Loki dumped the clothes on the bed.

"... made up or... something." Tony squinted at him. "Are you still mad?"

"No," Loki said, sitting beside the clothes. "Go back to sleep, Tony. Please."

"You sound mad."

"I'm not. I'm just tired. Afraid. The usual. It's not you."

"Is it because of the... that? You know?"

Loki glanced up at him. "Which part? The angry sex or you screaming at me until I wanted to kill you and then myself even more?"

“I’m sorry,” Tony softly said.

“Leave it.” Loki tugged his underwear on. “Water under the bridge and all that. Say, what’s Pepper think about this? Did I just ruin your future marriage?”

“Not really. We’re... open. Open-ish. It’s fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Yeah, no, it’s fine. She’s fine with me doing stuff like this. Don’t worry about it.”

Loki took another look at him.

“Bad time to lose my temper,” Tony muttered, “wasn’t it? That was... terrible. You just kept going on and on and it was frustrating, but then I made you...”

“I suppose you made some good points. You’re right: I don’t want to hear them. Looking back, though, I think I needed that. Minus me panicking on the floor again, anyway.”

“I’m not the right person for this. Do you realize that?”

Yes. Yes, he did. It was a simple truth that neither of them were really equipped to handle the full weight of everything and these things would likely keep happening. They likely wouldn’t make it to somewhere they could actually accomplish something—nothing past the basic “you need to try to do whatever you can because otherwise you’ll land yourself a whole host of other problems besides the trauma,” which was all fine and true but not remotely enough. Tony was just Tony and these things were more complicated than just eating well and trudging through the day, certainly more than they could do together. But what other options did he have?

“There’s better help out there,” Tony said. “You don’t need to settle for some jackass who can’t put up with you in the middle of a crisis just because you happened to get along.”

“Jackass?” Loki said as he slid on the rest of his clothes. “That’s quite the understatement.”

“Coming from the guy who was about to let me bleed to death because I was rude?”

“You would have been fine. I missed the artery, remember?”

“Oh, yes! Very considerate of you.”

“Cheer up,” Loki said, dusting off his coat. “I’ll make you something to eat.”

“Didn’t you tell me you can’t cook?” Tony said.

“I lied.”

Tony looked understandably shocked; Loki smiled and then walked out.

Somewhere between all the exhaustion and the forgotten bliss of waking in each other’s arms, it seemed they’d overslept; it was nearly one and dead-silent. Tony, still a bit appalled and a bit dishevelled with the only shirt he’d had on hand—the one with a bloody slice through the collar—sat awkwardly in the couch by the kitchen and watched.

“Any plans today?” Loki asked as he paused to tie his hair up.

“I have a meeting later,” Tony said.

“Exciting!”

“Extremely.”

Like most things Loki did, his cooking was controlled chaos: eyeballing the ingredients, eyeballing the equipment, and nearly starting a grease fire—twice. But the finished product turned out perfectly fine somehow. He split it into two servings and brought it and two cups of coffee to the table.

“How’s your shoulder?” he asked, sitting.

“Fine. How are your balls?”

Loki gave him a sour smile. “That’s not fine,” he said, leaning to get a better look. “Good healing magic doesn’t leave a scar.”

“It’s fine,” Tony insisted.

“It’s not.” Loki pressed a hand to the scar. “Don’t move.”

Tony sighed and kept himself still for the duration of the spell. “Are you done now?”

“No.” Loki moved his hand to Tony’s sternum. “Take a deep breath.”

“What? No.”

“Tony.”

He breathed in slowly.

“This never healed right,” Loki said.

“To be fair,” Tony said, “it was hard to fix a giant hole in my chest.”

Loki healed that, too.

“Thank you,” Tony said.

“I’m sorry for my behaviour last night,” Loki said, looking up.

“The part where you literally almost killed me or the sex? ’Cause if it’s about the sex, then please don’t apologize for that because that was fantastic.”

“I take it back. I wish I hadn’t healed you.”

Tony bestowed upon him the most shit-eating of grins and then smugly took his coffee. “And have you got any plans of your own today?”

“I don’t know,” Loki said. “Run around aimlessly through the city, I suppose. I need to clear my head.”

“You gonna keep paying for things with gold or do you need some cash?”

Loki chuckled. “I’ll take my chances. I know where to look.”

“New York, man,” Tony said, rolling his eyes. “This place is crazy.”

“Ah, we fit right in, don’t we?”

“That we do.”

They did not say much else. The jokes, as expected, didn’t hold; it was still incredibly strange to be sitting together having breakfast-or-thereabout, what with all the bloodstains and missed bruises. All the tension. Everything considered, it was... nice. But a night like that wasn’t quick to go and it was difficult understanding how to feel. Anger wasn’t right; it had faded well before morning. Relieved? A bit: at least it was clear they didn’t plan on killing each other. Maybe even thrilled. Mostly numb and confused. This was good—incredibly strange, to be sure—but good. Wonderful, in fact. What did they do now, though? What was next after something like this?

No answer came.

Tony was the first to finish his food, and then he half-jogged back down to his room for a change of clothes. Loki didn’t wait for him; he stopped only to clean up and then he was out. It was a warm and vibrant day and he was in good enough spirits, so he was happy to walk. He never untied his hair and he had his sunglasses on and he decided that he must look very cool; it did not otherwise cross his mind that he was a bit exposed again, especially not with both of the sigils gone. No one could tell anything was wrong! It was just him and his little existential crisis.

(And it was seriously a sort of large one, to be honest, but as he was saying: no one could tell and he was otherwise fine.)

There weren’t really many places he felt like being but he didn’t want to stay in his room all day again, so he wandered around. He visited a park and he snuck into a tragically not-free museum afterwards, where he stayed for some time; it was a fun way to spend the afternoon, even if he thought that most of the artifacts were unremarkable. Someone else looking at some jewels with him said, “Dude, I mean this in the best way: you look like a Viking wizard.”

“I am,” Loki said.

This was sadly a passing conversation and the stranger only said, “Awesome!” before continuing to the next site of interest, but Loki remembered it for most of the rest of his exploration.

He distracted himself very well, in fact. As the hours went, he eventually found himself back at that bookstore: it was on the way to the compound and hard to walk past, perhaps in part because he could not remember the last time he had seen the purple-haired clerk that was there so often and he had sort of missed the strange charm.

She was busy opening piles of boxes when he came in; she looked up as the bell chimed and said, “Hey! It’s been forever. I missed you.”

“Am I that missable?” he said above a laugh.

“You are, in fact, in my list of top favourite customers.” She ripped another box open. “Top contributors to my surgery fund. I have a lot of extra profit thanks to you.”

“Oh! That’s wonderful.” Loki leaned over the counter. “Did you get new jewelry?”

“I did. You’re the first person to notice. I got this pierced last week”—she pointed to the bridge of her nose—“and I got a new ring for this.” She pointed to her septum. “I’ve had it for a while but I lost the old one so you couldn’t tell.”

“They suit you,” Loki said. They were all a matching black, just like everything on her ears; it looked good with the pale curls.

“Thanks.”

There were a few dozen unopened boxes left. “Well, I probably shouldn’t keep you. I’ll go browse.”

“Okay. I’m here if you need me.”

He didn’t really know what to get but he still needed to rebuild his collection somehow, so he checked all the aisles and picked up everything that caught his eye—two armfuls, to be exact. He also got some colourful bookmarks and, because why not, another notebook he would never fill.

He dumped everything on the counter.

The clerk stuck her head around the side of the mountain. “Ever thought about going to a library?”

“I like supporting authors,” Loki said.

She squinted at him.

“My entire collection of books was lost in a fire some time ago and I’m trying to fill the void left behind,” he said, deciding that she could probably see through him like glass. “And I like supporting authors.”

“Fair enough,” she said. For records’ sake, she scanned the items anyway.

“May I ask how much more you need for surgery?”

“’Bout a thousand. Uh, thousand and a half, maybe. Yeah, I know what you’re thinking: can’t believe you gotta pay for medical services, huh?”

It really was rather absurd, wasn’t it? Many things in life were: existence was a tragic joke and sometimes all they could do was try to laugh. He wasn’t sure what came over him then—maybe he was trying to distract himself or maybe it was just that it seemed funny to keep the questionably impulsive decisions going—but he supposed it didn’t matter; he counted out the dollars and formed approximately slightly too much gold by the clerk’s hand. “That should cover it, right?”

The clerk looked at him like he was out of his mind. “Hold on, you can’t just—no. I can’t take all that.”

“I have no need for it.”

“That’s a lot!”

“Honestly, I don’t have any need for it. I promise.”

She stopped, flustered, and then nearly started crying. “We don’t even know each other,” she said. “Oh my gods.”

“I hope everything goes well,” Loki said. “You have my blessing.”

“Thank you so much. I’m Hemlock, by the way.”

“Loki.”

“Loki! I thought I recognized you but I wasn’t sure. You are the kindest person I have ever met.”

“Not everyone would think so.”

“Well, I do. Stay safe, okay? I hope I see you again.”

“I’ll try my best.”

She helped him put everything in the tote and then waved him goodbye with a teary grin.

So that was that, and, thinking that he was probably on some kind of a roll, he also went to get some food for his room. Nothing special: some vegetables, some meat, and some rice to compensate for the fact that his glamour still detested him. Because Tony was right and he couldn’t keep paying for things with his otherwise useless hoard of semi-stolen Asgardian gold and a hysterical smile, he had to look around for smaller shops. Yes, he probably could have just asked Hemlock for change, but ah—too late for that.

There was no one when he returned and he had to teleport inside; luckily, it was not an issue. He made himself dinner and spent the rest of the evening working on a painting.

He was still not very sure why that night had ended the way it did and he pondered it over breakfast the next morning. Did this solve things between them? Tony’s blood between his fingers lay fresh in his memory—the way neither of them had even flinched; they would have killed each other just as easily. How many times did this have to keep happening before the result became something less favourable?

He wondered fleetingly what Tony would have said if he’d had a different form, and then he decided he’d best not know.

It was quiet for most of that day and the next. Tony appeared a few times to grab some things and, by the way, apologize for suddenly going AWOL and say it was very good to see him again; though he did not say so, he was obviously concerned about leaving him alone and relieved nothing had happened. Other than this, there wasn’t much. Loki did his thing with his art and stack of unread books, mostly fed himself, and so the week went.

Like everything, like all his other little griefs that had gradually resurfaced as he remembered each of Thanos’s scars, Loki found himself tormented by the fact that he had not let Tony see him as he really was, which, though still not perfectly real—forget about the tragedies written on his skins—

was real to him: he liked himself best like that and so it was as real as everything else. Realer than what he was right now. After the very unfortunate crotch hit, perhaps we should have taken the hint and stopped trying to appease others' expectations of his body to his own detriment, but, as usual, he hadn't; why risk it when he knew how unpleasant Earth was about these things? It had been good, in fact a bit better than the other route, but it did nothing to ease his chronic shame, and if he could not rid himself of every other agony, he still had his body and it wasn't like him to hide it.

Once, after dinner alone in his room again, he locked himself in the bathroom and stripped nude. Not in a sexual way—no; looking in the mirror, all he thought was that he looked rather beautiful and he was lucky that at least he liked his appearance. The runes on his chest were still visible and his hair fell nicely over his collarbone; he had a very healthy sort of look to his face that he hadn't seen in weeks. He looked, most of all, like one thing: he had his usual male genitals to match his usual male figure and that was it.

The truth was that, along with his inescapable difficulties digesting grains and milk, his glamour had not been able to hide his Jötunn anatomy; it was a very surface-level spell and although this did the trick to make its maintenance unconscious, it meant he was still very similar to his biological ancestors in certain ways. It meant that he had the same reproductive system, which, while familiar, differed in one way: he was both, with both sets of organs—and, incidentally, internal ovotestes, which were immune to crotch hits. This had nothing to do with the rest of his appearance, which had been chance, nor his gender, which was its own cluster of crap, and it often seemed such a minor thing overall that he still wasn't sure why anyone cared. Asgard, though quick to inform him that this was uncommon among the Æsir, had no issue, and neither did most cultures. But after one too many bad experiences—after too much violence and after the whole adoption thing came up and he suddenly decided that everything about him was very, very horrible, including but not limited to his very not-Æsir organ configuration, thank you—he simply shifted and forgot about it.

Sakaar, of course, had been too caught up in a great many other different kinds of bodies to give any damns, which was why he had liked it so much. He had felt like himself for a time, and all was well.

So anyway: this.

It was an easy shift that he didn't have to think much about, in part because he was only reverting to a default. He still looked exactly like before from the front, save for slightly wider hips that came prepackaged with the other female parts at no extra cost; he was just a bit more himself. But, as was the way with his constant fear of everything, he only thought about the things that had happened to him like this. He thought about his stupid adoption and how it had been responsible for every catastrophe in his life save a few. He thought about Tony. Damn Tony and damn all of this.

He was so upset by this entire situation that he started crying, and then he remembered how much he'd wanted to stop lying to the one person who could see past it all and started crying even harder, and then by the end of it he was a sobbing mess on the floor and imagining he was back there in bed again to spite himself. Everything was horrible and he wanted to die and he hated all of it. He wished Thanos had killed him. He wished he didn't keep falling for people. He wished he wasn't such a coward.

He wasn't kind with his hands, and he let all the little scrapes and marks in on purpose.

He told himself he deserved them, and so perhaps he wasn't surprised that, after lying awake in bed for hours with invisible bruises and a low sting inside him, he dreamt that he burned on the

starship. He awoke drenched in sweat and choking half to death on tears—couldn't breathe—and reached instinctively for Tony but there was no one there—couldn't breathe couldn't breathe couldn't breathe

He sat up and took a huge breath. "I was doing so well!" he sobbed into the bedsheets. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry!"

no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no

He collapsed into a little ball and kept sobbing.

The weight of it all was awful; the smoke that had torn up his lungs, the blood that had refused to leave his hands, the things he had listened to. All the screams. All the lies. He couldn't leave: they reminded him of this. There was the hell they'd put him through. The hell he'd put himself through. Every little death he'd endured in the name of power. Every year worse than the last. Everything. These scars didn't go. And so he eventually exhausted himself, but he couldn't fall asleep again; he couldn't do anything. He needed air. He needed something. With his cold sweat skin and his damp cheeks, he dragged his body out of bed and shakily left the room.

It was four-seventeen when he passed the clock down the hall. He meant to go outside, but, like it had been expected, the door to Tony's workshop was leaking blue light; without much thought, he knocked.

The door opened. "What—" Tony looked him over, eyes wide. "Hey, what's going on? Are you okay?"

No, not really; Loki tried to say the words but could only shake his head.

"Do you need anything? Can I—"

Loki hugged him. Very hard. He did not let go. He started crying again.

"Okay," Tony said, reaching to return the embrace. "Do you want to come sit down? I can get you a blanket. God, you're soaking wet."

"I can't breathe," Loki sobbed into his shoulder.

"Remember you're safe here. Nothing can hurt you. Why don't you take my chair and I'll be with you in a second?"

Never—he didn't dare let go for even a second. The panic would start all over again. The fire burning under his skin would return. Tony's arms were so warm; everything faded beneath the touch.

"Or we could stand here," he said. "I don't mind."

Loki let go of him and then quietly shuffled over.

Tony eased the door shut and ducked behind the desk to search through some boxes. "I've only got this one," he said, pulling out a neatly folded square. "It's weighted, but that's okay with you, right?"

Loki nodded. Tony laid the blanket around him and then sat on the desk.

“I don’t understand,” Loki said. “I—I was fine and then I—”

“Hey, look at me,” Tony said. “You’re hyperventilating. Do you think you can take a few deep breaths?”

Loki counted slowly in his head.

“Progress isn’t linear,” Tony said. “When something like this happens, it doesn’t mean that you’ve failed. But you know that, don’t you?”

“I don’t want to stay awake all night again,” Loki said.

“I don’t think you will. Do you want me to make you some tea? We can keep talking.”

“You’re awake too. Why are you awake?”

“I went to bed really early last night and woke up fully rested a little while ago. I’m fine. Don’t worry.”

“I’m afraid I’ll spill.”

“There’s a travel mug somewhere with the other stuff. It’s got a lid on it. Is that okay?”

“Don’t leave me.”

“Of course not. You can come with me.”

Loki bunched the blanket around himself.

“Okay?” Tony said, moving to stand leaned against the desk.

No. Please. He didn’t want to move. He didn’t want to do anything. All of this was awful; he curled up tighter in the chair and watched the phosphorescent glow of the screens.

“Okay,” Tony said. “It doesn’t have to be now.”

“It’s not real,” Loki muttered to the light.

“Does it matter?”

No; maybe it didn’t. But he didn’t like that it terrified him regardless. He didn’t like that he was so afraid of something that wasn’t happening. He didn’t like that he couldn’t stop it.

“You can keep that if you want,” Tony said. “I don’t need it anymore.”

Loki struggled out of the seat with the blanket around him and followed him out. They went to the lounge because it was simple and quiet and because there was no one around to bother them. Loki sat in the couch and said nothing while Tony searched.

“Is chamomile okay?” he asked, pulling a thermos from one of the cupboards; he looked over and Loki nodded. “Alright.” He grabbed a tea bag and clicked the kettle on, and then joined him on the couch.

There wasn't really much to say and Loki didn't really want to speak anyway, so they sat there together in silence. He leaned on Tony's shoulder and tried to ease his tears. "Thank you," he said.

"I'm happy to be here with you," Tony said.

"I have a question."

"Yeah?"

"What would you say if... hypothetically, if I were to tell you that I'm physically male and female by default and I'm usually shifted to only male because it's less stressful than putting up with people's expectations of what I should look like as a man?"

"Hypothetically?" Tony said with a doubting but lighthearted look. "I would say that I don't judge people on shit like what they have in their pants and everyone who does is garbage."

"Hypothetically."

"Hypothetically, yeah."

The kettle clicked off and Tony went to fill the travel mug. Loki sat up with his feet on the couch and wrapped himself tighter in the blanket.

"There's a trick to this," Tony said, topping the mug with cold water from the tap, "if you don't want to wait hours to be able to drink it. Still gives it enough time to do its tea things but it cools off pretty fast after that." He screwed the lid on and shook it. "You don't usually take anything in your tea, right?"

Loki said nothing.

Tony took the mug and sat back down on the couch. "Do you want to talk about what happened?"

"No."

"Okay."

Loki took the mug and set it in his lap. "Is this too much?"

"No," Tony said. "Not at all. I was up anyway. I don't mind doing this for you."

"Thank you."

So they sat together for some time. Loki took the tea bag out after a bit and went to drop it in the compost and Tony fixed the blanket's slumping on one shoulder when he sat back down. Held an arm around him. Told him he used to get nightmares too and they did get better eventually; he promised. The fact that it had been so long since the last one was a good sign. This, too, would pass, and it was still true that this was not the first time something like this had ever happened to Loki and of course he knew all of this, but he did not complain: it was nice to hear it from another person. They sat together until the tea was gone and then they lied down and kept talking. Loki, without the energy or willpower to alter his weight, was careful not to lie on Tony and settled a bit to the side, nearer to the backrest. The blanket covered them well, and at some point they both fell asleep.

No amount of sleep was ever really enough when one fell asleep after sunrise, but it was better than nothing. They were holding each other when they awoke and someone's leg was brushing the floor; Loki's hair fell around his face like a curtain and Tony was drooling slightly. They couldn't get up for a while and didn't try.

"What time is it?" Loki mumbled into the blanket.

Tony strained to read his watch. "Eleven."

They did not get up until eleven-thirty.

Nothing much else happened that morning. Tony went to continue whatever he was doing in his workshop and Loki read in his room and that was it. They were still the only ones with a good reason to be around during the day, so the compound remained empty.

Sometime that evening, Tony knocked on the door. Loki sat up, startled, and said, "Come in."

"Hello!" Tony said, opening the door. "I have a favour to ask." He held up a medium-sized cardboard box. "Do you think you could deliver this to Peter? It's not crazy urgent but it'll take me forever if I try to get it to him myself, and I know you have better ways of getting around."

There was, truthfully, a bit embarrassingly, a part of Loki that had been anticipating something else—something on the topic of his unprompted hypothetics last night. But he wasn't too upset and he simply said, "Alright."

"Oh! Thanks. Can I borrow a pen? I'll write the address down."

Loki found one and joined him by the doorway. He took the box so Tony could write on the corner.

"You're not gonna have any trouble finding this, right?" Tony said as he pulled the pen away: there were coordinates under the other information, just in case.

"I'm good with locations," Loki said.

"Alright then. Thanks again."

Loki glanced at the address and then tucked the box under one arm and warped away.

It was not the most pleasant task in the universe, but he had no major difficulty locating the street. He avoided traffic and didn't get into too much trouble. He found the apartment building and he buzzed in easily. He found the unit and knocked thrice, and then he waited.

The door opened and a woman poked her head out. "Oh! I wasn't expecting anyone. What can I do for you?"

"I have mail for Peter," Loki said. "Is he here?"

"Not at the moment, but he lives here. What kind of mail?"

"I don't know. It's from Tony Stark."

"Tony Stark! Great. Well, why don't you come inside and set it down somewhere? I'm a little busy at the moment." She held up her hands, which looked dirty with raw meat.

“I-I’m not sure if I should—”

“I open my home to you. Please.”

Ohhhh no. Oh no. Absolutely not. No way. Looked like he wasn’t getting out of this, though; he tiptoed in with the package under an arm and shut the door behind him. “It’s a... very nice place you’ve got,” he said, trying not to let it show that he was currently dying inside.

“This old place?”

“It’s better than mine.”

“Hey, home is what you make of it. A nice place doesn’t mean anything if it’s not home.”

Of course. But this *was* a very nice place. Very cozy; much more inviting than his little bedroom at the compound that he had never actually bothered making his. “I think I see where Peter gets his charm from,” Loki said, half-joking, as he set the box down on the living room table.

“So where do you know him from? Is it a”—she wriggled her fingers—“Spider-Man thing?”

“Yes, I suppose. We met a few months ago.”

“And you are...”

“Loki.”

“You’re Loki! He’s been telling me about you.”

“Not all bad things, I hope.”

“No! Very, very good things. He thinks you’re wonderful.”

Loki laughed. “I think he’s wonderful too. He’s very kind.”

“You know, he should be here soon. Why don’t you stay for dinner?”

“Oh, no, I can’t.”

“Are you busy?”

“No, but I—”

“Come on, then. It’s fine. There’s enough for all of us.”

“But I have... special dietary needs?”

“Lay them on me.”

No, go away, this was not a good day for social interaction and he wanted to leave. But, with some hesitation, he dragged himself over to the kitchen. What had Tony said? They still weren’t really sure exactly what it was he had issues with. “I can’t have milk,” he said, deciding to play it safe, “or grains.”

“Looks like you’re in luck, then. It’s just chicken and vegetable soup. No milk, no grains, and you can have a second bowl instead of bread.”

“Oh.”

“I’m May, by the way. I don’t know if Peter’s said anything about me.”

“You’re his… aunt?”

“The coolest aunt in the world.”

The door opened suddenly. “This dude tried to mug me today!” Peter said as he closed it. “And I was like, ‘Look, man, I’m a broke teenager, I’ve got like two quarters and a piece of gum’ but he wasn’t having it and I had to friggin’ fight him off ’cause he pulled a knife on me which was absolutely nuts, I mean, who pulls a knife on a kid—”

“I told you not to go in unsafe neighbourhoods!” May said. “Peter, you could have been killed.”

“No, it was on a totally normal street in broad daylight and he got arrested like two minutes later but holy shit Loki.”

He waved. “I came to deliver something but apparently I’m staying for dinner now.”

Peter dumped his things on the couch. “What were you delivering?” he asked, picking apart the box.

“I have no idea. Tony wasn’t very descriptive.”

“It’s from Mr. Stark?” Peter exclaimed. “He was working on some mods for me. For the Spider-Man thing.”

“I hope you like them.”

Peter sprinted to his bedroom with the box and then sprinted back out to the kitchen. “Is dinner ready?”

“Twenty more minutes,” May said.

“Twenty! Are you trying to starve me?”

Loki chuckled.

“Okay, I need to go figure everything out anyway,” Peter said, making for his bedroom once more. “Loki, do you want to come with me?”

Sure; why not? He followed him out.

“So what’s happening?” Peter asked as he inspected the tech in the box. “Other than you staying for dinner apparently.”

“Oh… things.”

“Good things?”

“It’s complicated.”

“I heard you’re painting now. How’s that going?”

“According to Tony, it’s going very well, but I think he might just be saying that to make me feel better. But it’s going well enough.”

“Cool! See, I’m not much of an art guy so it’s really great that you can do that. What kind of things do you paint?”

“Whatever I feel like.”

Peter held up a note to read. “Yeah, I just like my tech stuff,” he said. “But I guess you could probably call it art; it’s all about creating, isn’t it?”

“It is.”

Peter stuck the note back in the box and then laid everything on the bed. It wasn’t much—just some little mechanical odds and ends and what looked like extra parts for something. He sat beside the pile and continued his inspection. “I’m glad to see you again, though,” he said. “Really. You’re fun to have around.”

“So are you,” Loki said.

“Thanks!”

The bed looked sturdy enough, but it didn’t seem quite as sturdy as everything at the compound and he had a feeling it wouldn’t hold his weight very well. He cautiously sat on the edge. “So I told you what’s happening with me but you won’t tell me what’s happening with you?”

“I stopped a bank robbery last week!” Peter said. “And I didn’t make it worse! It went great, actually. It was great. Also, I swear my voice is dropping again but I think I *might* just be imagining it. Or maybe I’m not? I don’t know.”

“Ask me again the next time we see each other,” Loki said. “I’ll tell you if it is.”

“Okay.”

Loki leaned in to look at everything. “Did Tony make your armour too?”

“Yeah! The new suit he got me is absolutely insane—there’s just so much stuff on it and it’s all like nanotech or something—and it’s awesome. I still haven’t used everything.” Peter set down whatever he was holding. “The spider legs! That was so cool. I can’t believe he added that. He also fixed a bunch of safety features.”

“It’s good he looks out for you like that,” Loki said. “You’re still so... young. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“Yeah, I don’t know where I’d be without him. My first suit was, uh”—Peter laughed—“basically pyjamas. Definitely no safety features on that one.”

“Have you got any powers of your own?”

“A few. Super-strength, enhanced senses, uh, agility. Also, I can walk on walls.”

“You can walk on walls?”

“Yeah! I just stick. It’s crazy.”

“Alright, you need to show me.”

Peter leapt off the bed and went to climb up the far wall. He was perfectly horizontal, a bit like a flag. “Look! No hands.”

“Can you go on the ceiling?”

“Yeah, I can go on pretty much everything.” Peter continued to the ceiling. “Cool, right?”

“Extremely cool.”

“You’ve seen me do this before, haven’t you?”

“I believe so. But I thought it was part of the armour, honestly.”

“Nope, it’s all me.” Peter dropped to the floor. “A lot of people think it’s just the armour, actually, but it’s one of the things I can do by myself.”

“Must be useful,” Loki said with a smile.

“It’s so useful. I love it.” Peter sat back down. “You could do this, couldn’t you? ’Cause you can shapeshift. You could turn into a spider and follow me around. We’d be spider bros.”

“Spider bros! Of course. That would be wonderful.”

Peter did, after some more fiddling, eventually take the box and everything in it and relocate it to the table, where he had left his other tech—including the Spider-Man suit, which had been tucked neatly away in nano-storage. He was good with this: he pieced together all the new components and got it all running with no issue, and, pausing to make sure nothing was amiss, he tried it on. In the other end of the table Loki spotted a tiny metal snake stir from its slumber and blink at them both, as if to approve, and then curl into a pile again. Peter tucked the suit into its storage, evidently victorious, and leapt back onto the bed.

“Oops,” he said as either the mattress or the frame itself creaked loudly.

Loki stood and pretended nothing had happened.

“Hey, can you tell Mr. Stark thanks so much for all of this?” Peter said, sitting up. “In person, I mean, because yeah, I could thank him over the phone but that’s totally not enough, and I guess you still hang out a lot.”

Hanging out! Right. Just hanging out. Just two good friends who used to be enemies and literally tried to kill each other and then kissed and then had angry bloody paranoid breakdown sex and then somehow went right back to being good friends who talked about their feelings and slept in each other’s arms sometimes hanging out. Just some good friends friending it up like friends did and hanging out all friend-like. Hanging out, yes. Nothing to see here.

“I’ll tell him when I see him,” Loki said with a stiff smile.

“Thanks. I really appreciate it.”

Wait, why was he here, again?

There was a knock on the door. “Okay, you can come down now!”

Loki buried his face in his hands.

Peter went to double-check everything was in order and then left the room. “You alright?” he asked, a hand on the door.

“I’m having a moment,” Loki muttered into his palms.

“Oh. Um. Okay.”

“I’ll... join you in a minute.”

“Yeah, of course. Take all the, uh, take all the time you need. Sorry.”

“It’s not a good day.”

“Okay.”

Peter left the door open; he awkwardly scurried off without another word, although as he sat in the kitchen, Loki overheard him say something about anxiety and not putting any pressure on anyone please. He stared up at the ceiling. Damn this little backwater planet and all its people who cared too much about him; why couldn’t they mind their own business? But he felt awful thinking that about a child who was just trying to be kind and, suddenly very ashamed of himself, he went and sat back down on the bed. He ought to have that dinner.

He smoothed out his coat and fixed his collar and then joined Peter at the dining table.

“I love the coat,” May said across the table. “Is that velvet?”

“It is!” Loki said. “And silk.” He opened it a bit to show the inner fabric. “I think this is one of the nicest things I’ve ever owned.”

“It’s gorgeous.”

He smiled. “Thank you.”

Peter, as usual, was already busy with what looked like a second bowl.

“So what do you get up to?” May asked.

“You know, I’m not sure. It depends on the day.”

“But no Avengers or anything like that.”

“No, not really.”

“Apparently he paints,” Peter said. “I didn’t know he can paint!”

“I can’t,” Loki said. “You haven’t even seen my art! It’s terrible.”

“Art is subjective,” May said.

Loki made to argue and then realized she was right.

“It doesn’t need to be good,” she said. “As long as you’re having fun.”

Somehow, he didn’t trust the chair, either. Maybe he was just afraid he’d leave a bad impression; nothing ruined a night like snapping a chair in half because he overestimated its durability. He had never actually snapped a chair in half and was quite certain he was worrying for the sake of worrying, but he stayed at the edge anyway.

“Thank you for the dinner,” he said.

“You’re welcome.”

It was pretty good dinner. Once he got past all the shy fear and guilt, he realized he didn’t mind being here as much as he thought he did.

The rest of the night was easy.

‡

Tony’s time at the compound was infrequent, but they eventually ran into each other over the next few days. Loki relayed Peter’s ecstatic thank you, they shared some news, and then they parted ways again.

As the week passed, they found themselves having a dinner of their own in the lounge. Just them; Tony scrolled through some miscellaneous things on the holographic displays and Loki ate in silence and it was mostly well.

“Someone once told me that healing from trauma is a lot like healing from grief,” Tony said to him between a recount of some business matter. “It’s not the same, but it’s similar. You deal with it in a similar way.”

“Often,” Loki said. He distractedly cleaned his knife and twiddled it, blade-first.

“How have you dealt with grief?”

“The same way I dealt with trauma: I buried myself in anger and ignored it.”

Tony gave him a brief smile. “Well, that doesn’t sound healthy.”

“The land of unprocessed emotions claims its ruler,” Loki solemnly said, balancing the knife on a finger. “What do you think would happen if I dealt with everything I’ve ever been through? I would lose my bloody mind. Thanos hardly scratches the surface.”

“But you know it never goes away like that,” Tony said. “Not really. It just eats at you.”

Loki set the knife on the table. “Why do you think I’m so strict about consent with my lovers?”

Tony was silent for a moment; he looked like he’d walked in on something he shouldn’t have. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“I know you’re right,” Loki said, sliding the knife to rest beside the plate.

“Do you think you can get through this by yourself?”

“No.”

Tony leaned back in his seat. “Have you ever thought about therapy? Like, professional?”

“Peter suggested that once. I suppose it might be helpful, but ah—who on this planet is equipped to deal with these kinds of things?”

“I’ve got a small list. At the end of the day, it’s still the same theory; it just takes more effort. So you’ve got more shit to deal with than the average person. Should that make you a lost cause?”

“Now, why would you ask me that when you know what I’ll say?”

“It was rhetorical.”

“Or was it?”

“Should I take your witty responses as a good sign?”

“I don’t think I’m qualified to tell you what you should do.”

Tony held back an amused sigh.

“It’s quiet these days,” Loki said.

“Yeah.”

“Any reason?”

“Oh, you know. Drama. The Avengers pretty much just got back together out of spite while Thanos and the Asgard thing were still an active problem and now there’s nothing. Which is great, actually; I think we could all use the break. But that’s it. Everyone’s mostly off doing their own thing again.”

“And you?”

“Yeah, I’m super busy here.”

“Surely I’m not meant to believe that.”

Tony shrugged. “There’s good equipment here,” he said. “I don’t have anything set up at the cabin yet. After all the dust settled, I just needed something... familiar. Time alone with grease on my hands, that sort of thing. I don’t really get the chance anymore.”

“You didn’t want to leave me alone.”

Tony was silent.

“You can’t keep doing this,” Loki said.

“Uh, yes I can. Look, I enjoy your company. I wouldn’t have stayed if I didn’t. I’m happy to throw a few weeks of my life at you.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“Do you think so? I’ve got a million other things I could and should be doing right now and instead I chose to sit down and have dinner with you. I don’t do that lightly.”

They had had this conversation before; why was it so difficult to take to heart?

Tony pushed his plate away. “Give yourself some credit,” he said. “It’s not easy to get to this side of me.”

It was a good side. There was something especially rare about achieving this sort of thing with someone who seemed to thrive on surface relationships and snark; it made it all so much sweeter. And so it occurred to Loki again that he had wasted his chance: why hadn’t he been more honest when he could?

“What are you thinking?”

What wasn’t he thinking? Hoping to distract from his more specific concerns, he answered, “It would be nice if I settled on a consistent opinion of myself instead of always feeling either like the greatest person alive or like dirt, sometimes within the same minute.”

“Oh, man. Same.”

Who cared, anyway? He thought he looked fantastic most of the time. So he’d had a few rough experiences like this; he would always be finding trouble no matter what form he took. But fear never stopped at just one thing and he’d had no issue obsessing over a variety of other old and unremarkable worries as the days went by: of course he could find a way to let this ruin him.

He cleaned off both of their plates with a quick spell and then went to return them to the pantry.

Maybe this was a bad idea, and damn if it certainly didn’t seem like one: he had his little rules and he had the little fortress around his heart because he knew it was *always* a bad idea. But he could deal with the consequences later, and, turning back, he let his battered conscience lead him and sat beside Tony. “Would you mind trying again?” he asked; they were very near like this, near enough that there was no need to elaborate. “It’s been bothering me so much.”

“Once more, with passion?”

“I’m serious.”

“I know. Your body, right?”

“I want to stop lying so much.”

“I don’t have any plans tonight. I’d be happy to. Shall we take it to my room? Play some music?”

“Tony, this isn’t a business transaction. Calm down.”

He laughed, and then he got out of his chair and pushed it in. “So is that a yes on my room? Or are we doing yours? Oh—I bet that fur feels wonderful.”

“Don’t even think about it. Do you have any idea how hard it is to get stains out of that?”

Tony’s laugh turned hysterical. “Surely your magic is no match for a little dried j—”

“How do you put up with yourself?” Loki muttered, pulling him in by the waist, although he was laughing too.

“I don’t,” Tony said, still laughing, and then he leaned in for a kiss only for Loki to block him with a hand.

“Absolutely not! You have food on your teeth.”

(To be clear, Tony was struggling to breathe at this point from laughing so hard, not to mention redder than a tomato on overdrive.)

“You are a travesty,” Loki said, going right ahead with a cleaning spell between the two of them; Tony, once he escaped the laugh attack and caught his breath, immediately claimed the parried kiss.

“You like it!” he said, smiling, as he pulled away.

Loki rolled his eyes and tightened his grip. “Take a deep breath.”

“Why—”

They blinked into Tony’s bedroom, and he nearly collapsed at once under the sudden shift in surroundings.

“I told you to take a deep breath,” Loki said, steadying him.

“You did that on purpose!” Tony cried.

“Maybe I did,” Loki said, pushing him down onto the bed with a wicked grin. “We’ll never know.”

“You jerk!”

“The worst.”

“How could you?”

“Smugly, of course.” Loki switched the music on with a flick of his hand, and then he joined him on the bed—never inelegantly, rather with a graceful dive. “Are you seething?”

“I am seething so hard,” Tony said, but he clearly didn’t mean it—no, none of this; his smile was so bright it looked like he might just melt with joy. There was nothing like this, and as they sank into the bed, hands, legs, everything tangled into one, the dimmed playlist echoing from the other end of the room faded into, suitably enough, Queen’s “Somebody to Love.” Tony recognized the opening immediately and couldn’t help but laugh, so genuinely amused his face went red, and Loki laughed too, holding the sound for a second before muffling it with another kiss, and then they were pushing into each other again, whispering little praises and adorations as Freddie serenaded them

from the speakers—and for just that moment, with only that earthly bliss before them, there wasn't a single ill in their lives that could dampen their mood.

Chapter End Notes

bruh

Different, Not Worse

Chapter Summary

Roots are upended. An old fear shows itself.

Chapter Notes

Good news: I'm pretty much almost done with the draft and can probably start updating more often-ish soon-ish. Or I might not. Or I might! Also, I have a new drawing tablet and am still taking requests for illustrations.

Bad news: my outline fell apart and I completely winged the rest of the story, everyone is out of character, and my author inferiority complex is acting up again but it's okay because I'm ignoring the entire MCU and just yolo swagging everything because life is too short to lose sleep over how perfect/imperfect a superhero fanfiction I wrote for fun is and also that's what editing is for. Don't talk to me about anything released after Infinity War because it does not exist and is none of my concern. :)

Worse news: I'm a bastard 🙄

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

The flames settled slowly; the smoke was gentle around his body. In the ship's grand hall, alone beneath the thin snowfall of ash, Thanos tended to a garden.

"Hard work," Thanos said, lowering his tools to wipe the sweat off his forehead. "Will you come help me, Silvertongue?"

Loki peered down at the blooming vegetables. "No," he said. "Not today."

"Shame," Thanos said. "Have you seen your brother?"

"I don't want to speak with you," Loki said.

Thanos had on a straw hat and simple clothing, all of them stained with dirt and sweat. He looked furious beneath the hat's brim. Demonic. "What?"

Loki turned and left the room; he felt himself being followed and hurriedly shut the door behind him. It did not open again.

Stop. Stop. Stop. Stop. Stop. Stop. Stop.

His head was fuzzy. Looked like he'd picked some of the flowers without remembering; they fell out of his hands and crumbled behind him as he walked. The ship was in a better state here, with

unmarred walls and mossy floors free of debris; the fires hadn't reached. Feathers strewn between the greenery. Cold air on his neck. Citrus. Everything and nothing. He continued down the corridor, stepping lightly on the metal, and saw a gathering in one of the rooms, but he decided not to interrupt and, turning back with sudden lucidity, he went to find his bedroom instead.

They couldn't reach him here.

He'd left in a hurry last time; the place was a mess. Home, though. There was a painting beside the bed that he ought to finish and someone had been trying to call him, but he paid it all no mind: he turned on the radio he had never owned, wrapped himself in the beautiful fur coat he had lost many centuries ago, and laid himself down on the sheets and did nothing. There was no ceiling: the ship was open to the infinite void. It felt a bit like it had been printed onto a flat surface, but it looked lovely regardless and the twisted clarity was refreshing.

They couldn't reach him here.

Turning onto his side, he found there was no outer wall now and the room opened to a busy night market. "Do you mind?" he muttered. He sat up and turned to look at the window, which was large and curtained. No thanks—it was raining. Damn it.

Thanos knocked on the door. "I need your help!"

"Piss off," Loki said, climbing out of the bed. He went to the empty room past what should have been the bathroom and sat in the very old recliner in the centre. There was still no ceiling; glancing up, he saw a cold, early dusk sky. He stared at his reflection in the mirror, as if it would tell him something useful. Bruises. Chains. He looked like shit. This wasn't worth it. This wasn't worth it. This wasn't worth it. This wasn't worth it. This wasn't worth it. This wasn't worth it. This wasn't worth it. This wasn't worth it.

"You know it wasn't your fault, though, right?"

You liar.

"Stop it."

Looking away, he saw his younger self raise an eyebrow at him in the mirror—younger, but not much so; before the fall and not earlier. Shorter hair. Brighter eyes. Fewer lines.

"It wasn't."

He stared straight through the glass. "Why do you sound like Tony?"

"Sorry," his reflection said in its proper voice.

They had been here before; the ship flickered away to the little mildew-scented cell. He deserved to be here. He failed them all. Family. Friends. Lovers. The gap between worlds should have taken him. The blood should have run dry. The fire should have burned his soul to ash. Failure after failure after failure.

"Stop it," said his younger self again, sitting beside him in the dark corner. "What would he think if he saw you now?"

Who?

“Take your pick.”

“I don’t understand,” he said.

There were no walls or bars or anything; they could both walk out if they wanted to. The whole thing felt sort of... calm. Where were they? He could see trees beyond the stone.

“It wasn’t your fault,” the boy said. “Stop it.”

“Are you mad at me?”

“Of course not.”

He couldn’t be sure; a dagger had weaved itself into his grip, unnoticed. As the dread subsided, he never quite put it down. “Stop what?” he muttered.

“Are you eating enough?”

Mostly.

“It’s not your fault they died,” the boy said. “It’s not your fault Thanos found you. It’s not your fault you couldn’t please Father.” He paused. “It’s not your fault you feel so deeply.”

Loki plunged the dagger into the boy’s heart.

The cell flickered to the ship again. The windows were vast; between their starry wonder, the reflection was just as vibrant. They stood together at the helm.

“This isn’t a good idea,” Loki said, still, as the frozen image of Earth stuttered in a field of static at one of the displays.

“They’ll forgive you,” said his boy self beside him, no sign of injury.

“No, they won’t.”

“Why not?”

The garden that had been there earlier was gone: there was just a long and empty cavern of metal gaping back at them. A smoke smell with no clear origin. A feeling that they needed to leave. As the violet settled, though, there was nothing.

“I didn’t want him to find it,” Loki said. “I thought I could protect it if I took it with me.”

“Quick thinking,” the boy agreed. “Good work.”

“But he still took it.”

“And killed everyone on the way out.”

Loki sat on the steps and stared at his bloody hands.

“What do you think would have happened if you’d left it?” the boy asked.

“He would have taken it. He wouldn’t have killed everyone on the way out. Problem solved.”

“No, thank you.”

“Tea?”

“No.”

Tony slid the plate across the counter. “You okay? You look like you just saw a ghost.”

“I’m fine.”

“Alright.”

Loki stared down at the food.

“So while that all’s going on,” Tony said as he tidied everything, “why don’t you go check out New Asgard? I think it would be good for you. I’m worried about your lack of social interaction.”

What an excellent idea! Out of sight, out of mind, right?

“Have I got anywhere to stay if I wish to spend the night?”

“You should! There are a lot of empty houses. Or you could bribe your way into someone’s guest room, I’m sure. They’d all welcome you.”

He didn’t want to go. He felt so, so calm here. Tony was so kind to him. But what else was he supposed to do?

“You’re not leaving for good, are you?” Tony asked, glancing at him.

“No,” Loki said, “I don’t think so. I just need some time away.”

“Okay. Take care.”

He finished his food and then quietly headed down to his room to grab some things.

Well, he’d expected this, hadn’t he? How many times did he have to fuck his future self over before he stopped leaving consequences for later? How many times did he have to tell himself never to bed the same person twice, let alone a friend? What a reckless fool he was; he knew this would happen and tried it anyway. This was all on him. He took his notebook and his pile of unread novels and he took the obnoxious stuffed dragon in the bed and, for some reason, he took the blanket Tony had given him, and then he warped away without a second look.

New Asgard was something of a fishing village, a cozy pockmark of tiny houses along the Norwegian shoreline at walking distance from town. It was small, small enough that he could cross its length in mere minutes, but it had a lively charm to it; although he felt very alone suddenly appearing at its border, it already seemed a bit like home. There was muffled music playing from somewhere and he could smell the ocean.

He walked down to the dock. It looked like it had been recently refurbished and expanded; there was some wood whose texture didn’t quite match up with the rest, although it was all in pristine condition. A few boats had been anchored nearby. Beyond it, there was only blue.

“Didn’t expect to see you here,” he heard Natasha say behind him; he looked over his shoulder.

“I’ve been busy,” he said. “I didn’t have the chance to stop by.”

“It’s a nice place, isn’t it?”

“It’s wonderful.”

Natasha’s ice-coloured hair was a forest of curls today; it seemed she’d only ever been manually straightening it and had simply stopped, leaving her with a texture very similar to what his was supposed to be. Her fiery roots suited the look. She looked a bit like she knew something, which was worrying considering the only thing she should have known was that he’d attempted suicide twice in a week. Maybe also that he often starved himself out of guilt and that light fixtures hated him; he was quite certain she’d learned of both at some point. But nothing else. Or so he had hoped, anyway: “I heard you tried to kill Tony,” she casually recalled as she sat on the dock’s edge.

“I attacked him in the middle of a heated argument,” Loki said, sitting beside her. “It’s not the same.”

“Did I sound accusing?”

He said nothing.

“I’m glad no one was seriously hurt,” she said. “That’s all.”

“Thank you.”

“Were you planning on staying? Or are you just visiting for the day?”

“I’d like to stay awhile.”

She nodded. “I’ll set you up with a bed. I should have something for tonight, but if I don’t, you’re free to stay with me. In the meantime... could you go see if Thor’s back? He’s been worried about you. Just let him know you’re alive.”

Loki said nothing again.

“Long night?” Natasha asked.

“I have no idea what I’m doing with myself,” Loki said.

“Welcome to the club.”

He sighed.

“I’ll listen if you need to talk,” she said. “I think most of the people here would. Don’t be afraid to speak up.”

“Why is everyone so obsessed with how I feel?”

“They’re not. It’s just a normal amount of concern; no one’s obsessing. You might not be used to it.”

He stared out at the waves. "I suppose I'm not," he said. What would Natasha tell him if she knew? Would it even be worth it? She'd probably laugh: how did he of all people fall for Tony Stark of all people?

"Do you want me to show you around?" she asked.

"It's a small place. I can figure it out."

"If you say so."

Loki moved to lean on a knee. "Why were you always the most forgiving?"

"I don't judge people on their worst mistake," Natasha said.

"That's very kind of you."

They sat together for a time, watching the waves. It was nice; although the dark expanse felt a bit foreboding and the silence was rather uncanny, it didn't bother him much. He found it like the dock at the compound: just another strange exception that he took for all its worth. There was no telling when or if he would be able to do this again, and so he was not in much of a rush to leave. But he got up eventually; behind him, as he trudged back up the little hill, Natasha said nothing.

He went to find Thor's house, which was an easier task than expected given that it said "Thor's House" on the door, and then he knocked thrice and waited nervously.

The door opened. "Hi," said Bucky.

"Well, you're not Thor," Loki said.

"Nope. Just his house-sitter. Were you looking for him?"

"Not really."

"Do you want to come in?"

"May I?"

"Yeah, what do you think he's gonna do? Kick his little brother out?"

"I hope not."

"He wouldn't do that."

Loki stepped inside and closed the door behind him.

"So what's going on between you and Tony?" Bucky asked as he strolled back to the kitchen table and sat. "Drama?"

"No. Nothing. Nothing is going on."

"Weird. I heard you made out."

"Where did you hear that?" Loki exclaimed, shooting him a horrified look.

“I heard it from Sam. I don’t know where he got it from. Apparently someone was snooping on the security cameras.”

“What? Why?”

“Why does anyone do anything? I don’t know.”

“So does everyone know?”

“Not yet.”

“Not yet?”

“There’s... really no such thing as secrets in this gang.”

Loki threw up his hands in defeat.

“To be fair,” Bucky mused, “he is pretty good-looking. I can see where you were coming from.”

Loki left his boots by the entrance and then went to join him. It was a nice place; it was rather tiny and looked hastily decorated, with only some chairs and shelves and a couch in the living room and some assorted appliances, but it felt inviting. There was an unlit fireplace at the end.

“Are you doing any better since the last time I saw you?” Bucky asked.

“I’m still alive,” Loki said.

“How’s Pete?”

“He seems well.”

Bucky leaned back. “Do you want anything to eat?”

“I just had breakfast,” Loki said.

“Yeah, time zones, huh?”

There was a woven tablecloth; it was brown, with intricate geometry stitched between the seams, and it looked like it wasn’t getting washed enough. The dock’s edge was visible through the kitchen window. Watching the shore, Loki suddenly realized he... didn’t like where he’d ended up. It felt a bit like he’d been burning out over the last few years—lost the power and excitement and then somehow landed himself in a boring little village fit for brooding. Lost everything. No grand schemes, no graceful escapes, no theatrics. No variety. No adventure. Nothing. And speaking of this village: why did it feel like it should have been better? It did. He’d made another wrong turn somewhere, hadn’t he?

“I don’t think this turned out right,” he said.

Bucky paused to consider what exactly this was. Then he leaned on an arm and asked, “What makes you think that?”

“I feel it.”

Bucky glanced at the dock through the window.

“There should have been more survivors,” Loki said. “We should have had a better home. It wasn’t supposed to be like this.”

“What’s wrong with this one?” Bucky asked, looking at him again.

“It’s... small. It feels like it was crammed into the tail end of a schedule.”

“But they built it just for you. They didn’t move everyone into some dying old town and call it a day; they actually sat down and put in all this time and effort and made something from scratch. Is that bad?”

“I think I changed something I shouldn’t have touched. This would have been better without my interference.”

“Would half the universe be alive without it?”

“They would have found a way.”

“But you wouldn’t be alive. A lot of other people probably wouldn’t be alive.”

“Good.”

Bucky looked like he wanted to frown but couldn’t really find the energy. “I don’t think you could have known what would happen,” he said, matter-of-fact. “You can’t blame yourself for every crazy chain of events out there.”

“I barely know you,” Loki said; that morning’s dream and his quips on the butterfly effect drifted briefly through his mind as he further processed the response. “Who are you to tell me what I cannot do?”

“I was the guy who went to find Thor when you almost died,” Bucky said. “I waited with him for hours until he was sure you were okay.”

“Why?”

“I wanted to do something good for once.”

“Or did you just owe me like everyone else?”

Bucky’s eyebrows raised. “Do you think everything people do for you is just because they owe you?”

“I know so,” Loki said with a thin smile.

“There’s such a thing as kindness,” Bucky said. “People can be... kind. It’s not all because they feel obligated. I guess that’s probably been the case before.”

“Often enough.”

“I don’t want to be like that. I was just tired of only hurting people. I did what I did for you because I could, and I’m glad you’re here.”

Then why did it feel like such a lie? Bucky seemed honest; there was nothing written on his face and his tone was simple. There was no good reason for him to tell anything but the truth, and the truth was warm and candid. It was comforting. Too comforting. There was no way.

“Do you think I’m lying?” he said, leaning back once more.

“No.”

Bucky managed a brief smile. “You know you’re pretty easy to read,” he said. “I know that look. It’s fine.”

“I don’t know who to trust,” Loki said.

“It’s hard, isn’t it? Feels like everyone’s out to kill you or worse.”

Well, better safe than sorry; it would only take once. Better he stay a bit rude than leave himself open to fire. It was easier like this.

Beneath its sleeve, Bucky twiddled his metal fingers. “Please don’t take it personally if I ever lash out at you,” he said. “I’m still not quite all there. I don’t mean it.”

“Likewise,” Loki said, watching the joints slide past each other.

Bucky tucked his hands in his pockets. “What are you going to do now?”

“Run away from my problems.”

“Yeah?”

“Maybe even cry.”

“Sounds fun.”

Extremely. Thinking more about it, Loki found he felt very much like he’d felt as he first saw Thanos amid the flames: he should have died, and he should have let everyone else solve whatever followed. He had planned it knowing he wouldn’t be able to cope if Thanos came after him twice, right down to making it look like an accident—like he’d just done something stupid and gotten himself killed with no further speculation. He had changed course mid-sentence because of Thor and gone for revenge because he didn’t know how else to justify his survival, and the truth, even now, was that killing Thanos had not done a thing: it had been nothing more than fleeting reassurance. It didn’t alleviate the grief, nor all the once-forgotten pain brought back by the sight of them. It didn’t keep him from falling just as easily as the last time. It had only shifted the tragedy a bit: taken the weight off everyone else and given it to him and Asgard’s crumbling remains.

And then there was Tony.

Bucky leaned forward once again, arms crossed on the table. “You know, sometimes you don’t have the chance to think about your decisions before you make them,” he said. “You just go. You pick something at random because you have to. If it turned out wrong, that’s not on you.”

“I had a fair bit of time to think about whether I wanted to just kill myself and be done with it or elaborately fake my death again instead.”

“Did you honestly?”

No. He had spent the entire attack considering his aftermath, but when it came down to him and Thanos in the same room together, it had turned to a matter of seconds: what if he switched himself out with an illusion and ran? What if he *tried* this time, instead of surrendering as soon as it got rough? No other thoughts—nothing; it had all happened so quickly that he’d just chosen in a panic.

“I don’t know,” he said, wondering how many times he had done so before. The pressure was too much; for fear of indecision, he often ended up choosing the worse option. But maybe Bucky was right. Was this worse? Or was it just different?

“You need to let yourself be,” Bucky said.

“I don’t want to let myself be.”

“There’s a difference between wanting to and needing to.”

Loki narrowed his eyes. “Are you trying to outwit me?”

“I’m just trying to be helpful. Tell me if I need to step back.”

“I... don’t mind.”

Bucky nodded. “It’s good to hear these things from other people sometimes,” he said. “Even if you know them.”

What would Tony say about all this? Could Bucky tell? Oh, gods; Loki kept his gaze on the tablecloth to hide the fear. He couldn’t do this. None of this. No ~~torture~~. No ship. No love. He couldn’t let this be. He did this. Stop lying, damn it: it was his fault down to the last detail.

“Are you sure you don’t want anything to drink?” Bucky asked.

“Please don’t talk to me,” Loki softly said.

“Oh. Sorry.”

They sat there in silence, neither daring to say anything. The dread was sinking again. The weight was getting too much. This wasn’t okay. He couldn’t do this. Stop. Stop ~~stop stop stop stop~~ stop please ~~stop~~ he couldn’t do this he couldn’t do this he

started sobbing, face in his elbows on the kitchen table.

“I guess that was coming,” Bucky finally risked. “Do you want to sit up, try some grounding exercises?”

“I hate myself.”

“Ha. Me too. But that’s not you talking. Not really.”

“Stop lying to me.”

“I don’t lie these days.”

“Everyone lies.”

“I’m not everyone. Do you need me to leave or can I stay here?”

What did it matter? They all knew what he was like at this point. One breakdown more or less wouldn’t change what they thought of him. He was pathetic. Weak. He wasn’t what he had once been and he never would be. That smug I’m-better-than-you wasn’t coming back.

Bucky got up and moved to the couch.

Great—this was a damn good first impression, wasn’t it? Loki glared at him through the tears.

“There’s a nice spot out back,” Bucky said, “if you feel like it. It’s quiet.”

No, not really; thank you for the offer, though. Loki laid his head down once more and continued crying. He wasn’t even sure why he was crying. Fear? Anger? Or was it just plain hopelessness? It didn’t make much of a difference.

This probably would have happened anyway: it was just a question of who saw him this time.

Bucky did not say anything else, nor did he really pay any attention to it all. He didn’t ask what the problem was or insist they try the grounding exercises. He just read something on his phone and tried not to cause a ruckus. Beside him, his metal hand flexed and unflexed in a nervous rhythm, like he was still struggling to understand its presence. The rest of him looked lost in a daydream.

Maybe they could get along, honestly; Loki peered at him again from across the room. Then, silent, he crept out of the chair and went to find something to drink. There wasn’t much: just a carton of milk (no thanks), some little glass bottles of assorted locally made fruit juice, and what looked like the remains of ale from who knows where. Very typical, actually. He felt bad digging around like this, but he hoped Bucky was right that no one would mind and took a bottle of juice.

“Since when do you house-sit for Thor?” he asked, kneeling the fridge shut.

“Since he asked me not to let any of the food go bad while he’s off fishing,” Bucky said.

“He doesn’t fish.”

“He does now. Said it’s a good distraction.”

“Has he had any luck?”

“Yeah. A lot of the meat here is just fish from him and whoever else he brings. He thinks we might end up doing this commercially someday.”

“Wow.” Loki inspected the juice. Yep: locally made, presumably in the town next door. This probably wouldn’t try to kill him. He unscrewed the cap. “Will he be back today?”

“Today or tomorrow,” Bucky said. “I don’t know for sure.”

The tears weren’t even dry yet. Loki rubbed the salt from his cheeks with a tired sigh.

“You don’t fish, do you?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Oh. Okay.”

Loki sat and tried the juice. It was good, and he allowed himself to enjoy it with some reluctance. “Do you like living here?” he asked.

“Yeah. It’s... peaceful. I like where I was staying before, but I like it here too. The people are nice. The scenery is nice. I help out when I need to. The usual. No one here wants to fight anymore; we’ve got that in common. I feel at home for once.”

“I’m glad.”

Bucky smiled. “I think you’ll fit in,” he said. “They’ve missed you.”

“Am I missable?” Loki muttered, toying with the cap.

“You are. It leaves a pretty big hole when you’re not around.”

If so many people were telling him that then he supposed it must be true; why would they bother otherwise? Still, he wondered. He angrily sipped his juice with teary eyes.

“What did she say to you?”

“It’s good that Tony and I didn’t kill each other and I can stay with her if she can’t get me a bed tonight.”

“That’s generous of her. You could stay here, too, if you want.”

“I’ll think about it when I need to sleep.”

“Alright.”

Looking through the window, Loki could almost see himself on the ship again. Everything had changed so suddenly. It felt sort of like that now: it only took an instant to drag him out of his comfortable life of familiarity and into the unknown. Just one little smile. It all happened so fast. And now he was... here. He didn’t want to be here. He wasn’t supposed to be here. He didn’t know how he would ever adjust.

He wanted to be back, but he knew it would only make things worse.

“I should go,” he said, making for the door with his juice.

“Okay,” Bucky said. “Stay safe.”

“I will.”

The door felt heavier on the way out. Loki went to see where the nice spot was.

There was a little alcove towards the end of the houses, between the shore and before the road leading into town. A thin overhang of grass covered it like a roof and it looked like there had been a fire not long ago: the ashes in the pit were wet from a recent dousing. Someone had dragged a log there to serve as a bench; he pulled his coat out from under him and sat. Maybe this wasn’t so bad.

He could get used to this, couldn't he? He could. This was an excellent place to finally build his way back up.

Anyway, he started crying again.

The juice was pretty good, though, and it was true he felt calmer here than inside. Despite how much of an absolute ordeal it was to drink something and not choke while sobbing incoherently, it went alright. He actually thought about seeking out some dry wood to get a fire going, but then he realized this would probably be a terrible idea all things considered and decided against it. It wasn't like he was cold, and the ambience was fine without it; he just sat there and slowly sipped his juice under the cool, quiet breeze. Somewhere, he could still hear music: he tried to pick out the muffled notes as a distraction.

As the minutes added up, he instinctively conjured the heavy blanket around him. It was light for his weight, or at least he suspected it was since it had once been Tony's, but he didn't mind; it was still a blanket and it was still nice to wrap around himself while the fear died down. Leaning into it, he found it smelled of flowery laundry detergent.

Nothing else happened.

Natasha found him there sometime later, sketching in his notebook between scribbled-out poetry. She was careful not to sneak up and appeared quite loudly at the other end of the alcove; the gravel crunched beneath her shoes. "I've got good news and less good news," she said, sitting on the log.

"Less good? Is that a euphemism?"

"I found you a place to stay but due to some minor technicalities including 'someone lost the keys and we can't get new ones made at this hour' you can't move in until tomorrow morning. Unless you want to pick the lock and squat."

Loki considered it.

"It wasn't a suggestion," she said with a smile.

"My disappointment is immeasurable," he said, capping the pen. "I could, though."

"There's no food," she said. "You can't go to bed hungry."

Her tone was telling. "Yes, I can," he attempted anyway.

"You shouldn't go to bed hungry."

He was so close to saying "Yes, I should" that he had to bite his tongue.

"You're not the first person who's had to spend the night with me," she said. "I don't mind."

"I snore," he lied.

"I have earplugs," she said.

“Sometimes I wake up screaming in the middle of the night,” he lied again: this had not happened as far as he knew and it was humiliating just to claim it had, but he wasn’t taking chances.

“They’re industrial-grade,” she said.

“So are my screams. You’ll hear them through the walls.”

“I’ll turn on a fan.”

“I don’t want to spend the night with you!”

“You can’t sleep outside.”

He stared at the notebook. “Yes, I can,” he softly said.

Natasha was silent for a very long time. “I don’t doubt that,” she eventually said. “I know you’re hardy, but I can’t let you sleep outside with a clear conscience. I need to know you have somewhere to stay tonight.”

Sure he did. Worst case, he could warp back to the compound and pretend nothing had happened. But he didn’t want to do that. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to spend the night with Natasha, either; he sort of liked how gentle she was with him and he thought that, like with Bucky, they could get along very well if they took the time. He was, now that he thought about it, afraid of burdening more people, and he suspected she could tell.

Slowly, he closed the notebook. “I’m... heavy.”

“Most of the residents here are. The furniture’s reinforced. You won’t break it.”

Yeah, he thought he was so smart with that excuse, huh?

“Were you drawing?” Natasha asked.

Loki flipped to the last-opened page and showed it to her. It was just the view from here; it was a good distraction sometimes. She looked at the sketch and then at the shoreline.

“You’ve got an eye for detail,” she said. A far-off sliver of a building from town was visible behind the cliffs: he had drawn that, too.

“Thank you,” he said, and then he shut the notebook and returned it and the pen to his storage.

“Do you want to join me for dinner?”

“Do I *want* to? Ah, let me think.”

“Would you join me for dinner if I invited you?”

He took a deep breath. “I can try.”

“That’s all you need to do.”

They watched the cliffs together for a short while. Then she stood, glancing back at him with an expecting look; he got all his things and followed her.

Most of the houses here were similar, with a similar layout and general design, so it did not surprise him much that Natasha's house looked a lot like Thor's on the inside: cozy, with sparse but quaint décor that had probably been acquired from the same place. She seemed to have put in a bit more effort, though. There were plants and stocked bookshelves and a nice rug in the living room, as well as a laptop and assorted other items tucked under the coffee table; atop it were stacks of papers.

"So what are you doing in New Asgard?" Loki asked, sitting on the couch.

"Legal matters," Natasha said. "Emotional support for the kids. I'm helping where Thor can't."

"How are they?"

Natasha paused. Loki realized perhaps it would not be good for him to know, but she had already answered before he could say anything: "They're coping," she said. "Not all of them got out with their family intact."

He sank into the cushions.

"They haven't forgotten what you've done," she said. "You're a hero to everyone here."

"I don't understand what I did wrong," he said. "There were... so many."

"You didn't do anything wrong. You did the best you could."

"So I just wasn't good enough?"

Natasha gave him a sympathetic look. "That's not what I meant," she said.

He stared at the wall. "Are you going to tell me how it wasn't my fault?"

"I don't think you'd believe me if I did."

"Because it's not true."

Clearly, there was no point arguing. She turned and rummaged through the fridge for something. "Do you want to try some strawberries while you wait?" she asked as she pulled a few ingredients out. "They were picked this morning."

He said nothing.

"Alright. They're on the counter if you change your mind."

He still said nothing.

There was a knock on the door not long after Natasha started preparing everything. She left the pan and went to open it.

"Hi, Nat!" came a child's voice he didn't recognize; he looked over the couch.

"Hi, Eil," Natasha said. "Is it that time again?"

Eil sighed dramatically. "Yep."

She returned to the kitchen to grab what looked like a cardboard box of pastries. “You know it’s not far from here,” she said.

“I don’t have money,” Eil said.

“I promise she would give these to you for free.”

Eil opened the box and then closed it again. “Okay,” they said. “Oh! Hi, Loki.”

“Uh... hi,” he said.

“Okay, bye,” Eil said, ducking out of the doorway with the box. “Thanks, Nat.”

She closed the door.

“Emotional support?” Loki questioned.

“I’m not judging,” Natasha said, making her way back to the kitchen. “They’ve been through a lot.”

Fair enough, he supposed; he had just been expecting something more than sweet distribution and found it a bit amusing.

“Eilífur,” Natasha clarified above a rustle, definitely noticing that he was trying to put the sounds together in a way that didn’t sound exactly like the drink. Yeah, that made more sense. Had this one been carried out of the fires too?

Watching her, Loki realized that he did sort of want the strawberries. He crept out of his seat, took a very shy handful, and then crept right back. These were good, too; they were sweeter than average. Like the juice, it was difficult to enjoy them, but he tried. He skimmed the papers on the table to pass the time until dinner. Natasha did not force an amount on him, nor did she say anything about how small the amount he served himself was. She just ate there in calm silence.

“I like your hair,” he said as he sat with his plate.

“Thanks.”

The dinner was also good. Fish, probably caught nearby.

Despite the fact that it was the guest bedroom and he was indeed a guest, he felt a little awkward taking it, like maybe he didn’t deserve the space. But Natasha had assured him this was fine, and so he settled in as best as he could. It was a comfortable bed and he could see wildflowers through the window; he opened it slightly. The pale blue sky was not helping the jet lag, though, so he shut the curtains tight.

“Goodnight,” Natasha called to him from the other room.

He paused. “Goodnight,” he called back.

He had a miserable time falling asleep, but at least he was calm. The breeze was nice and the blankets were thick and expensive-looking. The pillows were soft. Outside, he could still hear music, and the distant notes eased his mind. No fear, no dread, no nightmares; nothing of the sort. Everything was just... normal.

But he could not forget Tony, and as he tried and failed to ever drift off, that was all he thought about.

Chapter End Notes

[chuckles in AU] everything that Endgame jossed has been conveniently filed under "Butterfly Effect Thingz"

They Call This Whimsy

Chapter Summary

Loki slowly gets used to New Asgard.

Chapter Notes

Confession: this is the last good chapter before we officially enter "I drafted this in two weeks and haven't edited it properly so everything is a clusterfuck of what" hell. Not that I didn't also draft this in like a day and barely edit it! I'm going back to my roots <3

There was never a better lie than this. The night was long and lonely, its brief darkness smothered by the pale blue touch of the Northern summer, and there was such time to ponder it: as the ocean's endless expanse stared back at him, Loki could not understand why he had come here. He didn't want to be here. His fragile mind had no place before the waves and his traitorous heart didn't belong among these people—better to burn on his own in his familiar little hole. Better to die than act like he had a right to stay here.

He spent the hours hunched before the dock's edge, trying to convince himself otherwise. He couldn't understand why this was happening to him. Why misfortune followed his every breath; why his life was just a cycle of thinking he was okay now only to fall twice as hard the next time. Why Tony. His was a whole rule: that he may do anything and everything but dare grow fond of anyone if he valued himself. Sentiment led to grief and grief had made too many attempts on his life, so when he felt it coming, he turned his back and let it burn. In his desperation he had forgotten. He took too many risks; he knew what would happen and now there was Tony. Tony who he tried to kill. Tony who held him when he cried. Tony who had done damn near everything for him. And it wasn't just that; of course not. But it was one more thing to add to the list of mistakes. To remind him how stupid he was—no one had ever really loved him back and those that did ended up dying instead, perhaps from accumulating too much of his own bad luck. To remind him that he was one string of suffering after another. Maybe he hadn't thought about dying in a few days but he'd better not get cocky about it. It was like a curse that trailed him around; how could he not start to believe it when these things just kept happening? All of it was his own fault and he felt as cold for it as his skin would allow.

The cliffs here were wild and empty; the water he didn't dare touch. But going on, there were grasses and flowers and thin woods, their shallow reach silent and ethereal between the half-dark sky, and he felt at home there. He sat by the lichens and counted his breaths. He reminded himself who he was. The truth was he rather wanted to be back in the city, surrounded by lights and people; he liked his own company and he was just as well off here as anywhere else, but he thrived in chaos. How he craved a party or several—what he wouldn't give to throw himself out there without

immediately feeling like he was going to die. Sooner or later, the quiet would get to him, and, honestly, it already had: he was starving out here.

But, somehow, he tried anyway. He carried on out of spite.

In the morning, as Loki wandered back down into the village, he spotted Thor and some others unpacking supplies from a boat. “Did you catch anything?” he called.

Thor held up a fish. “Is that the hello I get?” he said with a grin.

“Hello,” Loki corrected. “Did you catch anything?”

“We did! Come here. I’ll give you this one.”

The fish jiggled expectantly.

“I’ll pass,” Loki said. “Thank you.”

Thor threw the fish back into one of the coolers. “What do you think?”

“I think you’ve got a nice boat.”

One of them was a kid—a very tall young boy probably around thirteen or so. He hopped out of the boat with some ropes. A goat sprinted after him. “Morning,” he said as he walked past Loki.

“It sure is,” Loki said, trying to see where the goat went; the boy snorted.

“Come help and I’ll let you try it,” Thor said.

Loki glanced at the giant stretch of blue. “No, thank you.”

“You’ll make me carry this alone?”

“Yes.”

Thor tried to look wounded, but the smile beneath his beard was obvious. “Alright, then,” he said, and then he lifted one of the fish-filled coolers out of the boat and wheeled it down to where the dock met the shore, alone. “What brings you here?” he asked as he returned for another.

“Panic, mostly,” Loki said.

“That’s not good.”

“No, it really isn’t.”

“Are you staying?”

“I think so.”

Thor wheeled that cooler down as well. “It’s good to see you again,” he said. “I’ve missed you.”

“When have you ever missed me?” Loki said, narrowing his eyes at him.

“Today. And many other times, in fact.”

“You don’t miss me.”

“Not generally, yes. But I missed you today.”

“How... bizarre.”

Thor beckoned him for a hug.

“You have blood on your hands,” Loki said.

“Oh. Sorry.” Thor wiped his hands off on his pants and then beckoned him again. “Please?”

Loki sighed and went to hug him. “You smell,” he muttered.

“That’s what my nose is for,” Thor agreed.

Loki could not hold back a laugh at this.

“Stark’s not with you?” Thor asked as he pulled away.

“No,” Loki said. “Did you need him?”

“No, I’m just surprised. You’re never apart. You seem like such good friends.”

“Hardly. I can’t stand him.”

“I’ve seen how you look at him.”

“With immense spite and loathing?”

Thor gave him a knowing smile.

“What have you heard?” Loki demanded.

“Nothing,” Thor said, returning to the boat.

“Hey!”

Thor busied himself with another cooler and ignored him.

“Fine!” Loki yelled, trudging back into the village. “Be like that.”

“I love you too,” Thor said over the slam of a lid.

So much for forgetting problems; Loki went to find Natasha in a huff. He knocked loudly.

The door opened. “I was wondering where you went,” Natasha said.

“Oh, you know. My brother’s just being”—he turned, cupped his hands around his mouth, and shouted this at the top of his lungs—“*a giant pain in the ass!*”

At the dock, Thor waved.

“On some level I expected this,” Natasha said. “But at least you haven’t killed each other. Have you had breakfast?”

“No. May I?”

She returned inside, where she was busy typing something in the living room. Loki closed the door behind him and went to check for coffee for when the rush wore off.

“There’s some ibuprofen in the bathroom if you need it,” she said.

He thought about it. The sleep would get to him soon; it couldn’t hurt. After confirming there was coffee left, he went to search. The bathroom was a little small, but it was nice. There was a tiny frosted window for natural light and it smelled like vanilla. None of the towels matched. He dug through all of the drawers, found the bottle in the very last one, skimmed the label and then completely ignored it and took two pills, and then replaced the bottle. Like the towels, none of the mugs in the kitchen matched either; he picked one at random and filled it. This went... well. Nothing happened this time—not even hesitation. Maybe not everything would be bad here. He took the pills with the coffee.

“I did get the keys,” Natasha said from the living room. “I can take you over when you’re done.”

Loki sat at the table with his coffee and the rest of the cold eggs and bacon. “Please tell me you don’t know.”

Natasha looked at him, then back at the screen. She definitely looked like she knew.

“It was one kiss!” he said. “Just one! One single kiss. We did not do anything. We just kissed.”

“I believe you,” she said.

“You don’t believe me.”

“Honestly? I don’t care what happened. It’s not my business. I’m sorry that everyone else thinks it’s a good idea to collectively embarrass you after everything you’ve been through.”

Loki took his coffee with a frown. “Thank you for being honest,” he said. “It’s... something, at least.”

Natasha nodded. “Sorry about the cold breakfast,” she said, and then she returned to whatever she was working on.

The rest of the morning was uneventful.

They did eventually get to finding the house, which was in a quiet spot towards the end of the shoreline. There was a lovely view of all the scenery from here and wildflowers grew by the door; it felt a bit like his even before he stepped inside. It had all the usual things: kitchen, living room, bathroom, two bedrooms, basic furniture, basic appliances, and not much else. “Home sweet home?” he said, and then he went straight for the fat armchair by the window.

“You still need food,” Natasha said, joining him.

“Stop pestering me about food. I will eat.”

“That kitchen is completely empty.”

“The food is invisible.”

She smiled, seemingly against her will. “If I come by later with some groceries, will you accept them?”

Loki sighed. “Will you let me turn you down?”

“If you really want to. But I’m offering. I just want to help you settle in.”

Natasha was not subtle, and for a moment he suspected that Tony had put her up to this. He didn’t argue, though; he simply shrugged and said, “Alright.”

“Do you need anything else?”

“... Tea?”

“Tea. What kind?”

“Any.”

“Okay. I’ll stop by before lunchtime.”

“Thank you.”

She smiled again, and then she turned and left.

The house suddenly felt even emptier. Loki sat there in the armchair for a very long time, picking at his hands, and then he got up and went to unpack everything weighing him down. His hoard of novels went in the bookcase beside the chair, his notebook went on the windowsill, and the blanket and stuffed dragon went to the bed; the clothes he folded and tucked away, even though he was afraid he would have to leave on short notice someday and be stuck with only what he was wearing. The hundreds of weapons he did and didn’t remember acquiring stayed because he didn’t know what else to do with them, but, as he turned back towards the door, he stopped, sat on the bed, and took out all of his prepared spells that could have harmed him and burned them. Herbs, bones, glass and fabric and wood that they were contained in—just swept into the thin air in a blaze of pure energy. The only ones he kept were the ones for warding.

He felt like he’d done something awful, and the pit in his stomach as he watched the sparks flicker away was immense. The rush settled, though, and it was true he still had a pile of knives if he needed them, and so, slowly, he realized it wasn’t that bad.

Taking the remaining ingredients, he went to ward the house.

It wasn’t easy; like the last time he did this, it seemed unnecessary and he was ashamed he even had to try. Who could hurt him here? Who would want to? These wards weren’t even that strong: it was no feat to simply walk in and attack him while he slept. But these wards were all he had and they were the least he could do to comfort himself, and one realized after a certain point that sometimes that was all that mattered. So he warded the house, cleaned up, and then, when he was sure he could do everything he could, he sat in his little corner of books and read, and for that time, everything was fine.

Natasha was considerate with the food she got, and Loki wondered as they sorted through everything in the kitchen if she had been asking around: she got meats, vegetables, a few kinds of tea, and nothing else, which he knew was the best way to feed himself given the chance.

“Just the basics,” she said, taking the empty tote. “No grains, no milk. I checked.”

“I thought you’d forgotten,” he said. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” She made for the door. “Come by if you need me. I’m usually free.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Then she was gone.

He found a spot for everything and went to finish his book. It was mostly accidental that he skipped lunch; he didn’t really mean to and just lost track of the time. Either way, he felt bad about it given all the trouble Natasha had gone through and, with some effort, he made himself dinner. He tried to ride the momentum and made sure he was hydrating, too.

But he still could not sleep, and, just like the previous night, he passed the hours pacing outside in a nervous haze.

He found Bucky at the dock, watching the sun rise.

“You can’t sleep either?” Bucky asked, his voice a tired monotone.

“Often,” Loki said. “How long have you been awake?”

“Since yesterday morning. You?”

Loki tried to do the math but found he couldn’t. He sat beside Bucky.

“It’s nice, isn’t it?” Bucky said.

The sky was bright purple and red, mirrored across the ocean as far as the eye could see. It looked like it had been painted: the colours were uncannily vivid. “It’s beautiful,” Loki said.

Bucky’s gaze was long and empty. Were the sun any higher, he might well have blinded himself; he didn’t look away for anything. “Do you... want to go get food or something?” he softly asked.

“That would be nice.”

“I think... Natasha picked up some things the other day. From the town next door. But I don’t think she’s up yet and I don’t want to break and enter again.”

“Again?”

“Ha. Yeah, again. She’s cool, though.”

“I don’t mind waiting.”

Bucky nodded to himself. “Alright.”

Loki was rather inclined to ask what in the world Bucky had been through that they were both sitting there in that moment, but it wasn't his place to know. They both had a battle they were fighting and that was all; there was no reason to dig any deeper.

"Do I belong here?" he asked, squinting at the sun.

"Of course you belong here," Bucky said. "Why wouldn't you?"

"I never belonged anywhere else. Why would this be different?"

Bucky was silent. He looked away—looked at the ocean, which, though bright, was not yet so impossible to look at as the morning sun. He picked at his metal hand. He pushed the hair out of his face with it. "Sometimes that's what makes you belong," he said. "You find other people who... also don't belong. You stick together."

Loki dangled his legs over the edge of the dock.

"Who says you don't belong, though?" Bucky muttered, leaning on a knee. "You killed Thanos and you're related to an Avenger. I think that's close enough."

"I'm adopted," Loki said.

"So?"

What a nonchalant answer; if only it had always been that simple.

"I don't get it either," Bucky said. "I don't think I belong here. I don't think they even like me. I just... tagged along for the ride somehow."

Loki, who knew he still didn't know most of what had happened in his absence—only what he had gathered from all the offhand remarks tossed around every now and then—said nothing. It seemed they were more alike than he thought.

"I guess everything paled after all that," Bucky said. "We had bigger problems."

They did eventually acquire food, which was just some smoked meat and preserves. Bucky made himself a sandwich; Loki did not. They had some coffee and shared a local dessert, and they discussed some silly things like Svala's newly discovered talent for whistling and the fish that had reportedly smacked Thor in the face on the way out, and then they parted ways for the day: Bucky went back to his video game marathon and Loki read as much as his tired eyes would allow.

The days turned into a week. He slept once, with a dagger beneath his pillow and his hand around it the whole night.

The starship was empty, and all of the rooms were flooded. The lights were flickering. The walls had singe marks. It was shallow water, not even up to his ankles, but it got to him; where he stood, the water was slowly accumulating a thin sheet of ice. His reflection in it was wrong. His armour was coming apart. He was bleeding from somewhere. Still, his steps were silent and airy through the corridors. The water was and wasn't there.

He tried to stay calm as he noticed the pain in his wrists. Stinging. Burning. Soaked in old blood and grime. There was no use. They wouldn't clean. They weren't real; he didn't look at them.

“I’m not done with you,” echoed Thanos’s voice at the other end of the corridor.

Loki breathed in heavily and turned. “What happened to the garden?” he asked. In his pale hands, he summoned a dagger each.

“You destroyed it,” Thanos said.

The water was muddy with burnt vegetable scraps and flowers. Loki watched them freeze around his boots. “Good,” he said. “You didn’t deserve it.”

But then Thanos had his hands on him and he couldn’t hold back the panic. “You did this!” he snarled. “You little beast. They should have killed you.”

The grip was tight to bruising. The wounds were too deep. The air was going. Loki tried to claw his way out but couldn’t find enough strength, and so he tried to wake up—

“You don’t know what I sacrificed for you. You ungrateful rat.”

“Don’t hurt me,” he wheezed above the pain.

But then they were on the floor, bleeding into the water. Falling apart. He couldn’t reach the daggers. He couldn’t reach anything. His beaten wrists were chained again. His voice wouldn’t even let him scream. Thanos was everyone: all those people who had ever told him it was his fault, his weakness, his wrongness, his worthlessness, his violent uncontrollable never good for anything second-bestness that brought him here.

—and so he tried to wake up

“Don’t think he wants you. They don’t want you. You’re lucky I saved your miserable life. You have nothing without me.”

—and then Thanos pulled one of the daggers on him and he tried to wake up

“It wasn’t my fault,” he sobbed through the blood.

“Can you speak anything but lies?” Thanos growled, dragging him out of the water. Everything was burning. The wounds were too deep.

“Let me go!”

Thanos threw him back against the wall. Everything was burning. The water was too hot. The wounds were too deep. And so he tried to wake up—

“You should have died.”

“But it wasn’t my fault!” he screamed into the pillow.

And then there was nothing. His skin was dripping sweat. His lungs weren’t working. Around him, the sheets were trying to catch fire; he bolted up in a panic and smothered the flames with the blanket.

He should have been holding someone. He couldn’t take this alone. The tears. The scars he couldn’t see. Thanos’s promises over the pain. Thanos smiling at him on the ship. Him—just a product of

complacent suffering left to face the consequences on his own. Left to everyone else's rage. He couldn't do this. He felt like he had been robbed of his free will: all he'd ever known was one violation of his rights after another. All that shame. All that anger. He kept the sweat-soaked dagger in his hand and left to get some air.

Bucky wasn't around this time; the village was silent and still. Under the slate-blue light of the sky, it felt impossible. It wasn't real. With the dagger beside him, Loki sat in the wildflowers by the door and cried, alone, until dawn. And then he refused to sleep again out of fear, and, like he had done so many times before, he scraped by with terrified naps and enough caffeine to give him a heart attack.

The week turned into two.

It was difficult to quantify these sorts of things on the best days, and, as the last of the food went into a tired breakfast and the first thought upon eating it happened to be "I need to buy more food," Loki realized he couldn't tell whether this was getting better or worse. He was eating and hydrating and hadn't done a thing to hurt himself since he moved in, but he also couldn't remember the last time he had seen another face; he couldn't remember if it had even *been* two weeks because, without sleep to separate the days and with such ambiguous sunlight, he was forgetting how to keep track. His hair was bordering on matted to the point where he had to keep it tied back. He was still alive somehow, though, and so he supposed he must be doing something right: as long as he was alive, the rest didn't matter.

But he was exhausted and afraid to look at anyone, and he didn't know how he would buy anything like this. He wanted to ask for help but didn't know who would and wouldn't laugh at him. Desperate, he chanced Thor.

It took ages, but the door eventually opened. "Good morning," Thor said. "Where have you been?"

"Surviving," Loki said. "Are you busy?"

"Do you need me?"

"No."

"Then why are you asking?"

"I don't need you; I just thought maybe you'd want to come show me around town later. I like the company."

Okay, that was definitely the most obvious lie that had ever come out of his mouth in his entire life because he had never shown himself to enjoy the company at any point at all in at least the last thousand years and yes, Thor could definitely tell because he gave him the strangest look imaginable.

"I don't have any local currency and you do and I need to buy food," Loki said.

Thor still said nothing.

"What are you staring at me for?" Loki snapped.

“Have you been sleeping well?” Thor softly asked.

“No! Are you going to give me an answer?”

“Of course I’ll come. Will you let me finish eating first? I’m happy to join you.”

Well, that went great; Loki turned to pace outside, a hand to his forehead. “I’m sorry for yelling,” he muttered.

“I didn’t even notice,” Thor said, probably alarmed by the apology. “Do you want to come inside?”

“Oh—no, I’m sure you won’t be long. It’s nice out, anyway. I don’t mind waiting here.”

“Loki.”

“Don’t ‘Loki’ me!”

Thor frowned. “Alright,” he said, and then he went back into the kitchen. Behind him, the door remained open.

Loki sighed and joined him at the table.

There were those times when it was best to just be quiet and perhaps this was one of them; they were both silent for most of the duration, not knowing what to say or why. The breeze through the open door was pleasant. Someone was playing music somewhere again. With enough effort, it was almost possible to forget everything.

“I know you know this,” Thor said, “but no matter what happens, you are still my brother and I love you very much. Even if we fight. Even if we can’t stand each other most of the time. Please don’t forget that.”

Loki did not respond, but he hoped it was clear he felt the same. They were all they had left; he couldn’t afford the anger anymore. He didn’t want to.

“I’m always here if you need me,” Thor said. “I promise.”

“Why couldn’t we be like this before?”

“Is it too late to start now?”

Loki stared at the table.

“How long have you been awake?” Thor softly asked, pushing the empty plate aside.

“I don’t know,” Loki said. “How obvious is it?”

“You look like you’ve been hit in both eyes and you’re shaking.”

“That would be the lethal amount of caffeine.”

“Are you trying to stay up on purpose?”

“I can’t tell anymore.”

Thor looked like he wanted to say something but wasn't sure what. "Do you sleep at all?"

"Here and there. An hour or two at a time."

"You don't sound upset."

"It is what it is."

Thor watched him clean the plate. "Please be careful," he said.

"I try," Loki said. Then he stood and went back outside; Thor followed.

The next town was close, no more than ten minutes on foot along the side of the road, and the weather was nice, so it was a good walk. They didn't say much, but that was fine. It was just... familiar. Simple. Nothing bad happened and it turned out they did enjoy the company after all.

Loki never actually found a sign for the town or else he just didn't see it and so it remained "the town" in his mind, which was acceptable. It was a small town, certainly eons bigger than their tiny village but nothing very extravagant, and it had a similar charm; there was a lot of colour and a lot of sound and all sorts of different people out and about. They probably could have moved here just as easily, but he realized perhaps it was good they didn't: he liked the particular little culture they were making for themselves and it would have been lost here.

"I have some other things I need to get," Thor said as they walked into a small market. "Do you mind?"

"Not at all," Loki said, even though he did sort of mind: he didn't want to spend any longer here than necessary. At least it was a small store.

They did a lot of looking around but not too much. Thor got a very large amount of assorted vegetables and a few of the other usual things, and, because he actually had a functioning digestive system, he also got some milk for himself. Loki had a glaring contest with it while they paid.

"Your enemy," Thor said.

"My enemy. How could you do this to me?"

"I need to drink twice as much in your honour. It's symbolic."

"Your face is symbolic."

He chortled.

"You know they make Lactaid, right?" the person at the till said as they sorted everything.

"You mean admit defeat?" Loki said. "Never."

"It's more like better preparing yourself for the battle," Thor said, taking the bags.

"It's not! It's me accepting that milk is stronger than me, which it's not."

"One time you cried for three hours because your stomach hurt so much."

“I did not. It was twenty minutes and it wasn’t even that bad.”

“You said it felt like someone was stabbing you repeatedly.”

“It felt like mild discomfort.”

“If that was mild, then what’s serious?”

“See”—Loki took the carton—“I could drink all of this right now in one go and that would *probably* make me throw up and then lose my appetite for the rest of the day and then pass out on the floor while sobbing, which I think would be fairly serious. Other than that, it’s fine.”

“Please don’t drink all of that in one go,” Thor said as he walked out with everything.

“I can and I will,” Loki said, jogging after him.

“Milk doesn’t even taste that good.”

“I agree! But it’s unacceptable that I can’t just drink it if I want without having to weigh the possible consequences against myself.”

Thor took the milk. “I’m sure there are a lot of people out there who can drink milk but are upset they can’t hit a target at a thousand metres from atop a cliff,” he said with a smile.

“Ah, yes, because that’s such a practical skill here,” Loki said, rolling his eyes. “Thank you for reminding me.”

There was definitely a deeper reason behind everything, but it was a good day and it wasn’t worth delving into this again. Thor wasn’t stupid: he probably knew anyway. They went to a butcher shop nearby, which was, according to him, the only place anyone should ever buy anything from because it was fantastic, and then they also stopped by one that sold handmade soaps and candles because he had apparently run out of the greatest shampoo on the planet.

“Is it true you’ve been spending Asgard’s gold on books?” he asked as he grabbed a bottle.

“It’s not like we needed it,” Loki said. “Besides, it’s funny.”

“Is everything you do because it’s funny?”

“No. Only most things.”

Thor handed him the bottle. “Smell it,” he said.

It smelled like lavender. “Are you growing your hair again?” Loki asked, handing it back.

“I’m trying.”

“Good luck.”

“Do you want anything?”

Loki glanced at the candles. “I don’t know,” he said. “Maybe.”

Thor waited while he picked a few of the large scented ones at random and then they continued on their way.

There was, admittedly, a rather long period among all of this where Loki was very upset that he could not also try a nice shampoo—not with the current state of things. He wondered if it would be a good enough push to keep trying; he just had to ease into it, didn't he? Surely he could get his mind to accept that it wasn't happening anymore. But he never did go back to look and by the time he decided he should have, they were already back in the kitchen and unpacking.

“Why do you eat so much?” Loki asked as Thor piled things on the table.

“There is a little man living in my stomach,” Thor said, “and he eats my food. Every time I eat I must account for him and eat more.”

“Is this a mutually beneficial arrangement or has he conned you for free food and lodging?”

“He tells me jokes sometimes.”

Loki attempted to sort the huge spread of foods on the table. “Do you eat all of this?”

“Some of it's for you,” Thor said.

“I don't eat this much.”

“Some of it's for others.”

Loki didn't know what he should take for himself and what was reserved for others. In fact, he hadn't specified at any point and was overwhelmed by the choice. He hoarded the candles and wondered if he should just ask. The items slowly disappeared into different places and Thor sectioned off what remained.

“Is this enough?” Thor asked.

“That's too much.”

“You asked me to help you.”

“I didn't ask you to help me.”

“But I am still giving you all of this. Because that's what brothers do.”

Loki tried not to start crying again as Thor picked up the other things and headed back out with them in a bag. The door stayed open.

“Are you coming?” Thor asked, lifting the bag.

Loki didn't know where at first but remembered some of the food was for others. Was he supposed to be coming? He followed anyway and closed the door behind them. They went around the village checking a few houses and talked to a few people, most of whom he didn't remember meeting but recognized in some way or another. One of them was Eilífur, the kid who had come to pick up some pastries that first night, and Mogrin, the boy who joined the fishing crew sometimes: he was apparently the oldest brother and a caretaker of sorts now for Eil and their sister Vera, though for the most part everyone in the village pitched in. Like Thor. They looked happy to see them both but

Loki felt unwelcome, as if someone would air all his sins to them including that he might be why their family tree was now a twig. Or maybe they knew already.

“What are you up to today?” Thor asked as he helped tidy some things.

“Bucky’s doing Dungeons and Dragons later,” Mogrin said.

“Oh!” Thor exclaimed, but he clearly did not know what that was.

On their way back out Loki felt someone slip something into his pocket. It was a single piece of fruit taffy. He looked over his shoulder and saw Mogrin wink.

They also visited Svala’s mother, Sibella. Svala was not home. “Good morning,” Sibella said as Loki sat. “How have you been?”

Loki assumed it was a trick question and that everyone already knew he was a nervous wreck, but he said, “Better lately.” It wasn’t a lie, but it wasn’t the truth either. “Are you well? I remember hearing you had some issues with pain.”

“Better lately,” Sibella said, but Loki wondered if she was just trying to make him feel better about having caused this.

“We have a good healer on our hands,” Thor said, which was patently false.

“You’re recovering quicker than I am,” Loki said, which was unfortunately completely true. “At this rate I’m sure you’ll turn out fine.”

“I believe you,” Sibella said, which of everything in this conversation seemed to hit him the hardest because he was quite certain no one ever believed a word that came out of his mouth regardless of how true it was. He tried to smile.

Continuing through the village to drop off the last of some miscellaneous goods, Loki could not help but feel that everyone was scheming against him again somehow. This was not the case, of course.

“You aren’t responsible for the actions of another,” Thor said as the two of them returned to his house with the empty bags.

“What does that have to do with anything?” Loki said. “False, by the way.”

“Oh, you can try. You can do everything in your power to get someone to act a certain way. But ultimately what one person does with a situation is up to them. And in that moment, it becomes no one’s responsibility but their own.”

“But that doesn’t mean we *don’t* carry a responsibility for the behaviour of certain people.”

“But you understand what I’m telling you.”

Loki opened the door and went to get his things off the table. “Thank you for the food,” he said, and Thor just looked at him as if hoping they could talk more about it but didn’t try. They did share an awkward hug before Loki left, though.

Even with all of the fresh food and a set of scented candles to line the tables his place felt bare and unwelcoming, but it was an improvement. He thought that if he got the rest of his things he might feel a bit more at home, and he thought that if he drowned himself in enough blankets and nice smells he could probably at least get to sleep easier. Lighting one of the candles in his reading corner, he was almost certain he was right. It wasn't really distraction so much as it was just cushioning: the world felt softer like this, easier to stomach. He wasn't left to spiral into himself.

He had lunch and he had dinner both by the open window and the day was well.

It rained overnight: the ground was wet in the morning and the air still smelled. Though he never shook the fear that the rain would resume, he managed a trek outside after breakfast. He went to the dock and back again, staring up at the pale grey sky, and then he sat with Natasha for a time because she had spotted him on the way to get something.

"Are you sleeping alright?" she asked between their otherwise casual conversation.

"No," Loki said. He was already quite sure he looked exhausted if his glimpses in the mirror and Thor's incredibly eloquent description meant anything, but, just to prove it to himself, he asked, "Is it obvious?"

"You look tired most days," she said; as if on cue, he felt his chronically bunched eyebrows further tighten. "I'm worried."

"Don't be."

"You know that just because someone's worried about you it doesn't mean they think you're weak, right?"

Loki, who felt personally attacked by this question, said nothing.

"I hope things get better for you," Natasha said. "I miss the banter."

"You say that like it's left."

"It often seems like it."

"It's there. It's just a little quieter."

They did not say much else.

Turned out even the massive pile of books wasn't enough with the rate Loki was burning through them and he didn't have the energy to do anything else and so, reluctantly, he decided he should stop by the compound and grab the rest of his things. He didn't know what time it was there but he assumed it would be fine, so he warped to his old bedroom.

He wasn't sure what he was expecting. Disaster, maybe; several weeks was more than enough time for something to go wrong and something always did. The room was untouched, though. Even the sheets were still crumpled. It was early, and, careful between the dawn light, he went and packed everything into his storage space. He fixed the bed and tidied what needed to be tidied and double-checked he had gotten everything and, perhaps out of morbid curiosity, he then went for a look around the compound. Tony was usually up by this time, so it was surprising to find the workshop empty. It seemed not a single person was in. The spite-tolerance had worn off and Tony had sorted

out the equipment problem and everyone was back to their old lives. Nice was a strong word, but it had been nice while it lasted.

It occurred to Loki as he left that he had never gotten ahold of the cabin's location and he wondered how they were faring there because it sounded like a nice place. It also occurred to him that he could have stayed here; his problem had been the people and now there were none. But this would probably be a mistake: he was doing well where he was now and he would only force himself into another hole. So, with all of his things, he returned to New Asgard.

He spent the rest of the day sketching alone.

He thought the next morning, for no real reason, that maybe he should get a radio or something like it because it was very dull sitting in silence all day; his dream self that time must have known a thing or two. Then he thought that he wasn't sure where to look for one or if he even wanted to. Still, after breakfast, he decided he would.

He went to pester Thor for some normal Earth currency.

“What do you plan on buying?”

“Illegal weapons.”

“Oh. Alright, then.” Thor dumped an unspecified amount of kroner into his open hand. “Have fun.”

“No,” Loki said, tucking the money in his coat pocket.

“Oh! I wish you a very unfun experience, then.”

“I love you too, brother.” He turned and left.

The weather was a little better that day, so he didn't mind wandering. For unknown reasons, it was not as easy as one would expect on Earth to find a radio here, and, in fact, the best luck he had was in an antique shop—not that he cared; hell, this was rather like him. It sure took him far too long, though. He expected himself to get lost there for hours, and, tragically, he was correct. He did get his radio, a very cozy little analog with a crooked antenna, and he also got some pretty old jewelry passed down along the years, a silly set of stoneware with frogs and mushrooms, and an equally silly rug that looked like a patch of neon grass dipped in a rainbow. Yes—very productive!

The clerk greeted him by name when he went to pay.

“Have we met?” Loki said, expecting to be reduced to the title of Thor's brother as usual.

“I heard you saved the world,” the clerk said. “Thor's very proud of you.”

“Oh.”

“Do you need a bag for this?”

Loki glanced at the items. “No, not really,” he said, and then he warped them all into storage.

“Wow, that must be useful.”

“Very.”

“Have a nice day, then.”

Loki thanked him and left.

He spent a while exploring the place, all the other little shops and scenery. A stranger complimented him on the coat and a giant dog stopped to greet him. The workers where he got lunch were kind. A few times he ran into people he thought he had seen back home and they seemed to recognize him too and they talked. About life, about who was doing what. He didn't know why anyone would want to talk to him knowing how many deaths were on his name and was awkward when he should have had much to say, but it was nice to have a normal conversation like this again. They said it was good to see him. They showered him with strange kindness. He passed Eil and Vera with some local children and was pestered to stay and help them keep a ball off the ground, which was stressful not because it wasn't fun but because at that point he really wanted to be getting on his way—nonetheless, they kept it going for a while. Eil and Vera walked home with him.

In any case Loki was happy with the day. The family of frog ceramics went in the pantry and the awful rug went by the window with the big chair, as did the radio that may or may not have been functional. It was quaint, this tiny nook he'd set up: he had all his books here and all his writing and all his art and, to top it off, a lovely view of the scenery. Never mind the wards soaked into the walls; it was nice here. After some fiddling, he managed to keep the radio on a local station playing Norwegian oldies. Apparently he could improve the signal with a bit of kinetic energy, which was very lucky because he suspected he wouldn't otherwise be getting a thing. He sat there with a cup of tea and a book, and the fur blanket, and thought that this was incredibly... normal. He was still nervous around water and he still flinched at everything and he still wasn't sleeping well, but that was all: for the most part, he was just carrying on.

Once, he cried in that same chair with that same kind of tea and the radio on while it rained outside. He kept the window open against his good judgment and tried to make himself believe that it wasn't like before, but it didn't make a difference: it reminded him well enough and that was all he needed to hurt again. He made himself bear it because he didn't know what else to do.

But nothing else really happened, and for the most part, his days were simple.

‡

There was a time at some point in the next few days where Loki, usually comfortable as everything, felt a very old and familiar little shift over breakfast, and, knowing that it was just the state of existence sometimes and it would be unwise to brush it off just because it had been so long and it usually didn't matter, she leaned into it and let her body match.

There was no other reason for this than she could.

She was running low on food and a bit too tired to head down for something herself at this hour, so she went like that to see what she could mooch. No, nothing much: just something to get through the rest of the day in the likely event that she did not muster the strength to warp all the way to town and buy food and then warp all the way back again.

She tried Thor first, knocking approximately far too many times in a row on the door.

“Good morning, sister!” he said as he opened it. “It’s been a while.”

“I’m not keeping track,” Loki said.

“What do you need?”

“I’m starving to death and fear I’ve no strength left to seek out sustenance. Spare a vegetable?”

“Only one?”

“Oh, I don’t want to rob you.”

Thor disappeared inside and then returned with a bundle of assorted greens. “Anything else?”

“That will be all,” Loki said, taking the items. “Thank you.” Then she left.

The rest of the day was unremarkable. She painted some and she wrote some and she read some, comfortable with an expanding collection of tea and old Norwegian ballads in the background. Perhaps the only unusual occurrence was her unbroken sleep that night: she woke bright and early with no issues, not even with her hair.

There was a knock mid-breakfast, and she went to answer the door with a mug in her hand.

“Didn’t mean to interrupt,” Natasha said as Loki took a questioning sip.

“I don’t mind.”

“Can I come in?”

“Of course.”

Natasha shut the door behind her. “So just to get this out of the way,” she said, “should I refer to you as a woman?”

“You could,” Loki said, returning to the kitchen table with the tea. “I don’t care much. Do you want anything? The water’s still hot.”

“I’m good. Thanks.”

Natasha sat across from her.

“Why do I feel like I’m in trouble?” Loki said; she set the mug down.

“You’re not,” Natasha said. “One of the fishing boats got wrecked. No casualties. We lost some equipment, though, and I was wondering if you could retrieve it somehow, or just see where it went.”

Loki stared into her tea, suddenly lost. “I’m sure I could find a way,” she said, but she didn’t mean it.

Natasha picked at the tablecloth. “Something’s on your mind.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

Perhaps as a distraction, Natasha asked, “What kind of tea do you have?”

“Too many kinds. If you want something, I’ve likely got it.”

She got up and grabbed a mug.

“Third drawer on the left,” Loki said, not looking up.

Natasha got something and then shut the drawer. “Tony was asking about you,” she said as she filled the mug.

“Is he well?”

“Seems like it.” Natasha sat once more. “He’s just wondering where you’re at.”

It wasn’t an easy question. She was eating consistently and talking to people and engaging in meaningful hobbies, but there were also things like this: why was she so overcome with dread at the thought of searching the water? How simple it would be to shift into a sea-dwelling creature and locate everything like that, but it was impossible in this state. She would sooner drown in a fit of panic.

“I’m alive,” she said.

“You are,” Natasha said. “It’s good to see you up and about.”

Loki offered a tired smile.

They didn’t say much else. They had their tea in silence and Loki finished her breakfast, and then they went out to the dock. The lost equipment was near the shore, but that was all. It was still such deep water nothing was visible beneath its waves. It was still too much. Loki was almost certain this would not be a problem. The issue came from running water—from spills and pours and drips, because that was what she had endured between all the blades. All the screams. All she knew repeated back to her. This wasn’t the same: she was fine with the small stagnant water of her tea and it wouldn’t be much of a stretch. Still, when she imagined herself with wet skin again, she panicked. She remembered the worst. Her feet led her away from the dock on their own.

“What do you think?” Natasha asked.

There was no way. The usual tricks didn’t work with such low visibility and the unusual tricks—diving down there herself for a better look—were impossible. No. No—

“Loki?”

“I can’t help you,” she quietly said. “I’m sorry.”

Natasha looked out at the dark expanse. “That’s too bad,” she said.

Loki sat there on the dock.

“Don’t beat yourself up over it. We’ve got good funding. It’s no issue.”

It would be so simple to just take a running leap off the dock and shift midair. It would be so much simpler than throwing impractical spells at the waves. Hell, if she tried, she was certain she could nail this whole thing with astral projection: cast herself down there for a quick walk along the ocean floor and be back in no time with a plan and everything. Yes—she definitely could. And if she wasn't there in body then nothing would even be able to touch her. So why didn't she?

“Do you think I could ever hunt here?” she asked, trying not to think about it.

“Sure,” Natasha said. “I don't see why not.”

“Somehow I feel it wouldn't be that simple.”

Natasha sat beside her. “Usually you'd need a license,” she said, “and there are guidelines on what you can and can't do. But it shouldn't be a challenge.”

“Did you ever figure out... everything you were figuring out?”

“Most of it. You won't get the military on your back if you try to apply for a hunting license, if that's what you're asking.”

Loki nodded slowly. Then she stopped and said, “Wait, don't I need papers for that?”

“How about I do all this for you?” Natasha said with a thin smile.

“Would you?”

“Sure. I'll knock a few regulations while I'm at it. How do you want to hunt?”

“Bow. But... I don't think they allow that here these days.”

She thought about this. “I'll get something sorted out for you,” she said. “I know you're not exactly the average bow user. I've dealt with similar situations.”

“Thank you.”

They didn't really speak much more. Loki got some food and then retreated home for the day, where things continued as normal.

As the days went on, Tony never truly left her mind. She tried. But somewhere among all the fleeting nightmares, she couldn't. She craved the warmth and he was the closest she had. Her hands were crying for him. For anyone; only because she trusted him a bit more than the average person and allowed herself to be honest when she needed and because the joy of a good love was the kindest distraction from so much pain. But she didn't know how to approach it and from where, only thinking that she should let it die because she didn't deserve it anyway. Because she shouldn't bother people with her dramas. Because it was lucky he wouldn't live long; no one her age would want to spend all that time putting up with her.

That didn't matter, though, and in the way that the universe worked she was asked one afternoon to bring Tony some files in person. Aside from her utter bafflement at being trusted with a package of confidential documents, she was very conflicted regarding the whole thing, but, with some reluctance, she took the files and went to find the cabin: the address was scribbled on a sticky note. It was early there and she wasn't sure anyone would answer, but she obviously didn't want to dump the confidential files in the mailbox and run, so she waited. It was a beautiful place surrounded by

trees and water and the cabin itself looked wonderful; she sat cautiously on the steps with the files in her lap.

The door opened and she looked up. “Wait, Loki?” Tony exclaimed.

“Sadly,” she said, standing. “I was asked to deliver this.” She handed him the folder.

“What, you’re just gonna throw some mail at me and leave?” Tony said, half-joking. “Sit down for a bit. I missed you.”

“I... shouldn’t.”

“Please? What, do you have somewhere to be?”

“Y—no. Yes. Um.”

Tony gave her an exhausted smile. “Okay,” he said, walking back in with the files. He set them on the living room table. “Please don’t let all the bugs in.”

In a panic, Loki entered and shut the door behind her.

“You look different,” Tony said as he leafed through the papers. “Anything I should know?”

“I’m a woman right now.”

“See, I didn’t want to assume, y’know? Either way, cool.”

Why couldn’t everyone on Earth be this casual about it?

“This happen a lot?” Tony asked.

“No,” Loki said. “I don’t usually need to be anything. But I think I need to be a woman right now.”

“Well, I like woman Loki. She seems neat.”

She blushed.

“How are things?” Tony asked.

“Fine,” Loki said. She did not mention the boat incident, nor the fact that she couldn’t sleep most nights.

“Are you gonna keep standing by the door forever?”

Yes, actually. In fact, why not open it? Stand on the other side? Close it and run? She... quietly went and joined him.

“You get up to anything cool?” Tony asked as he slid the folder shut.

“No.”

“Nothing?”

How did one go about saying that they wanted to leave immediately because they feared they were falling in love and wanted to burn it while they could? She couldn't do this. She mocked Thor for the same thing because she knew: she would never be ready no matter how many times this happened. Grief didn't get easier. Outliving everyone she touched didn't get easier. This day, the next, a hundred years—what did it matter? It was a heartbeat. A blip in the vast ocean of her life.

Tony, of course, was no less perceptive than before; he looked up with a questioning frown. "I guess things aren't fine, are they?"

Loki didn't face him. "I don't know what to do with myself."

Tony leaned back into the cushions. "In general?" he asked.

"It keeps raining."

"And you're right by the sea... yeah, that must be rough."

"I don't think I'm getting better."

"Are you eating?"

"Often."

Tony nodded. "That's better than before," he said. "Do you still hurt yourself?"

Loki paused. "No," she said. "I don't think so."

"See? You are improving."

"I don't belong there."

Some things were improving, then; there was still all that. There was still this unsolved matter between them.

"Do you want anything to drink?" Tony asked, evidently preparing for a long talk.

"No," Loki said. "Thank you."

Tony took the folder and went to leave it downstairs. He returned shortly.

"I should go," Loki muttered, climbing out of the couch.

"Hey, come on. I'm free all day. I don't mind."

"I have things to do."

"Like what?"

"Things." She made for the door.

"Things?" Tony said, raising an eyebrow.

"I'm falling in love with you," she blurted.

In spite of everything, this was clearly the last thing Tony was expecting. The room went dead silent. They both didn't move. Loki could feel her insides melting; she leaned against the door and pressed her hands to her face.

"Oh," Tony said, just a very small oh and nothing else, and then he looked at the unlit fireplace, at the floor, and then back at her. "And that's... bad."

"Yes!"

"Oh."

"I can't do this again," she cried. "Not with you. This wasn't supposed to happen."

"I'm sorry," Tony said. "I shouldn't have gotten so close. I didn't realize."

"Of course you didn't! Because I was supposed to be keeping that distance, not you. I knew that spending so much time with you was risky. I knew sleeping with you was risky. I let you in because I was desperate and now I have to deal with it."

Tony was silent for a while, leaned into the couch arm with an unreadable look. "What do you want to do next?"

"I want to stay here," Loki softly said. "I've missed this. But I'm afraid of the pain."

That was always the problem, wasn't it? Avoiding things for fear of pain. Hiding so nothing could hurt her again. Neither of them spoke for a very long time. Loki stepped away from the door and paced, nervously thumbing the knuckles on one hand.

"Thank you for bringing those files," Tony eventually said. "Do you need anything?"

"No. I'm glad you're well."

Tony smiled. Loki did not say goodbye or anything of the sort, in part because she did not mean to leave for good and in part because it was simply such an awkward moment that she couldn't bring herself to speak. She walked out, a bit heavy on her feet, and warped back home.

The day was long.

Nothing was ever really quite normal, but the hours passed easily. Loki ate well and visited her neighbours whenever she could manage it and mostly slept. Running into Svala and Crow—yes, still a mysterious secret identity—she learned the two had been living together for some time; the attack on the ship had been unkind to Crow and it seemed the best option. She learned that Natasha was helping when possible.

Bucky was still tucked away with his own problems, but on the odd days they saw each other, he was kind. Though neither of them revealed much, they found common ground.

Once, while sitting together on the dock on another sleepless night, it began to rain. The drops were cold and light, barely a bit of a drizzle, but it didn't really matter. They were getting wet quickly, and the longer they sat there, the more Loki could not keep herself calm. She lost it.

“We should probably head inside,” Bucky mused, staring up at the pale midnight clouds.

He was right, but it was so hard to think. She couldn't even move: she just sat there, eyes shut, and tried to understand the feeling of clothes stuck to her skin. Hair stuck to her neck. All the droplets running down her face. She couldn't breathe.

“Do you want me to walk with you?”

She should stay here. Let herself break. How else would she do this? Slowly? Slowly wasn't working. She needed this.

“What are you trying to prove?”

“This can't hurt me,” she whispered into the rain.

“Forcing yourself to drown isn't how you learn to swim.”

She said nothing.

“Come on,” Bucky said, climbing to his feet with a grunt. He offered a hand, but Loki stood on her own.

They walked back to her house in silence.

Bucky, of course, still did not ask why this had happened nor anything else. He simply shut the door and hung up his dripping coat with a sigh, and then he sat in the kitchen and kept dripping water on the floor. “Sorry,” he said. “Do you have any firewood?”

“None,” Loki answered, staring out the window. True—why would she? She didn't get cold.

In the kitchen, she heard the kettle click on.

“Don't rush yourself,” Bucky said. “You don't rush these kinds of things.”

Loki said nothing again. She removed her coat, the one that Tony had gotten for her, and laid it flat on the little coffee table by the couch for fear of the fabric losing its shape, and then sat in her armchair, turned the radio on, and tried not to think. Bucky joined her eventually, sitting on the edge of the table beside the velvet coat with his tea.

“I'm tired,” she said.

“There's a difference between facing your fears and making yourself have a breakdown,” Bucky said. “It doesn't get you anywhere. Sometimes it sets you back. Be kind to yourself.”

“Are we all just broken hypocrites sharing advice we don't listen to?”

“Many of us.”

The song on the radio was lovely. They never did get to bed, but this was expected. They sat in silence while it poured outside. Loki calmed herself eventually and Bucky made himself a snack. The night carried on.

But the More Things Change...

Chapter Summary

The past often repeats itself.

Chapter Notes

Terrible news, everyone! I completely botched the execution of this chapter and probably ruined the entire story in the process. Hopefully it's not as bad as it feels.

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

There came a time in the next few weeks when the area around the Avengers compound was attacked, and it went like this.

Someone got weapons. It didn't matter who—didn't matter what their name was or what fights they were picking. It could have been anyone. But they got weapons and they knew how to use them, and they did. Was it chance that it was in the same corner of the city as the compound? Did they know it was there and plan their moves accordingly? Didn't matter. What mattered was they were strong, and the only ones who could take them on were the Avengers. And the Avengers, for the moment, were nothing.

That was how these things went sometimes—unluckily and unprepared. Bad timing; there were too many other things happening in other parts of the city for anyone to bother. It happened too fast. As it stood, they were just Tony, begrudgingly dragged out of his nook in the cabin because he was capable, Peter, who was mostly moral support amid the explosions, Steve Rogers, who was faring well but unable to get a blow in edgewise, and Natasha, who had been in the vicinity by chance on unrelated business and was pretty much doing the same nothing as Peter plus some recon. Everyone else who could have helped was too far and too busy (fuck you in particular, Stephen Strange, although there were definitely many honourable mentions) and those who were nearby were no match for this sort of thing. It was familiar, and, if the last few times this had happened meant anything, they'd find a way but it wouldn't be soon enough: the cost would be too great.

They shouldn't be here. They should leave and call the big guns: better half the city blows up than half the state and its occupants. They were only a mid-point and that was how these things turned out sometimes—hopeless but for something aggressively extreme akin to hammering a nail with a nuclear missile; it had happened a few times and nearly happened some other times, like during the invasion of 2012. If that was how it went down, it wasn't on their little ragtag team of misfits.

But maybe someone had a different idea: where was Loki, and hadn't they once claimed they could level a city block if they truly wanted to?

Well, that was a shitty idea.

“No,” Tony said, his helmet down, standing firm before the rest of them as an entire skyscraper collapsed on the other street with an earsplitting quake. “Not happening.”

“It’s the fastest way,” Steve said, although the look on his face was the same: this would be a bad move and it would be on them. “We don’t know how long—”

“No!”

Natasha, knowing that there was no good side to this, said nothing.

“I can’t,” Tony said. “Not after everything Loki’s been through. Not like this.”

Behind him, the smoke was thick. The streets were burning up in clouds of ash. Most of this side had been evacuated early, but it wasn’t enough: somewhere under the rubble, there would be bodies. It had been just like this, and it might well prove fatal this time. But Loki also wouldn’t want all the death. Not again. Not to anyone else. So that was who they passed the decision to. It was night there, but she was awake; she didn’t startle at the knock, nor when Bucky explained everything to her. She wasn’t ready. She didn’t know if she was strong enough. She thought the same thing they all did: this would be a mistake, and there was no telling what would happen after the dust settled. This wouldn’t work. This would go wrong. As the seconds sank into her gut, though, she realized she had everything to lose if she didn’t try.

And, as if to prove her right, she warped there just in time to block a mountain of debris they couldn’t outrun.

It was hard to decipher the look she shared with Tony then—Tony, wide-eyed behind her as she stood with full armour and the runed sword blazing skyward. The street was still beneath the emerald barrier: everything had halted with a single gesture. There were no explosions for an instant. Nothing; she could hear her heart racing. The Iron Man suit was strong, but it wasn’t this strong: he would have been flattened to dust beneath it all. An unrecognizable mess. Blood and ash.

“I owed you,” she said; she wished she could smile at him but her body wouldn’t let her.

Tony looked starstruck. “Thank you,” he said, mustering the smile she couldn’t.

Loki turned as another blast rocked the street and held the barrier. “Is there a plan?” she asked, glancing over her shoulder.

“No plan. Take him down.”

He was a guy—just a random human who’d picked up some power armour and ballistics from who knows where. No way anyone was touching him, though; getting through all the fire was impossible. The smoke wasn’t going, and as the smell sank into Loki’s armour, she was suddenly breathless. Her throat shut. Her insides became a void. But she found her courage, and before the man could attack again, she warped to his side and blew him across the street with a blade of energy from the sword.

The flames retreated from the tempest’s strength.

The piles of steel and concrete disintegrated.

The man, bruised but alive, got up.

“What’s your problem, anyway?” Loki growled, walking after him with the sword low. Sparks trailed behind her. The ash on her cape burned up in green. Her eyes were alight beneath the golden horns.

“Fuck you,” the man said, firing another blast.

Loki warped out of the way. “You first,” she said, and then she knocked him full-force into the asphalt—left a massive crater stretching to the other end of the street as he slid. Shorted the circuits with an overload of raw magic, just in case. He didn’t get up.

This was an outrageously quick ending to such a disaster, and as she warped to Tony’s side, she saw them all gawking.

“It didn’t suit me to have all these spells but never use them,” she said, because it was true: no sense stifling herself.

“Maybe you are something of an Avenger,” Tony said, hoping to lighten the mood.

“Hardly. I’m not useless.”

They might have laughed, honestly, but the weight of what had happened left no room for humour. They *were* useless; that was why it had gotten so bad. They couldn’t even stop one guy. Unlucky, wasn’t it?

She stared down the street as the sirens neared. “Is that all?”

“Should be,” Tony said. “We only really needed to stop him. The other guys can take it from here.”

Why did this feel familiar? Not the fires. Not the ruined buildings, though she remembered those well. Not the smoke caking into her hair. Ah—she had been here before. As she watched the man, his bruised body struggling to move the armour’s locked joints, she felt a bit like she had six years ago: frustrated, trapped, numb. Terrified of what came next. But she sure didn’t show it, and, wrapping herself in that very same damn-you-all snark, she turned and started back down towards the compound without a word. Didn’t even look at anyone. Behind the horns, her gaze could have killed.

She was brisk, and, deciding quite shortly that she had better things to do than walk, she cut the rest of the way and warped right into their usual meeting place in the compound. Everything was fine.

She went to the kitchen, still carrying the sword, and put the kettle on. Everything was fine.

She stepped away and sat in the couch with the sword beside her. Everything was fine.

The others showed up quickly, but it was hard to tell; the room was foggy and the minutes were thick and sluggish. She stayed there in the couch and said nothing. She stared at the kitchen island. Armour still on. Sword still there. Battle-ready. Silent. No breaths. No movement. Nothing. They sat at the large table, where Tony immediately opened all the data he had on the holographic displays. Live news. Street map. A few other things. He, unlike her, removed the armour, although he was just as restless.

The kettle, entirely undisturbed by everything, continued whirring.

“Is he okay?” she heard Steve ask.

“She,” Tony said, not looking up from the graphs.

“She?”

“Loki’s a woman today.”

“Oh.” Steve paused; the gears spinning in his brain were almost audible. “Is she okay?”

“Jesus tap dancing Christ, Steve, does she look okay? No. Fuck off.”

Steve, of course, made a face like he had just watched someone wipe their ass with a page from the Bible, but fair enough: there were bigger problems right now than a spicy sentence and he probably shouldn’t have asked in the first place.

The kettle clicked off. Loki grabbed a mug at random—the pink one that said “Drama Queen”—and a bag of very strong black tea and then carefully filled it. Though she could not see him, she was certain Tony was anxiously watching her.

“Is it a good idea to be walking around a kitchen wearing horns?” Steve asked genuinely.

“Yes,” Tony said. “Leave her alone.”

“What? I just don’t want... her to crash into anything.”

“If she crashes into something, we will deal with it. Not my concern right now.”

She sat back down with her tea and said nothing.

“Casualties?”

“Don’t know yet.”

“How far does that go?”

“Far. Peter, get off the table.”

“Sorry.”

“Any survivors?”

“I don’t kn—wait.”

“Tony.”

“Shut up! Shut up. I’m thinking. Yeah. Yeah, it looks like there might be—shit.”

Loki glanced over the backrest.

“They’ll never get everyone in time,” Tony said, eyes frozen on the topography.

Steve did not respond, but his expression was very clear: and we can? He lowered his gaze.

Loki returned the sword to storage, or something like it—something a bit closer on hand—and then took her tea and slowly went to join Tony. “Never’s a strong word,” she said.

Tony didn't look away from the grids. "Yeah."

She leaned on his chair's backrest and nervously sipped. What was the motive? Anger? Grief? Or was he just desperate for attention? Was it anything like the tangle of catastrophes preceding the invasion—and did it matter? Or was she just trying to justify her presence here again?

"Rubble's too deep," Tony mused, more to himself than to anyone else. "Whoever's alive will be dead by the time search and rescue hits. But that's how it usually goes."

"I've got a plan."

Tony turned to look up at her. "You mean go back out there? No. Absolutely not."

"So we let everyone die instead knowing I could have helped?"

"You can't do this to yourself."

"Do you not find me capable?"

"I do find you capable. I know you *can*. And I know what it's going to do to you. Loki, please."

That look in Tony's eyes was familiar: he looked like he was trying not to cry. He looked like that man who had kept vigil in a hospital room instead of celebrating his birthday. They ought to stop here and rest.

"I didn't think I'd live to see the day when I have better morals than you lot," Loki muttered, turning away with her tea. She finished it in one breath and set the mug on the table. "Cowards. Not you, Peter."

"Excuse me," Tony said. "No."

Loki drew the sword. "I'm going," she said, glaring down at him. "You can't stop me. Maybe if you come with me I'll have a chance."

Now that sure was a rock and a hard place. Tony took a heavy breath and stood. "Your stubbornness will get you killed," he said, forming the Iron Man.

"Quoth the most stubborn man I have ever met."

Tony resisted the urge to argue and clasped her hand.

There were still firetrucks and ambulances and every possible law enforcement vehicle around the corners and at least a few news helicopters, and the smell of smoke had not gone. They seemed very small among the chaos—just them, side by side as the magic faded. "Scan for life," Loki said, pulling away from him. "I'll get the rubble loose."

"Can you do that?"

"I'll find out."

Tony let the faceplate down and flew off for a better look.

It was quick—a few seconds in one spot and then another, and then he said, “Two over here!” no faster than Loki warping to match him. She was in better shape than she’d been on the ship and the sword helped, gleaming as the concrete lifted itself away. Hands pressed tight to the hilt. A breathless stare. Tony, knowing what these injuries could do if disturbed, was wise enough to leave them to her.

They were alive, but not well—ripped in a dozen different places with bleeding gashes and ash-covered bruises. Unconscious or close to it. Climbing the rubble with the sword in hand, Loki healed them both. “They’ll wake,” she said, but she wasn’t sure. Aftercare? Ah—Tony was already on it; she caught him ending a call just as she turned. He continued down the street.

“One?” he said above a mess of busted vehicles, and then she went and hurriedly did the same.

Over and over—not thinking, not really speaking. Locked on autopilot. She stopped feeling the ash in her eyes. The smoke lost its hold on her lungs. Every wound she saw wasn’t real. She caught a glance from Tony as they crept into the worst of it: he knew. This was familiar, and he hated himself for it. This was the last place she should have been and she was a fool for offering. This shouldn’t have happened. He shouldn’t have let her. His voice was cracking with each number—apologetic, frantic, desperate. I shouldn’t have dragged you here; I’m sorry you had to see this again. But all the grief in the world couldn’t get in their way. All the fear couldn’t stop them. There was a later time for that.

“There’s a kid here,” he said. He warned it: are you okay with this?

No. No, she wasn’t. But it didn’t matter. She went in there just the same and healed the child’s bleeding wounds, one hand on their chest and the other on the sword. She counted the sirens. She tried not to give in to the void. Turning back, she could almost hear Thanos’s mocking whispers. It wasn’t this, but it was close.

“Please hang on,” Tony said. “I’m with you.”

Loki didn’t answer—not enough for that. There were bigger problems.

“Four over here. That’s the last of them.” Tony landed and removed his faceplate. “That’s it. I checked.”

Loki pulled the concrete away. “Keep that on,” she said as she got to work. “There’s too much debris in the air.”

“And you?”

“I’m fine.”

There was no winning that argument; Tony slid the faceplate back on and kept watch. “Don’t keep yourself here longer than you need to,” he said. “Please. I don’t want to cause you more grief.”

“I’m staying until I know it’s safe,” Loki said. She leapt off the remaining rubble, sword up, and stared down the street. “You checked?”

“I can’t find anything else,” Tony said. “The rest are dead or in a hospital.”

Did they do what they could? Was this enough? There was more. There had to be more.

“You did the best you could,” Tony said. “I know it doesn’t feel like it, but please believe me. I’m proud of you.”

“Did you check?” she said, breathless.

“I checked. That’s it. I’m sorry.”

She sat there in the middle of the street and laid the sword behind her. “That’s it?” she whispered.

“That’s it,” Tony said, and then he let the Iron Man melt away and sat beside her. “I’m so sorry. I never wanted to put you through this again.”

She leaned into her knees and broke down. The ambulances did come by shortly. Just in case—she didn’t know how well she’d healed everyone. They never moved; that part of the street was undrivable anyway. They just sat and said nothing.

“Stark!” someone said, coming up to their little pile of rubble. “You said they’re healed?”

“I don’t know. My friend knows healing magic, but it’s not her specialty. A lot of them are still in critical condition.”

And oh, yeah, she was dressed to the nines in her usual style of armour and a very, very unmissable headpiece and she *knew* everyone here recognized her, but somewhere between everything Natasha had claimed to have done and all the lives she had just saved on camera and perhaps the fact that she was also sobbing her face off and clearly in no state to commit another crime against humanity, no one really seemed to care: if nothing else ever went right, luck graced her this one time.

“Thank you, miss,” was all the man said, and then he was gone.

The minutes felt like hours.

“We can go now,” Tony softly said. “They’ve got it from here. It’s okay.”

“I don’t know why I did this.”

“Because you’re kind.”

“I don’t want to be kind.”

Tony took a heavy breath of smoke.

“I don’t want all this death anymore,” Loki said. “I can’t take it. It’s too much.”

“I know. No one wants to see these things. Do you want to head back? You don’t need to stay here.”

“I can’t breathe.”

“Look at me. It’s okay. Just count to five. You’ll be fine.”

She breathed in slowly. One, two, three, four, five. One, two, three, four, five. Beneath her, the leather was muddy; her hands were covered in ash and blood. She knew this place. She had been here before.

“You don’t need to be a hero,” Tony said. “No one will judge you. This thing breaks you.”

“It’s a small price to pay, isn’t it? What’s a little grief for so many lives saved?”

“You’re allowed to put yourself before others, Loki. You can do that again. I won’t stop you. Some people feel better when they’re sacrificing themselves. That’s not you, and that’s okay. You don’t have infinite pieces of yourself to give. Most people don’t. That’s okay.”

“Do you?”

“I used to.”

Loki stared up at the smoke.

“Let’s head back,” Tony said. “Okay?”

“Okay,” she said, and then she warped them into the compound and vanished the sword. Tony stood; she didn’t. She appeared right up against the wall and stayed there, blank-eyed.

“How bad was it?” Steve asked.

“Pepper is the only reason I didn’t just fly myself into a liquor store,” Tony said, trudging into the kitchen for a glass of water. “I quit.”

“What?”

“I quit. And so does Loki. Sorry, Pete.”

He scooped aside with his leftovers so Tony could get to the sink.

“Tony—”

“Don’t speak to me.”

Steve shut his mouth.

The room was silent, and, as Tony returned to the table with his dusty clothes and glass of water to see what he had missed in their absence, the creeping dread hanging above them felt physical. He scrolled through everything and tried not to think. He pretended it was just words and numbers. He realized how stupid he was and shut the entire thing off, leaned back in his chair, and said nothing.

Peter would probably be up for weeks over this, but at least he hadn’t seen the worst of it. Hey: welcome to the Avengers, kid. What a load of crap.

“That’s so funny,” Loki suddenly said with a wheezy chuckle, “that—you know, Thor was telling me once that I should come join the Avengers because he missed fighting by my side or something like that and then *this* happens and we’ve finally got a chance to fight together and that bonehead’s off fishing! Can you believe that?”

Tony tried to smile. “What a guy.”

“And now he’ll tell me that I shouldn’t have gone alone and I should have just stayed home and read a book and then I’ll say”—she started sobbing between the laughter—“you really *are* the

worst, brother! I can't believe you were off fishing the one time I needed you. And then he'll probably start crying too because that's what he said when we—"

At the other end of the room, Natasha stared down her sandwich.

"Because it was just like that," Loki choked out, and then she vanished the armour and continued sobbing into her velvet sleeves. "It was worse."

"That must have been horrible," Natasha quietly said. "I... can't imagine."

"I don't know what changed. I never cared."

There was a long pause; everyone at the table looked at each other, trying to decide who should do something or what. Then Natasha left her sandwich and went to sit beside her on the floor. "These things add up," she said. "They get to you eventually. It happens to the best of us."

"I want to forget."

"I wish you could."

"Have you ever held a dying child in your arms?"

Natasha took a slow breath. "I have," she said. "It's an awful feeling. I'm sorry you had to experience it. No one should have to."

"I miss not caring," Loki muttered. "I want to be the person you met."

"A lot would be different. I don't think it would be all good. We wouldn't be talking right now."

She was very close to saying something about how none of them wanted her anyway, but, closing her eyes, she refrained. "I should have stayed in that tavern."

Peter looked like he wanted to argue but wasn't sure how. "I... think I sprained my ankle," he quietly said; she and Natasha glanced at him.

"Did you?"

"I don't know."

She walked over with a sigh. "Let me see," she said, kneeling before him. "Left?"

Peter raised the foot. "Yeah."

Loki pressed a hand to the bone. "Peter, that's not a sprain," she said, looking up with a baffled frown. "This is broken in three places."

"Uh."

She healed it nonetheless.

"Thank you," Peter said.

Loki stood. "Anyone else?"

There was no answer.

“Alright,” she said, and then she rubbed a fresh tear from her eye and went to sit with Tony.

Tony, perhaps out of desperation—perhaps something about familiar routines and stressful times—paused his stewing for a moment to scoot closer with his phone and say, “Hey, look at this,” before showing her a video of a kitten climbing onto another kitten only to topple them and a third kitten to the floor. Luckily, it worked, and she managed a tired laugh above the tears; so did he. Then the video ended and everything went right back to horrible. But for a moment, it worked.

“I guess I misjudged you,” Steve said as Tony tucked the phone back in its pocket. “Even after everything that’s happened. I couldn’t move past it. I’m sorry.”

“I don’t blame you,” Loki said. “It’s not unwise to let experience guide you. I would have questioned it if you trusted me so easily.”

And it did seem sort of out of character, didn’t it? But cold exteriors often hid the kindest hearts; this, she knew firsthand. She would lay herself down just as willingly as on the ship.

“You did good today,” Steve said. “Thank you.”

She smiled through the tears. “You’re welcome,” she said, and then she said nothing else for the whole evening.

‡

They never did get to the collateral; nothing in the world could have made them spend another second amid the ruins. Although Loki was certain she could breeze through all the damage—she had done it before—she wouldn’t know, nor would Tony have let her try. They had done enough. Loki, who had a very unfortunate case of combined jet lag, sleep deprivation, and general mental exhaustion, slept for most of the day. Thor was understandably distraught by this whole situation and begged to see her, but by the time word got out, she had already locked herself in her former bedroom—spell on the doorknob and everything; there was no picking this one.

“Please open the door,” Thor said. “I’m worried about you.”

“No, you’re not,” Loki said.

“It’s almost seven,” said Tony beside him.

“Time is a construct,” she solemnly quoted.

“I want to talk.”

“Talk with Thor.”

“Please.”

“I want to be alone.”

Tony sighed. "Okay. Sorry I bothered you."

They both left. Loki stared up at the ceiling. It was bound to come to this, wasn't it? Her past always repeated itself; no reason it wouldn't do so again. Thanos would be laughing if he knew.

She heard Tony at the door again a little while later. "I brought you dinner," he said. "If you want it. Can I come in?"

What was Tony's deal, anyway? She reluctantly dissolved the magic around the doorknob and unlocked it.

Tony entered slowly. "Do you want me to leave this somewhere?"

"The kitchen table," Loki said.

He set it down. "I fucked up," he said.

"Every now and then you will. That's just life sometimes. It can't be helped."

"I'm afraid I sent you back to where you started."

"I'll never be back where I started; I have experience I didn't have before."

"How long have you been in that position?"

"Twenty hours, give or take."

"Do you want to come outside with me for a bit? Clear your head?"

"Is it raining? I can't see from here."

"No. I wouldn't ask if it was."

"Where do you want to go?"

"Wherever. Just a walk around the compound, if you want. I don't care."

Loki rolled onto her side.

"Okay?" Tony said, making his way back to the door.

She got up slowly. They walked out together. It was quite busy for once, with everyone packed around the table discussing the state of things. No one really looked at the two of them other than Thor, who smiled once and then returned to whatever was happening.

They walked around the compound.

"I think that was the last time I inexplicably save everyone from an otherwise hopeless situation," Loki said as she kicked at some grass.

"Yeah." Tony leaned against the wall. "The novelty wears off after the first few times."

"Someone else should go be a hero."

“Yeah.”

“When do I move past this?”

Tony slid down the wall to sit on the ground. “I don’t know,” he said. “I took a few years once I started seriously looking at everything. You might take less. Or more.”

“I suppose I should start with Thanos slaughtering everyone I grew up with,” Loki said, expressionless. She stared down at the grass.

“That’s probably a good idea,” Tony said with a nod. “Work backwards, that sort of thing. Deal with the surface stuff.”

“Isn’t it funny how much can change in just a second?”

“Hilarious, honestly.”

Loki sat beside him. “This is a good spot.”

“Yeah.”

There were birds chirping somewhere.

“You know I’m not a therapist, right?” Tony said, turning to look at her. “I don’t know what I’m talking about most of the time. I don’t trust that we’re going about this the right way.”

“I know,” Loki said. “I appreciate you trying anyway.”

“I don’t think I can help you through everything.”

“We can start somewhere.”

Tony leaned on a knee. “You sound so wise all of a sudden,” he said. “I like this side of you. It’s... comforting.”

“It’s always there,” Loki said. “Sometimes it’s just harder to see.”

“I guess it is.”

There was no mention of the fact that Loki still felt like she was falling in love with him. That sitting here was simultaneously the best and worst feeling—that she could feel herself breaking every time he smiled at her because she knew what followed. That all of this was her own fault. Tony looked like he was thinking it, but he said nothing.

“I am a tragedy stitched together with lies,” Loki said.

Tony whistled. “That’s hardcore.”

“Disaster was my first love. I braved her flaming touch to feel warmth.”

“She was just as misunderstood,” Tony said with a nod.

“Fear knows a good waltz.”

“I’d rather dance with her than alone.”

“I don’t know where I’m going, but the darkness has my back.”

“He’s kinder on my eyes than the light.”

“I’m not alone so long as I’ve got rage.”

“He carries me when I’ve lost the strength.”

“Grief has the sweetest kiss.”

“The worst poisons do, but I don’t mind.”

“There’s not so much joy without a little chaos.”

“They know what’s what. Life’s got no rules.”

“The easy sights aren’t so lovely as the ones you’ve paid to see.”

“The oldest paths are quick, but you’ll eventually miss the trees.”

“Pain is just hope’s messenger.”

“They’ll both catch me when I fall.”

“They’re always gentle when I’m hurting.”

“They’re always there when I call.”

“I don’t think we’re so different—just called a different name.”

“We’ve each got our own story, but where it matters, we’re the same.”

“The ship’s safest at the dock, but that’s not why it was made.”

“You’ll find the prettiest nights on the darkest seas, as long as you can be brave.”

“Happiness smiles brightest after she’s been caught in the rain.”

“The greatest treasures take a struggle; she learned this from pain.”

“I wish these things were simpler, but the simple things bore me.”

“Better to take a few chances and simply see what might be.”

“Nothing will change if I just keep cursing my luck.”

“Better to face it with a laugh and just not give a fuck.”

And Loki did—burst out laughing so hard it turned into a cough, and then she kept coughing so hard she cried, and then she laughed again.

“See, I know you knew what you were doing!” Tony insisted with a cackle. “Nothing rhymes with luck.”

“You’re terrible.”

“Yeah. I don’t know what you expected, honestly. Wanna try again?”

“I think that’s enough.”

“Alright.”

They sat there until dark, which was not very long but still a fair amount of time spent in silence. Then they circled the compound again before going back inside. Nothing else really happened; Loki went to eat in her room and Tony went to sort out some new information and that was it. She didn’t sleep. Like the repairs, she was sure she could help if she tried, but she never did. She considered what she overheard and crafted solutions on her own, and that was all she did.

Loki passed by the wreckage on some quiet hour that next morning. They had cleared the loose debris from the street, but that was all: the buildings were still destroyed, the asphalt was still in a million pieces, the smoke was still burned into everything. It was cornered off and crowded with workers. There was no sense staying long, and, slowly, she continued down the city. She got a coffee and listened to someone playing a banjo. She sat with some stray cats. She tried to be normal. Turning back, she eventually found herself at that bookstore: it was on the way to the compound. Mostly because she had nothing better to do, and because she was so, so glad it had been away from all the chaos and needed to be sure, she stopped by.

Hemlock was on her phone. “Whoa,” she said, looking up. “You look great.”

“Even with the hair?” Loki tiredly responded; it was down today, like a mane around her face.

“Especially with the hair. It suits you.”

“Thank you.”

“Can I help you with anything?”

“I... don’t know.”

“More novels to rebuild your collection?”

No, not today. Shame was a bastard; she knew damn well what she was looking for but didn’t know how to ask. She inspected the jar of bookmarks by the cash register. “Do you have anything on... trauma?”

In general or like self-help? Ah—Hemlock seemed to know well enough. She went in the little storage room behind the front desk and re-emerged shortly with a torn and creased paperback. “I don’t need this anymore,” she said, setting it on the counter. “You can have it.”

Loki picked it up. “Are you sure?”

“I’ve got everything down by heart.”

She flipped through the book, feeling a bit too much like she was committing a robbery, and then warped it into storage. “Why me?”

“You’re not exactly my average customer,” Hemlock said, leaning on the counter with her languid, nonchalant half-smile. “And I heard what you did the other day. Saw it in an article, I mean. You looked epic. I think you deserve a free book.”

“Thank you.”

“I hope it helps. Anything else?”

“I think that’s all.”

“Alright. See you later.”

Loki walked out and continued back to the compound.

Maybe it was fate that, as she reluctantly sat down for dinner with whoever was still here, Steve brushed a glass of water with his elbow, tipping it over and spilling its contents on the floor with a loud splash. Half a second. It startled her so badly that everything in her body ceased—no breaths, no movement, nothing. She shut her eyes by reflex and tried to calm herself.

Tony, ever observant, glanced at her; she caught his gaze as soon as she looked again. “You okay?”

No. No, she wasn’t. She hated this. Why was she panicking again? What did a glass of drinking water have to do with anything? This wasn’t happening.

Tony questioningly motioned towards the nearest exit.

She got up in a hurry and went to sit on the stairs. Tony joined her.

“That was unfortunate,” he said.

“I just want to have dinner!” she hissed, burying her face in her knees. “This shouldn’t be so hard.”

“Based on what?”

“I’m not supposed to panic because someone spilled their drink.”

Tony leaned on an arm. “Maybe not,” he said. “But you did. That’s not your fault. I’ve panicked over things like this before.”

“I don’t want this to happen.”

Well, of course not; why would she? Tony nodded. “Sometimes it takes a while,” he said, a bit quietly.

“A while? Nothing has changed.”

“I think it’s because you’re treating it like a fear.”

“I don’t think you understand that it’s not *just* a fear. It’s not a fear at all! I keep panicking because it reminds me of Thanos. All I can think about when my skin’s not completely dry is—”

She broke off in a stammer; Tony waited patiently.

“I can’t,” she whispered.

“Well, there’s your answer,” Tony said. “Of course it’s not just a fear. It’s a reminder. It freaks you out because it reminds you of something. You can try to deal with it directly, but you need to work on the root of it, too. Otherwise you’ll only keep making yourself panic for nothing.”

“I know.”

“So how about we sit down tomorrow and take a look at this?”

“Tomorrow?”

“Is that too soon?”

She said nothing.

“You still have a lot of tea, right? How do you do that?”

“I don’t know.”

“But there’s something you can do. So why don’t you come over tomorrow and we can try filling a glass of water?”

“That’s stupid.”

“No, it’s not. That’s the point: you need to start with the small things to ease yourself back into it. So what do you say?”

She didn’t want to.

“And remember if it doesn’t work, you can always try again.”

She got up and took her dinner to her room. Tony watched her leave but didn’t follow.

She shouldn’t have come here. That nook in her house on the hill had served her well; she should have ignored them and stayed there. These idiots would get her killed if she kept running after them at every whim. Did they even care? Or was she just useful to have around? Only one who could turn the battle—yeah, that tracked: that was probably all they needed her for. Maybe not Peter. Hopefully not Tony. But the rest? She believed it. Or maybe she was just paranoid again. Either way, she couldn’t face them when she went to return her plate.

Tony looked dead on the couch. “Did you change your mind?” he asked, peering at her from behind his phone.

“Eat me,” she muttered, and then she turned and vanished without so much as a goodbye.

He sat up. “What? I... Loki.”

She was gone, though. No trace. Not even the shine of emerald in the air; it flickered away before he could even blink. The seconds turned to a minute and he still couldn’t understand. The minute turned to several. The room slowly emptied.

At the other end, Natasha was staring a hole into the holographic displays.

Tony shot her a dim glare over the couch. "You should have said something."

"I know," she said. "I'm sorry. We shouldn't have dragged her into this."

"Do you even care?"

"More than you think."

Tony took a hard breath and then plodded out of the room. Natasha, alone there at the table, just kept replaying old information. Dead. Injured. How willingly Loki had shown with no promise of anything other than another lifetime of grief and how they'd barely even thanked her. They truly were awful.

Chapter End Notes

"Hey Johan where's the climax of this story"

Yes.

Intermission #4: Everything Left Behind

Chapter Summary

Fearing the worst again, Tony tries to understand.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is quirky so I'm posting it early. Did I mention the rest of the story is in shambles and I'm suddenly reconsidering this and everything I just wrote? Wahoo!

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

The place was empty in the morning.

The rooms were quiet; the worst of it had been dealt with.

The guilt never fully left, and Tony, who had not slept after hearing that Loki had not merely returned to New Asgard, wondered where to go from here.

All the usual.

I don't want to write a poem

this is stupid and I hate writing

please leave me alone

I would rather be sleeping

not writing a poem.

At the end of everything, it wasn't his responsibility. He hadn't insisted. He hadn't wanted; he had been very clear about this. And, although it was a bit tragic to say after all this time, it was just as likely that this had been... well, temporary. They'd bumped into each other by chance and overstayed the kindness because the situation had called for it. Beneath whatever friendship they'd forged in those few months, they were still two vastly different people with vastly different lives and they still barely even knew each other: of course it wouldn't hold.

If it was friendship, anyway.

No no. [REDACTED]

(The successor to 'I don't want to write a poem')

[REDACTED] *(sorry)*

... But he still, at the end of everything, felt wrong letting Loki vanish without a trace on such a sour note. Even if it wasn't his responsibility what they did with themselves. Even if he ought to just call it and carry on. Didn't work like that; it felt wrong. So he took his time running the possibilities.

[REDACTED]
you should rest, you bruised and battered piece of starlight;

all the cries on your tongue drown the stars in your eyes.

you keep screaming to deaf ears

you keep begging to die

you keep testing your fears

knowing when they face you, you hide.

you need to stop lying

and let your injuries heal

they'll never get better like this

they don't care how you feel.

you need to sit down and let your tears dry

wait for your strength to return before you risk another try.

Tony scanned once, and, while waiting, made himself too much coffee and grabbed what remained of dinner.

[REDACTED] ||

What did you do to me?



- *orange tea*

- *jam (any)*

- *bread alternative that isn't shit ← Doesn't exist*

The next day, Tony scanned again.

Hold me and tell me you will not be another grave.

I long to feel that certain love again:

that love that will not go

that will not wither with time

that is fearless and kind

and, most of all, blind;

that which stays pure

and stays strong

whose touch is gentle

and never wrong

who knows no greed

nor shouts or screams

just love and nothing else

with no pain in between.

Nothing. No results. Not in New Asgard, which Tony had already known; not anywhere else.

This left a million other possibilities, and, perhaps only for the closure, he stuck with it.

The lies we tell ourselves are usually subtle.

Reality's easy to change when you're not looking, and you usually aren't;

Usually, you'll never notice, and one lie's already another.

The memory of it twists till you're not sure what's fact — eats at your judgment till it's all you can see.

Honestly, you'll think, this can't be a lie: it's just been so long that it's become a part of me.

The coffee at the AA meetings was good, and often the coffee was the only reason Tony could ever bring himself to go.

13.

what a special kind of suffering it is to be trapped inside your body —

no breaking down these walls that hold me captive in every breath;

I fear my sentence here will end only in death.

this skin is unfamiliar

these legs are not mine to tread

these hands are not my own —

whose eyes — lips — chest

and everything in between;

these are not mine

but they are all I have.

A few days passed and, increasingly frustrated with the empty exchanges between everyone who might have known something, Tony went to ask Bucky in person. But Bucky had no idea.

“Have you checked town?”

“No,” Tony said.

“You should check. She hangs out there sometimes.”

“The scan didn't pick up anything,” Tony said. “So I guess Loki's either shifted or not on this planet. What are my options?”

“Thor might know,” Bucky said. “But I haven’t heard from him. Sorry.”

“Okay,” Tony said, although it was not particularly okay because that had been the main reason he came here; now what?

fear is the silent killer, they have told me

but the truth is I feel alive in its arms.

fear fills the gaps that feel nothing

and the parts that feel too much

the parts that fix to be and never are

and the parts that try but don’t get far.

I don’t know how to breathe without its grip around my throat

but I don’t think I would want to

I rather like where it’s gotten me

and [REDACTED] I like that I met you. I

(These two go together)

apathy is an old friend of mine

that sits at my bedside and sings to me.

I like hearing the truth sometimes:

I don’t always need to care

and my troubles are too trite

no one will mind if I don’t bother

or if I just walk away without a fight.

I can’t put up with what’s no longer there.

I can’t accept that I have only distractions, diversions, and deaths-for-rent —

time and some willpower and a thousand unfamiliar voices to drown it out

so I’ll take apathy any day.

Town, of course, was pointless. It was a nice change of scenery, though, and Tony found it funny how every single one of the few strangers he asked along the way said the same thing: they hoped Loki was okay wherever they were because the world would be emptier without the wit.

He hoped that too, and, a little weary, he returned to New Asgard to kill time.

they say that goldfish grow to suit their homes:

that those we have so grown to know

such tiny creatures, palm-sized —

that toss them in the ocean

and a truer size will show.

I think I understand:

this body is one of those perfect little globes —

those purchased with pocket change, with not an inch to roam.

my soul is stifled here, spread thin beneath its bow

and I can't take it; there is no space for me to grow.

“You are not their caretaker,” said the woman seated by the fire with him, a thin smile across her scarred face. “They go where they please when they please. They are not bound to anyone. If they want help, they will accept it. If they want to be found, they will. And if not, then that is no one’s fault.”

Tony had learned this early on and he knew it was true. But they were not the first such person he had known and this was not the first time he had done something like this, and if there was anything at all he could do right now, he might as well try; it would nag him for ages if he didn’t.

The fire stared back at him.

the funniest thing of all

is to tell yourself that you mustn't expect perfection

for you are only one man — but then you argue

that you are never just a man:

you are as vast as the universe itself

*varied as each of its atoms
wonderfully complex —
a man, yes, but never only.*

*might I be honest for a moment
and tell you that there are times when even I have my doubts —
we are all such harsh creatures, laying claim to such falsities
that there is no such thing:
I must only be a man, just as to think otherwise must only be madness.*

*there are times when
the pain of insincerity seems to vanish
the distance between who I know myself to be and who they think I am seems to close
the agony I have felt seems no realer than a dream —
surely
they must be right.*

*but I think I know better what it is to stand in this body of mine;
to claim I am only a man is to betray a part of me
and if she hears, o — how angry she'll be.*

*I am never just a man
just as the forest is never just a tree
and the sky is never just a star.
I am only me — nothing less
nothing more.*

The days turned into a week.

Tony, by then out of the odd little village and home picking apart forms and other legal drudgery, wondered if there was even any use: whatever could have happened would have long happened by now. He also wondered if this could be considered stalking and thought that maybe he ought to take a step back—that, after a certain point, questioning what was going on passed from wholehearted concern for a good friend in a crisis to none of his business whatsoever because what another grown person many centuries older than him did with their own life was their concern, not his.

Still, in between his usual schedule, he kept asking around.

18.

*how bright it must be back there in the cosmos
warm beneath the light of a million new and dying
weightless, breathless, formless, fearless
too tired to struggle, with eyes too cold for crying.
my body is not eternal and the peace won't last
no rest between the fires lit beneath my skin of glass
cold, but they're colder — I know it'll get to me
and I've no running from hunger, nor thirst and sleep
someday I'll have to decide where my bones will lie
but for a moment I remember, and how bright it must be.*

“I’m worried,” Tony muttered, kneading the tablecloth. “What was the point?”

“There’s always a point,” Thor said across from him. “He gained a good friend. His smiles when you two are joking are the brightest I’ve seen in years. He’s honest with you; do you know how much trust that takes?”

More than anyone could imagine. Tony had met these kinds of people before: they lied constantly because it gave them control where they otherwise had none. It gave them a means to defend themselves—put them a step ahead of everyone at all times not because they wanted to, but because they needed to. And so for someone like that, telling the truth was akin to surrender. Honesty was not something offered lightly.

“You don’t know if Loki’s a he again,” Tony said.

“They’re only words to him. He’s all of them, always. As long as you’re polite, he doesn’t care what you call him. That’s what he’s told me.”

“That... must feel powerful.”

Thor smiled.

Please Don't Read This

You are so beautiful it hurts and I have no idea how I never saw it before. I want to cry every time you smile at me and I think one of these days I might. I can't tell how much of this is just infatuation, but the truth is you are the most gorgeous person I have ever met (which makes me feel awful because I hate shallow love but I feel even worse denying it) and, believe me, I have met many. You probably already know this, though. Oh well.

“But you won't rest, will you?”

“Friends don't let previously suicidal friends vanish for weeks on end conspicuously close to a mental health crisis,” Tony said.

Thor, who had been thinking this every single one of those days but had not wanted to remind himself of it, said nothing.

Blink and you'll miss it! ♥ ——— (seriously, please find a palatable bread alternative)

grief is a blade that was never removed

bloody inside the flesh and shrouded by scars

more painful with age yet too painful to recall

grief will be healed over, but it is always there

and it will kill you as soon as you think you don't care.

once — an uncareful step, an unwatchful breath

and the blade is moved too far:

the space is reopened / the scars grow larger / the pain grows deeper

but it still won't budge.

for a moment we can stop and tell ourselves it's not real

but my, dear heart, how it hurts; come so many years and it's torturous to touch

but it will only get worse from here, and one day you need to sit down and steel yourself

bite down if you need to — but take that which has taken so much.

“Looks ominous,” Tony said, holding up the pendant: it was smooth and flat, etched with runes in some kind of dark, crystalline stone. “... What is it?”

“It’s a compass,” Thor said. “It’s all I have. He set it to track him: if you can somehow get it working again, it’ll lead you to him. But... bear in mind he could be anywhere in the universe, and if he truly doesn’t want anyone to find him then nothing will be enough.”

“Why do you have this and why have I never seen you use it?”

“He gave it to me on a trip once and then deactivated it as soon as we returned so I couldn’t annoy him. I kept it. I thought it might be useful someday.”

“But it doesn’t work right now.”

“No. But it does in theory.”

Tony slid the pendant on with an unsatisfied sigh. “Thanks, I guess.”

“I hope you find him well,” Thor said. “I can’t lose him.”

Tony knew that Thor could have blamed him for this and, fearful for a moment, he suspected he did. But it seemed just as likely that these kinds of things had become normal over the many years and so it really wasn’t anyone’s fault: whatever Loki did or didn’t do came at their own discretion and all the warnings in the universe couldn’t sway them. And, had they not known and not had the chance to help and had something awful happened as a result, it probably would have been no better—no difference between wading through the same destruction again and the helplessness of having done nothing about it; both cut equally deep. Both were too familiar. Either would have killed them.

“I hope so too,” Tony said, slowly gathering his things, because he would miss this strange and whimsical troublemaker dressed in fine clothes and a clever smile and he knew he wasn’t the only one.

Some more truths (or in other words, I’m rambling)

sometimes our choices in life are between two deaths:

is this the easier one — quicker — better —

the one that will hurt more/less

the one that must happen

or something else?

no one ever knows, but there’s one way to be sure.

have faith you’ll survive either;

that's what courage is for.

-

for all the world's evils, there are such precious moments.

warm laughter, a tall tale or a few, and some good music;

what empty distractions we sell ourselves

but the rest is worth bearing for this.

There was no telling if the compass would ever work again or if it would ever even work without anyone's touch but Loki's, and Tony certainly wasn't the right person for finding out. He had a feeling it would be simpler than it seemed, though: if he had learned anything in their time together, it was that Loki was very practical with magic and tended towards the unremarkable. Assuming his hopes were right, it might have been as easy as just matching the signature—tricking the spell into working.

Not that that was easy. Tony Stark, meet magic: gross.

The truth was he couldn't stand it most of the time: it bothered him that he couldn't just chalk it up to science he didn't understand and he'd drawn more than a few negative associations from less-than-pleasant users, not to mention it ran on a completely different set of rules than what he was used to and boggled the crap out of him. But, as with many things, he had grown fond of its quirks in the past months and he was willing to sniff around.

What he did remember was how it had felt each and every time he brushed with one of Loki's spells, like an aftertaste. Hot. Cold. Maybe even a bit of strawberry. Warm laughs, reckless determination, loyalty without limits. Theatrics, but nothing tawdry. Anger. Apathy. All of the above and more. Pride buried in loathing. Kindness hidden beneath scorn. Love behind fear. Everything that was and wasn't—every wild and infinite contradiction stitching the magic together, most of which were too vast to be put in words. Everything no one would ever see in its full majesty: no great achievement could ever amount.

Tony thought he was imagining the faint flicker within the runes, but, watching it die again as the feelings scattered, he realized he hadn't.

He slid the pendant back on and went to further investigate.

He had a hunch he would find what he needed wherever Loki had been—that every little touch and every old spell would have lingered enough to jolt the pendant out of dormancy—and, hopeful, he continued his trip through the village. He checked the Iron Man suit, which still had some kind of something entwined in the code; he checked the dock, which he knew had seen several hundred too many breakdowns from every single person who lived here; he went to the little alcove with the fire pit again because he had forgotten to try there, and then, realizing this probably wouldn't work, he

wondered if he ought to dig through the compound. Somehow, he suspected the bedsheets would suffice.

He was still a bastard, though, and so he went to break into Loki's house and see what in the world was going on. It was unlocked.

It was hard realizing just how worried he was he would find them a few weeks dead somewhere—hunched and rotting with a bloody knife in one hand. But there was only the usual: the books, the papers, the pens, and the fur blanket piled on the armchair. In the bedroom, the marshmallow-esque dragon stared back at him as he opened the door, as if it knew he was trespassing with a magic rock in his hand. Sorry, dragon.

Perhaps to no surprise, the pendant did not react to any of this. Tony had expected it on some level; even if he was right, whatever was left must have been spread so thin that it wouldn't have mattered. There was no point looking here. There was no point to any of this. But he didn't give up so easily, and, turning to leave the bedroom, he saw what were very certainly several various-sized canvases beneath a cloth cover in the corner.

He pulled the cloth away and knelt to look at the paintings.

They were landscapes, some of wild forests and plains and some of cold mountains and vibrant night skies; one was clearly New Asgard's shoreline, its pencil skeleton half-painted. A few were more abstract: a wolf that looked like it had been deemed too much effort partway through and fed to angry black blotches and nicks, and a multi-coloured abyss that had probably been a field of flowers at some point. Many were simply sketches.

Looking farther back, Tony found another: an ethereal portrait of himself. He was smiling in it, working on some kind of small contraption, and the scene was bathed in pearlescent blue light; from the lines on his fingers to his eyelashes, not a detail had been missed. It was a late hour, but he didn't seem to mind. He seemed... serene.



A recreation of the painting described in the story. Tony is sitting at his desk, leaning on one hand and picking at something with a screwdriver. The room is dark and the Iron Man's casing covers him and his workspace with a pearlescent blue glow.

He was lost for words and could not look away for the longest time. There had been paintings made of him before, but nothing like this: there was something otherworldly about it that he had never seen. When had Loki managed this? How had they gotten such a perfect reflection without a photograph? Turning the canvas, Tony found writing on the back:

Tony,

I finally found a use for that paint! I hope you like it.

With love,

Loki

Tony removed the pendant from his neck and pressed it to the canvas's wooden frame. The runes flickered once and then settled to a soft glow, and then the pendant began to float towards one direction. "Well, that was anticlimactic, wasn't it?" he said to no one. Then he tied the pendant to his wrist and covered the paintings.

The good one (or: you can't stop me.)

can't think

think I'm brain-dead —

fed up with these ideas

rotting in my head.

can't breathe: the air's heavy

and my lungs are burning —

but breathe, though it's hard

between my guts churning.

can't speak, can't see;

feel your arms like a stranger's

like knives cutting into me.

there are no dangers

there's nothing to fear

but watch me choke

on these lingering tears.

these wounds feel like a dream

they shouldn't hurt me now, not then, not ever

but how real each scream:

you're here forever —

and every feverish glance

each look over my shoulder

every terrified trance

that's made me so much older.

*I didn't deserve this pain;
it still makes me wince
how fragile I am — how weak: what a shame.
I'm sick of these feelings
and how each day fades away
these days, I'm spent: all I crave is some healing
but these days I know it won't be today;
these days, there's nothing but time to keep breathing.
tomorrow I'll head out
and try to clear my head;
it's the worst kind of lonely
but it beats being dead.
I think there's no use
and these hopes feel so bare —
think I didn't suffer enough abuse
to deserve this kind of care.
my soul is still drowning
and my mind still won't obey
there's no point in me trying
not tomorrow, not today;
there's no point in not crying
because I still won't feel okay.
every effort seems to fail
everything pushes me back
I feel worse than when I started
but I think I'm still on track —
or maybe I'm not thinking: my head's still not clear*

but no matter what happens

I still seem to be here.

alive isn't much

but it's the best I can do

and as long as I'm alive

I think I'll make it through.

Chapter End Notes

when you're terrified of love because all it's done is hurt you but you poke it with a stick anyway like a funny little gremlin who just discovered fire, that's amore (these two fools don't have boundaries)

Forget-Me-Not

Chapter Summary

Sometimes the road is easier alone. Sometimes it's not.

Chapter Notes

[insert obligatory "wehwoahewgydhajgduiw we're in DRAFT LAND baby! Everything is WEIRD and BAD lololol I tried my best I'm sorry" disclaimer here]

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

There was no telling exactly where she wound up because she wasn't looking: it was a blind warp for the most part, something just to the middle of nowhere to get the panic out. It was a cold and windy morning and she almost fit in with a fur coat and hat. Rougher features. A little scruff on her jaw and an unkempt flop of curls. Thin glasses, just to further fudge any scrutiny; like the rest of the outfit, she put a little effort into those and kept them tangible. Nothing exceptional, perhaps aside from the fact that she proudly did not care what chaos her gender was trying to wreak today. But that was typical.

She was very alone, and, slowly, she made for the city on the horizon.

She never found out the location, but she could catch the Russian beneath the Allspeak's translation and decided she was somewhere in the very far parts of Siberia. That was just as well; all she needed was some time away. So now came her other problem, which was she had no idea why she had done this or why the shift: who the hell cared, anyway? But she didn't change back, nor did she consider returning anytime soon. She didn't need all this drama. She didn't need Tony. She didn't need any of it.

Good riddance, in fact.

Anyway, she found a bench and tried to clear her head.

"Oi!" said a man, sitting beside her. "What's up with you? Did she take the kids or something?"

"Only my dignity," Loki said, her voice a dry tenor.

The man nodded solemnly. He was very large and very drunk. "I'm Boris."

"Loki."

"Lucky?"

Wait, hadn't she had this exact same conversation in an interstellar tavern somewhere?

“It’s cold,” Boris said. “You need more clothes.”

“Cold doesn’t bother me.”

“That’s what everyone says.” He offered his vodka. “Drink?”

“No, thank you.”

Boris downed a long gulp of vodka. “What’s on your mind?” he asked, resting the bottle at his feet.

“I’m haunted by the consequences of that time I led an alien army into New York for, mainly but not exclusively, mass destruction purposes, which I did mostly because I was tortured into doing it but also because I needed an outlet for over a thousand years of pent-up emotions originating largely from the fact that apparently I was adopted and that’s why I was treated like shit compared to my brother not to mention I hated who I really was and would have very much liked to forget all of it by committing a few dozen crimes against humanity—the usual—and it turns out that I never even got over everything that led to said incident and I am in fact just now starting to process it all at once which is not going well, at all, not even a bit, and I’m also growing increasingly unstable as I remember the torture I’ve been repressing this whole time as well as basically every other awful thing I’ve been dealing with for the past thousand or so years that I’ve just been ignoring and, by the way, I also watched everyone I’ve ever known and loved get slaughtered before me recently, and to top it all off I’m falling in love with the former enemy who’s been helping me with all of this despite swearing to myself I would never fall in love again for my own sake and now I’m hiding in the middle of nowhere so I don’t have to think about it. Any questions?”

“That’s a lot of weight on your shoulders,” Boris said. “You don’t deserve it.”

“You don’t know what I deserve.”

“Everyone deserves happiness. I’m sorry you struggle so much.”

Loki resisted the urge to chew him out and said, “Thank you.”

Boris was not very talkative, and they mostly just sat in silence under a dead streetlight and watched the city from afar. Loki, suddenly remembering the book she had never started, pulled it out and opened to the first page. There were many tabs and scribbles along the margins, mostly reminders and notes about passages; flipping through, many lines were highlighted. It was odd realizing how much of Hemlock had been etched into the paper—comforting, but a bit odd.

“You read?”

“Often. Do you?”

“Occasionally.”

Loki nodded. “It’s familiar when other things aren’t.”

“I guess I shouldn’t bother you.”

“Feel free. I don’t mind.”

But Boris did not say anything further, and he eventually got up, got his things, and disappeared into the streets. It was just her on that bench, alone with the ancient paperback.

Loki wasn't expecting much, but she sort of trusted Hemlock and she trusted the book's wear and it wasn't like she had anything to lose regardless, so she read quietly. Nothing was wrong—not with her, not with anything else. This was all she needed. It was all a bit heavy and she couldn't get very far without making herself panic again, and, marking the page, she tucked the book back into its spot and went to look around. She liked this place; she could probably live here if she wanted. No one would bother her. She wouldn't have to think about anything.

Suspecting the locals wouldn't humour her and knowing she'd need a bed soon, Loki did the stupidest thing she could have ever done and sold her entire stash of gold coins and every weapon but the sword and a single dagger for cash. And she hated herself for it, and, walking out with lighter metaphysical pockets than she'd had in centuries, she felt someone ought to kick her in the head for what she had done: most of her weapons were timeless relics collected over the years and she had hardly even gotten a good deal. But as she sat down with a hot drink to count her fortune again, she also suspected she would appreciate this one of these days—that, like all the spells she had destroyed in her little bedroom in New Asgard, she simply didn't need them.

The room she found was small and didn't have much inside, but it was in good condition. There were fancy soaps that she would never use in the bathroom and all the other usual amenities, like a tiny fridge, a tiny plugin stovetop, a tiny microwave, a normal-sized electric kettle, and, last but not least, a tiny ironing board and matching iron, which, like the soaps, she would likely never need. She had already burned the last of her wards protecting her house in New Asgard, but there was no way she was trusting her life to a cheap motel and so she spent the next hour crafting sigils from scratch, something that, at its core, needed no particular ingredients, only time and energy.

Although she wasn't entirely satisfied when she finished, there wasn't much else she could do without stocking up on fresh tools and materials and she was in no state to do so now. After tidying everything, because she felt uneasy not knowing quite what she looked like, she stopped for a cursory glance at her reflection. Fine enough. She had not bothered masking many things, including her eyes and skin tone, but between the thin and fuzzy facial hair and the glasses, she was perfectly unrecognizable: no one ever expected this sort of appearance when they were searching for her. No one would bother her.

Still unsatisfied but a little less so, she went and lied down on the bed.

What the hell was she doing?

They never did get to solving her aversion to water, not any of the other things. But she could do that herself: Tony was just one man and nothing so far had been new knowledge. This wasn't the first time. It wasn't impossible. What was Thanos, anyway? What was any of this?

Turning onto her side, Loki realized she didn't know.

She felt very lost and scared; she only knew that much. No one could be trusted. Not even herself—not with everything. This was her fault, after all.

Safe or not, she slept lightly. Beneath her pillow, she held the dagger.

As the days passed, hungry, tired, and nervous, she picked slowly at the book. Page by page, a bit at a time. Nothing that would overwhelm her. There was truth to a lot of it, and, although she had known much of this, it was comforting to see it explained in words. That her body was refusing to process the memories and digging them into a rut until they were even worse than the original. That they often weren't even memories; as far as she was concerned, she was still living them. That it

needed to become ordinary, objective, and harmless—awful, but nothing more: something in the past that no longer meant anything. And, on that note, yes... she was allowed to call it trauma. No beating around the bush about it because she thought it was stupid: she'd done enough of that over the centuries.

This isn't on you, Hemlock had written in the margins, circling the passage, and Loki, wanting to call bullshit but realizing that was exactly her problem, promptly began to cry.

Which part? This, the aftermath? Or everything leading up to it? She knew she had been responsible for the invasion; she had felt so at home in the disaster and laughed so brightly as the people scattered beneath her that it couldn't have been anyone else. She could have turned down Thanos if she wanted. She could have run and never come back, but she stayed. Losing herself in the void was her fault and, as she whiled away the many hours watching her body slowly start to come apart and remembered all the ways she could have pulled on the universe's threads to take her anywhere else and all the ways she hesitated, refused, didn't until it was too late, it turned to be her fault that they found her. Her mother's death was her fault; the massacre of Asgard was her fault; whatever she and Tony were was, with good certainty, her fault, for she had not forged her rules about never bedding an acquaintance over nothing. But the truth was most of it had only been awful luck and a habit of getting herself caught between a bad and a worse option, just like her run with Thanos—closer to survival and desperation than anything else.

And it wasn't her fault that it broke her eventually.

"You can enjoy something without wanting it," the boy said, his eyes cold, tired, but wise. "You aren't automatically responsible for everything because it felt good in the moment."

"Don't go there," Loki said.

"Do you have a better analogy?"

She sat beside him in the rubble; her dress was dark and airy, like the universe outside the shattered windows. "I asked," she said. "I didn't need an army."

"I don't think you could have known what you needed," the boy said, leaning on a tiny knee. "A man has you tortured for a year to get you to work for him while telling you the whole time it's to make you understand your potential and why you deserve revenge on your family? Of course you'll ask for an army. It's called a diversion."

"Did he ever really see anything in me?"

The boy thought about it.

"He didn't need to torture me," Loki softly said. "He could have just... kept talking. I would have listened regardless after hearing it enough times."

"But he wanted the power," the boy said. "He didn't need to torture you. He wanted to. He didn't need to commit so many genocides. He wanted to. He didn't need to do anything. He wanted to."

It was hard not to tear up over this.

“Ever heard of duress?” the boy asked, quite casually, as he gazed down the ship’s grand hall; its cavernous ruins were filled with junk farther than the eye could see. “You don’t have the proper forethought for something like an invasion if you’re being threatened into it. Even if you want it. Even if you follow through with it. If you’re spending the whole time thinking about what’ll happen if you fail, then part of that responsibility isn’t yours.”

“But part of it is,” Loki said.

“You burned that part when you killed Thanos,” the boy said. “You didn’t kill him for satisfaction: you killed him because you didn’t want anyone else to suffer like you did. Have you not redeemed yourself?”

“There’s no such thing as redemption.”

He gave her a thin smile. “Either way, it’s not your fault,” he said. “Even if it was, it’s not.”

“Stop speaking in riddle,” she said.

“I know you understand me.” The boy heaved himself to his feet. “Be kinder to yourself.”

“I’d rather have another nightmare than listen to your smarmy ass.”

“Hey.”

“I’d rather have another nightmare than listen to your smarmy ass, please.”

He rolled his eyes. “You’ll get there,” he said, and then he headed back down the ship, his body small beneath its towering expanse.

Early in the morning, as Loki finally made herself have breakfast in a dusty little diner in an old part of town, she found someone reading a newspaper at the next table and spent too long wondering whether to ask for a peek before they saw her staring over her coffee. “Can you read upside down?”

“Sorry,” she said.

“Eh. Here you go.”

She fumbled the paper when they handed it to her and nearly dropped it. “Uh. Thank you.”

“No problem.”

Did this count as self-harm? She flipped to the world section for the very last of the attack, which was mostly that repairs were going well, the man responsible would never see sunlight again, and casualties had now reached a number in the hundreds that she tried not to read. But those that had survived were making good recoveries, including those she had healed herself, and it would have gotten a million times worse before they could have stopped him if she hadn’t showed up; the city of New York was grateful and, with the enthusiastic agreement of the folks responsible for these sorts of things, whatever was still left of her record on Earth—not much, incidentally—was officially pardoned.

They called her a hero, and it took all of her strength not to start crying in front of everyone.

Despite everything, she could only think that this had not been monumental enough for her to deserve such a title. She hadn't done much; she hadn't, say, saved the planet from exploding. She hadn't even saved most of those caught in the crossfire. Clearly, she needed to do more before anyone could think of calling her a hero. Not her. Never her. And this made her tear up, and, taking her coffee, she tried so, so hard not to start crying in front of everyone.

She had been here before: why couldn't she just take people's word for it? She was easy to miss when she wasn't around. She was worthy of kindness. She wasn't completely irredeemable, even if her efforts weren't perfect; no one's were. Her mistakes weren't life sentences and sometimes she *was* alright; she ought not to spend the hours dwelling.

Well, enough time hearing otherwise would do that to someone. No wonder she never bought it.

She reached over her chair to return the paper.

“Earth's crazy, huh?”

“It sure is.”

The stranger got up and left without another word. Loki continued eating alone.

It would have been just as well to make this her last meal and go back to starving herself and she certainly didn't feel fit to face any more people than were in the diner, but, knowing that would only make things worse, she went to search for some shops that wouldn't make her panic. She had nothing better to do anyway; it didn't matter if she wasted time. And she definitely wasted time. She got all the basics, though: meat that would last weeks so she didn't have to see anyone, vegetables that would last weeks so she didn't have to see anyone, and a sketchbook and some shitty Russian mystery novels from the checkout because she didn't feel like stopping home for her things for at least a very, very long time. Then she shut herself in her room for the rest of the day. The usual.

She did finish the book, and, as she stared down Hemlock's notes in the blank end pages, she wondered if it was really that simple. It all seemed so... plain. The book felt complete like this: the print outlined everything and the forest of comments gave it the practical meaning it was missing. The anecdotes and explanations were hopeful. What she had been doing with Tony was fine; it only needed some refining. A little more focus. A little more care. Maybe another angle. Something more like her.

Thinking it through over dinner, she realized she ought to give some of it a try and she told herself she would set some time aside tomorrow. She had absolutely nothing to do with her day: there was no excuse not to. Here was the plan, and, bear in mind, it was her plan based on her past experience dealing with other stubborn memories over the years that she suspected would be exactly the kind of *something more like her* Hemlock and the book's author together suggested she try:

1. Write everything down. Memories, feelings, recurring nightmares—the lot of it. Get the emotions out. Make it into something real and tangible that can be reshaped, controlled, and cast aside.
2. Be objective. Deconstruct what happened and why. Distance the experiences from their emotions. Expand the timeline; take the focus away from a single replaying point and let the rut grow shallower.

3. Shift the narrative. Replace the responses that no longer fit. Change the ending.

This, of course, was much easier said than done—she hardly even remembered anything beyond the worst moments—and there was just as great a chance that it would do nothing, but it gave her a clear and concise way to at least try to normalize the memories and ease her emotional response to them. And, if she kept at it long enough, she suspected she could work it into something else: powerful and vivid lucid dreaming, which she did plenty of. There was nothing so direct as completely rescripting an event as she relived it.

Maybe none of it would work. But she didn't give up so easily; better she start somewhere and see what did and didn't make a difference than just sit and keep burning, if only because she couldn't stomach the thought of letting them win. If only to spite them, in fact.

They couldn't stop her.

Her dreams that night were quite disappointing, to some good surprise, and so she didn't bother with that part. But after breakfast, she sat with the sketchbook, tore out a sheet, and wrote about the first thing that came to mind. The first part. The best she remembered.

Coming through the void, as a failing glamour fought the universe's icy weight and the unforgiving air slowly scraped at her lungs, her feverish mind could only list the reasons she was here. Again and again and again and again and again, long enough that she could still remember some of the phrases she had thought down to every word. She spent her life in a shadow, starved for attention. Her first lies were to be liked; her best efforts had always been in the name of image. It was hard remembering exactly how many times she was made to feel defective, but they were a lot. Every time she tried to do something good it was beaten into the dirt—her with it. That was all she was: dirt. No one could tell because she hid everything so well behind arrogance and grandiosity. She knew, though. She could count her suicide attempts where she had thought this, right up to this one.

They were too cruel to her. They shouldn't have treated her like that. She tried: was it her fault she was kept to such impossible standards?

She hated herself. She didn't want to be evil: she just wanted to be.

She hated that this was the only option made available to her.

She hated that it had done nothing.

It was true in time that she simply needed to search out the places where she was valued, but they were never the right ones. Partners who tried to kill her between loving praise. Friends who only wanted to take. Allies who offered salvation in exchange for obedience.

—and so Loki smelled her blood again and her eyes began to flood, but she kept writing because she *remembered*, and she was furious. How dare they? She was vulnerable; she should have been protected. Offence shouldn't have been the first skill she ever learned.

“You're doing well,” she had once heard her mother say.

Her aim was exceptional: she was hitting bullseye not long after she picked up her first throwing knife. She was young, a tiny little boy with a narrow, perpetually nervous gaze; above her, the sun was sweltering. Stepping away, she had looked to her father for approval and seen nothing. Was

this the man she'd been scared to touch? This man who had nearly sentenced her to death without a second thought and her cold hands had flinched. Would she have been so careful if she knew?

“Shall we rest awhile?”

She stared down at the knife in her tiny hand and thought.

But then, truly, she began to weep. The freshest ink smudged beneath her and her hair that wasn't hers fell into her glasses that weren't real and she thought that she shouldn't be here: she should be holding someone right now, not isolating herself in a city whose name she didn't even know. This wasn't right. None of this was right. Still, it felt good to get the rage out in words, and though it wasn't the first time she had done such a thing, it felt good to be plain about it—not like her vague poems and scribbles. Tucking the paper into the book before it could get further waterlogged, and then the book into storage, she promised herself above her racing heart that she would continue someday soon. But not today.

She was nervous for talking, but she managed to walk down the backstreets for some air and spent the rest of the day there reading cheap novels.

“Did you make up your mind?” Thanos asked, stopping with his items.

Beneath the flood of water at their feet, the discarded Infinity Stones were a hazy rainbow. Loki raised an eyebrow at him from behind her tea. “Regarding?”

“We need you.”

“Right now? I'm busy.”

They were in an alien city somewhere. The sky was bright blue and the layers of skyscrapers were dotted with vegetation; looking up, she saw eight moons.

“How dare you?” Thanos growled.

“Hey.” Loki tapped the cup with a fingernail. “Hydration is important.”

Thanos chucked one of the stones at her. It burned like touching a hot stove: she dropped the cup with a yelp. “Choose your battles,” he said, standing.

“I do!” she yelled. “That's why I refuse to let you—”

Her voice died: he had his massive fingers around her throat. Crumbling ice. Dirt and ash. She kicked out as he said, “Do you know what I sacrificed for you?”

“You didn't sacrifice a thing,” she hissed above the grip.

He threw her over the roof's edge, but she took him with her.

The sky was thick and watery, like falling through space. Like the gap between worlds. The building collapsed behind them; something was on fire. But she knew what she was doing. She hit the dusty ground feet-first and drew her sword, no mind paid to the crowd.

“Don’t,” her boy self warned, ever patient, as Thanos crossed the square.

“You had no right,” she said.

“Maybe if you weren’t so broken I wouldn’t have tried,” Thanos growled.

“I was only broken after I met you!”

Thanos lunged; Loki barred him with the sword. “You were always broken,” he said, pushing the blade with both hands.

“I can’t believe you have the gall to lie to me,” she said. She wasn’t this strong: this kind of weight difference would get anyone. Putting all her might into the sword, she still couldn’t overpower him.

“You don’t want to admit it,” Thanos said with a sudden push that sent the blade’s edge into her chest; her shirt was a bloody split from shoulder to shoulder. “If you were always like this, then you have no chance of fixing yourself. Isn’t that right, Silvertongue?”

“I didn’t always have nightmares of you,” she said, jerking the sword away to slip loose. But he got her in a headlock.

“I should have killed you,” he snarled, tightening the grip. She felt something cracking. Felt herself coming undone. Flames between the cobbles. “The fall should have killed you.”

“I hope you remember me,” she said, and then she impaled them both.

The little boy, disappointed but understanding, calmly vanished.

Although Loki never really went into the city, it was good when she was able. There was art and music and all the other usual things, and, daring a trip to a restaurant every now and then, she found magical local dishes. The stray animals gravitated to her like they knew something; once, almost a dozen cats laid themselves down beside her as she sketched the scenery. She was easy to ignore in this form, not a tall and dark wonder dressed to kill, and so no one ever spoke to her: she was as invisible as she could be without putting in the extra effort. But this suited her.

There was too much noise sometimes. Sometimes she couldn’t even look at the chains locking a door or fence shut because she imagined them around her; if she stared too long at a dog pulled by a leash, she remembered the helplessness. Passing conversations sounded like something she had once heard somewhere. Something that shouldn’t have meant anything caught her off guard. Someone burned a cigarette too hard once—made a cloud of smoke large enough for her to start thinking. Most of it she couldn’t avoid, not if she dared to go anywhere but her room. All of it was painful. All of it was infuriating: why *this*?

And never mind making sure she drank enough water.

Never mind a lot more than just that. Her injuries came and went; unexpected nightmares woke her at the worst times. Most days, she couldn’t bring herself to eat much if anything. Still, she didn’t return to New Asgard. She liked this place. She liked being alone. As bad as it seemed, she felt, at least somehow, that the break was good for her.

The old lady who sold Loki her tea and desserts was kind, if perceptive. “Stay,” she said. “Let me read your leaves.”

No, thank you; it would tell her nothing she didn’t already know and she was getting restless here. She ought not to hold up the business, anyway. Still, without the guts to argue and without any conviction that she would be able to make any of the tea herself, she sat politely and opened a random tin: peach, cinnamon, and hibiscus.

“You’re not from around here,” the woman said as she put the kettle on.

“No,” Loki said.

“Where are you from?”

She paused. “It’s complicated.”

“You speak good Russian.”

Not particularly, no; without the Allspeak, the most she could say was yes, no, and hello. Still, she said, “Thank you.”

The old woman had a very pretty set of fine china in the back of her shop, with very pretty tiny spoons. She hobbled over and scooped a tiny spoonful from the open tin Loki was holding and then hobbled back. They did not say much; in the corner, a poorly tuned radio played strange and ancient tunes from another era to fill the silence.

It was good tea, and Loki drank it slowly. The woman sat in the other chair as she turned the cup over onto the saucer.

“Your hands are shaking,” the woman said.

“It’s been a rough few months,” Loki said, carefully righting the cup.

The woman took the cup and peered inside. Turned it one way, then another. Brought it close and then held it at arm’s length and looked at it from a distance. Loki waited patiently while her eyebrows wrinkled.

“You’re afraid of love,” the woman said.

“I don’t need love.”

She raised her bunched forehead. “Why do you lie so much?”

Loki stared down at the cup. “Truth is vulnerable,” she said.

“Yet you’ve been searching for it.”

“I can’t burn it from afar.”

“Will you find it like this?”

Loki looked at her foreign hands in her lap. Her voice, whose rough, unfamiliar timbre had comforted her, suddenly felt wrong. “I fear I won’t,” she said, not meeting the old woman’s gaze.

The other chair creaked as the woman rested her thin arms on the table; her hair fell around the wood's edge like a ghostly veil. "Why do you look like this?"

"Genetics, I suppose," Loki said, fighting a confused smile.

"You are not the first shifter to come in here. I can tell you are uncomfortable in this form."

The smile dropped. "I... don't know," Loki quietly said. Her voice felt even more jarring now.

"You need to find your family," the woman said. "This isn't a battle you fight alone."

"I have no family."

"Your family is the one you choose."

"I'll outlive most of them. They're not right for me."

"Who is right for you?"

Loki leaned back. "What use is love if it's gone so quickly?"

"Everything in life is gone quickly," the woman said. "If you are always living for the future, the present will pass you by."

Surely this was true, and, if the grooves holding the woman's tired face together meant anything, it was coming from the heart. But in a fit of tragic honesty, Loki softly confessed: "I just want to grow old with someone. I don't think that will ever happen."

"Then why do you avoid the love you do find?"

"All it's done is hurt me."

"All of it?"

"... Ah. There were good ones. I miss them."

"Would you have preferred it never happened?"

Loki thought about it. "No," she said. "I enjoyed the time I had. I just wish it had been longer."

"You'll need help eventually," the woman said. "Even the most powerful kings had a court."

"I don't think that will be enough."

"You have all you need. That will make it easier. You have good fortune; it will carry you."

"My fortune is awful!"

"Was it not luck that you've made it so far? Nothing can stop you."

Loki considered this. "Survivor's bias?"

"Ah. You understand."

She fiddled with the unopened tins.

“You need to stop hiding,” the woman said.

“I’ll try,” Loki said, although she had no intention of doing so. “Thank you.”

The woman took the cup and its saucer and went to wash them. It was hard to listen and, slowly, Loki got up, got all her things in a bag, and left.

She never did try to find her way home, in part because she was too afraid; she had gone suddenly, in a very chaotic moment, and she feared what she would come back to. Did anyone even care? Had she burned her chances by being so unpredictable? No sense checking—better she didn’t know. Despite this, she was very mindful of herself and passed the days with care. She ate when she was hungry and drank when she could and cried when she needed to, and, for the most part, she was fine. It was a while before she found the peace to examine her thoughts again and she was impatient, but she tried not to rush it. And oh—she still had her moments. Her sleep was still miserable. Her startling was still too frequent. She still couldn’t shift back.

But she kept herself alive, and, even if it wasn’t enough, that was all she needed to do now.

Once, after breakfast, she got comfortable with her slow breaths and pen and made another attempt, writing down everything that came to mind. Tapping a foot to keep herself sane. Maybe two feet. Maybe even some fingers—anything to keep her from sinking in too deep because she did: she went far, far too deep and she knew it. But she was so sick of letting it rot inside her head that she just couldn’t help it.

They were not so kind with her as the days passed; the wounds got deeper and the words harsher, none of the initial concern that had stood out to her in the oldest memories. It was for her sake: how could she not strike back against those who wronged her? If she wanted power, she should take it. If she wanted glory, she should listen. They were offering. The pain was only to make her understand; they didn’t mean it. But it didn’t matter what they meant—never while she was screaming her throat raw and thinking that she must be going insane because this had to be one of those things she would look at in hindsight and stop, blink, and realize how fucked up it was that she could believe for even a second that they were right: it wouldn’t be the first time, would it? Like all those stories—

This isn’t abuse.

—and only once it was gone was it so easy to see how profoundly it had wounded its victim, but for as long as they kept telling her that and as long as she kept accumulating cuts and tears and holes on her body she believed it. She had to. She wanted to. Trembling on the cold floor as the steaming water cooled and her mind tried to reboot itself, she knew she wasn’t thinking straight. But she believed it.

It was true that she deserved Earth: she wanted to see the pain she’d felt and it felt good to be feared after all these years trapped in a shadow. It felt good to have a purpose. Ah—she was still terrified of the other half of the deal, but it didn’t matter. They loved her more than Asgard had. They gave her what she should have always had. The magic was too much. The destruction was too great. She couldn’t heal herself these days: the wounds sat half-scarred beneath the cuffs keeping her there. They knew this and didn’t care. They didn’t care that she was hungry; her magic kept her. They didn’t care that it wasn’t enough. They didn’t care that she was wasting.

But they loved her more than Asgard had, and so she accepted it.

She remembered fighting tears with a fist around the sceptre. She wanted this. She wanted this, right?

No. No, she didn't. This had been the worst trade and she wished she could take it back. She wished she had seen this earlier and for fear of something worse, she never gave her full strength. She didn't want to: she was exhausted. She let herself fail so she wasn't running; they wouldn't know. Better she fail them than run. She hated this. She hated everyone. It shouldn't have come to this. Where was the mercy? This hadn't been her; she couldn't have just turned it down. She couldn't abandon the purpose she'd been given. She couldn't abandon the pain. No one was right here—not her for her zeal as she led an army, not Thanos for tearing her apart in the name of salvation, not everyone who had beaten her down so far. All of it was awful and confusing and frightening and she wished it had never happened. All this; all her scars in the mirror and all her choked up laughter as they drenched her tired body in fire to listen. Every time she had heard, “You don't know what you're capable of.”

She knew very well what she was capable of. She could have killed all of them; she could have levelled New York without the army.

But this wasn't it.

Burying herself in white lies wasn't it. Bleeding herself dry for glory. Serving someone—she didn't want to be capable of this.

She stopped, suddenly breathless, and put her head down on the table and wept.

How many others had Thanos ruined like this? All the broken and vulnerable made easy prey to his lies—easy to rebuild from scratch; how many of his soldiers had been just like that little boy who never returned from Jötunheim? Made small under the pain. Bent with the words like it wasn't enough to have suffered already. Brought back different. Brought back wrong.

This wasn't working, she thought, and then she curled up tight and kept crying until she couldn't.

The ship's remains were rotting in the snow. The bodies hadn't been burned yet. The boy was elsewhere: he had better things to do than grieve. Above, the foreign sky was alight with green and violet; everything beneath it was an eerie glow. Scarred hands. Blue skin. Turning back into the cold night, Loki tried not to let it bother her. She had been here before.

“You've got a long road ahead of you, kid,” said Anderson, the blacksmith, hunched in the snow with his tools.

“Nothing longer than I've lived,” Loki said.

The sky looked like it might come apart soon. This place wouldn't last.

“We don't get this weather a lot,” Anderson said. “You need better equipment.”

It would have been very poetic to turn and flip him off with her icy hand, but, understanding the concern, Loki refrained. “Funny I should see you now,” she said.

“Be careful out there.”

She lied down in the snow to watch the sky. Her glimmers didn't stay; she saw ashen scars lining her bare chest. There were no times she remembered being so genuine and she feared her freezing tears would betray her, but it didn't matter. This place would be gone soon. “They're right, aren't they?”

He scratched his beard. “Not necessarily,” he said. “There's power in solitude. Sometimes the road's easier alone. Sometimes it's not.”

“This will be gone soon,” Loki said as the lights began to burn holes in the sky.

“Maybe someday. That's life.”

She glanced at him with her red eyes. “Does this mean anything?”

“If you want it to,” he said. “Not everything needs a meaning.”

She looked back up at the melting sky. “Good talk,” she said, and then she said nothing else as the stars joined the storm of violet-green. The night fell away into silence.

These days were slow, and, between scattered meals and lonely writing sessions—sometimes poetry, sometimes something else that occurred to her—Loki tried to busy herself. Her wounds were shallow, barely the little scrapes on her fingers that showed themselves every now and then when her fidgeting got out of control, but they bothered her when she held a pen: move wrong and she felt everything. She went around the parks and all the ancient and crumbling landmarks. She fed the strays and healed the injured ones; she liked the company and it felt good on her conscience. She blew too much money on coffee—often her only meal, but hydration, at least—and she found a carving kit sharp enough for wood but not her own skin, and, taking another trip through the backstreets, she found some scrap sticks and planks to try it on. Daring a seat there on the steps by the old shops with the cup beside her, she unpacked and began to pick at the wood.

There wasn't actually a plan other than she sort of felt like some kind of animal, which turned out to be a horse because of course it did. But that was just as well; she formed the beginning of a bust between sips.

(She did, by the way, take so long to actually start drinking the coffee instead of just carrying the cup around with the intention of drinking it eventually that she had to reheat it a few times.)

Somewhere between all of this, above the thin crowd beyond that decaying little corner, she eventually heard her name. Soft. Uncertain. Questioning: this form sure wasn't what the average eye looked for and it was easy to miss. Easy to misjudge. But maybe the way she stopped mid-sip in that same instant, completely still and very confused, was telling.

She looked up.

“Um... I guess not,” said Tony, rather nervous and small with the Iron Man's casing latched faithfully to his sweater.

Resisting the urge to respond no, wrong person, go away, and so surprised and almost relieved at the sight of a face she recognized, Loki lowered the coffee and, in her dry and unfamiliar tenor, asked, "How and why did you find me this time?"

"Thor gave me a magic rock," Tony said, pulling the runed pendant from his pocket: like the device on his chest, its glow was bright enough to see from a distance.

"Why."

"We were scared you'd done something stupid and I needed to know."

Loki felt her stomach sinking. "Go away," she said.

"What do I tell him?" Tony asked, sliding the pendant back in his pocket.

"Go away."

"Do you want me to?"

No. Not at all. Come sit, in fact; she had missed the company.

"Are you a man today?"

Loki set her things in her lap. "I don't know," she said. "I chose this form to blend in. I suppose I'm neither."

"How should I refer to you?"

"However you wish. As long as it's polite."

"Oh. Really? That's what Thor said you said, but I think I didn't believe him for some reason. I guess I wanted to hear it from you."

"Words are only formalities. They have all the same permanence to me as clothing."

Tony nodded. "Cool," he said, and then a long stretch of silence settled between them. Loki went back to picking at the wood; the passersby, entirely without any care for the situation, kept walking. And then, eventually, he managed to come over and sit beside her on the steps. "You know you don't need to run away every time something goes wrong."

"It's fun," Loki said, taking her coffee.

"Is it?"

"No."

"Oh."

Tony didn't know why she'd left, did he? Maybe he'd gathered. Maybe he hadn't. Not that it really mattered. "Have I missed anything?" she asked.

"Not much," Tony said, resting his arms on his knees. "Pete has chin hairs and he won't shut up about it. Normal stuff, I guess. What have you been up to?"

“Nothing.”

“Wow.”

“What do you want from me?”

“I just wanted to make sure you’re okay. That’s all. Sorry if I... went overboard. Sometimes I care too much.”

Tony looked beautiful like this; his cheeks were a bit flushed from the afternoon chill and his hair curled loosely around his face. His eyes were warm. Had he always had such long lashes?

“Thank you,” Loki softly said, lowering the coffee.

Tony squinted at her glasses. “Isn’t it so weird how you sound completely different but you still sound like you?”

“I suppose it’s how I speak.”

“You left the eyes.”

“You must know them well.”

“They are pretty distinctive. I got a few decent looks.”

“Anything else?”

Tony paused for a look. “The mouth is the same,” he said. “I think the ears are the same. Hair’s obviously different, but I think the hairline’s the same. Dunno about the rest. The beard’s throwing me off. Did you leave the chin too? Yeah, I... think you did.”

“Have you been looking at my face often?” Loki asked, amused.

“It’s a hard face to forget.”

“It’s distinctive?”

Tony smiled. “What are you working on?”

“A horse,” Loki said. “I think.”

“Do you like horses?”

“They’re lovely. I’ve raised many.”

“Really? I never knew.”

Loki set the empty cup beside her. “I suppose I don’t need to stay like this.”

“You can if you want to,” Tony said. “It’s not my call.”

She warped away the wood and knife.

“I... guess you’re okay,” Tony said, standing.

Loki took his hand in a sudden panic. “Stay?”

Tony stopped mid-motion. Then, slowly, he sat back down on the steps just the way he had been sitting before and tried to think of something to say. “We never got to the water thing, huh?”

“I’m working on it,” Loki softly said.

“On your own?”

“I got a book. From a friend.”

“Oh, you did! That’s awesome. Has it helped?”

“Mm... a little.”

“Yeah, I—I was going to get to all that, but I didn’t get the chance. There was just too much going on.” Tony rubbed the back of his neck. “Good for you for taking the initiative. That’s not easy to do by yourself.”

“Do you want to go walk somewhere?” Loki asked. “We can find a better spot than this.”

“Oh! Sure.” Tony got up. “Lead the way.”

It was a nice side of town with good routes, and, once they got away from all the people, it was pleasant to walk. The nerves took a little longer; Loki couldn’t understand why she’d done anything but turn around, refuse to speak on the matter, and let Tony return empty-handed to Thor. But, after some time, she allowed herself to settle down, and, eventually, she allowed herself to shift into something more comfortable. Rather a bit in the middle—close to her default form, but milder. Not particularly one or the other beneath the green velvet. Even the voice. It had been a while; why not have fun with it?

“I thought he threw that away,” she said as Tony stole another look at the pendant.

“I guess not,” Tony said. “You made it?”

“It was useful a few times.”

“Must have gotten annoying.”

“Hence why I deactivated it. Speaking of, how did you get it working again?”

“Oh, uh... one of your paintings.”

Loki looked up. “Oh no,” she said. “Not that one, right? Not that one. Please.”

Judging from Tony’s expression, yes, that one. Loki was very certain her pale skin was currently betraying every single drop of blood pooling in her face and then some. She looked away and pretended she wasn’t dying inside.

“I think I might have cried a little when I saw it,” Tony said once the initial mood eased.

“Oh no.”

“Can I hang it up somewhere? Please?”

No! What the heck no. Absolutely not. Please stop talking about the painting immediately no you may not have it go away and stop making those eyes.

“If you want,” she stammered.

Tony beamed. “Thank you!”

What had she expected, honestly? She’d been hoping he’d see it eventually, but she didn’t think it through: the heart did all sorts of things in the late hours. Sometimes that was a love letter to someone she was trying not to love.

Well, he didn’t seem too upset about it.

“Wait, did you break into my house?” Loki asked.

“No,” Tony loudly denied.

“You did!”

“I did not break in. It was unlocked.”

Under normal circumstances Loki would have been quite offended by everything, but, truthfully, she just found it amusing—very like Tony, and, in a way, very like her: she also cared too much sometimes. If anything, she appreciated having someone who wouldn’t give up, and so she only laughed a bit and then said nothing further on the matter.

They ended up stopping for lunch, or whatever it was for Tony, where he asked with immense concern, “Are you still paying for random things with literal gold?”

“No,” Loki said as she paid with very normal local Earth currency. “It was weighing me down.”

“Metaphorically?”

“Metaphorically.”

It was a fun while; they went and looked around some more after eating. Tony did not have anywhere to be for the next few days and had no issue other than perhaps he was a bit underdressed: he was unused to this kind of summer and seemed cold under his sweater. Loki lent him the velvet coat for another layer.

“You’ll freeze,” Tony said, although he accepted the gift graciously.

“I won’t.”

There was something to be said about all this; it suddenly seemed so funny how Thor had joked about wearing each other’s colours so many months ago. Tony had either forgotten or wasn’t bothered.

They eventually returned to the little motel room, by which Tony was not impressed.

“I know you could have gotten into something nicer,” he said, collapsing on the bed with his legs dangling.

“I didn’t mean to stay long,” Loki said. “I would have looked if I saw I wasn’t leaving soon.”

“Bed’s good, at least.” Tony thumped it with a hand. “I’ve never seen a bed this big in a motel in my life.”

“Do you want anything? Food, drink?”

“Do you have anything sweet? My blood sugar is tanking.”

“I have pastila and a hoard of chocolate.”

“I’ll try the first.”

Loki tossed him a piece. “How long have you been up?”

“Yeah,” Tony said.

“Somehow that’s more alarming than any actual answer you could have given me.”

Tony laughed. “You can’t make me sleep.”

“I can and I will. Please don’t get crumbs on the bed.”

“Okay,” Tony said, moving to sit at the table.

Loki put the kettle on and then sat in the other chair. “Everything else is fine, I hope.”

“Mhm! Things are great. All the crap’s finally settling.”

“That’s good to hear.”

Tony finished his pastila. “Do you mind if I use the shower?”

“Not at all.”

It felt a bit like he was wondering whether or not to ask if she wanted to join him as he tucked his chair in and made for the bathroom. This would have been nice, but, due to reasons including “water trigger” and “help I’m falling in love with you and I shouldn’t be falling in love with you and you shouldn’t even be here right now because I have not stopped falling in love with you oh no,” perhaps it wasn’t the best idea. Loki, acknowledging the possibility but knowing it was beyond her limits, shook her head as he glanced at her from behind the open door.

He shut the door.

At least she was being honest with herself; better she burn a few opportunities than push herself to breaking again in the name of bravery. Everything in its own time. She went to fill a mug and had it outside.

Tony did not take particularly long and was done by the time she came back inside with the empty mug. The coat was laid neatly on the bed.

“Are you heading back?” Loki asked, draping the coat on one of the chairs.

“I should,” Tony said. “I need to go pass out somewhere. I think I’m starting to hallucinate.”

“You could always spend the night here.”

What the fuck no why did she say that? What the hell? No.

“I guess,” Tony said, fixing his shirt; the Iron Man’s casing was on the nightstand. “So much for my circadian rhythm.”

“You say that like you have one.”

“Hey.”

“Am I wrong?”

Tony thought about it. “No,” he admitted.

“You should rest,” Loki said.

“It’s still early.”

“Not for you.”

“I refuse to go to bed at”—Tony squinted at the alarm clock on the nightstand—“seven forty-eight in any time zone. That is a crime.”

“You’re a crime.”

Tony sighed and crawled under the covers. “I’m still cold,” he said, quite expectantly.

“I’m afraid I can’t help you.”

“Do you plan on staying up all night?”

Loki paused in front of the window. “I know you remember,” he said. “I’m not so warm. I’ll only make you colder.”

“I do remember,” Tony said. “Most of you is just as warm as anyone else. I think you overestimate how cold you are.”

Loki sat on the bed. “You don’t know how cold I am.”

“Well, you sure aren’t cold figuratively. That makes up for it.”

It didn’t, and she wasn’t that kind, anyway; where did anyone ever get that idea? But Tony wasn’t much for lies and he had liked how she looked on Titan, so maybe he was honest after all. With some hesitation—with a lot of hesitation, in fact—she crept to join him under the covers. She kept her distance, though.

“Do you think I can get whatever I ate back in America?” Tony asked.

“I’m sure you just need to search. Or you could make some yourself.”

“Could I? Huh. Do you have a recipe I could take?”

“I don’t. Sorry.”

“I guess that’s what the internet is for.”

“Mm.”

“Oh!” Tony sat up slightly. “The shampoo in there is so nice—like, I cannot believe it and you need to smell my hair.”

“What? No.”

“Please. I am begging you.” He sank his face into the pillow. “Please.”

“Tony, I’m not smelling your—oh. Is that orange?”

“Yeah!” He turned onto his side. “Awesome, right? I didn’t know they made orange-scented shampoo.”

“You learn something every day,” Loki said. It occurred to her that she was suddenly very nervous; was it Tony? This was... adorable. What a goof he was—and how terribly, horribly frightening that was.

“Can I take it with me?”

“Sure. I don’t plan on using it.”

“Thanks.”

Loki waved the curtains shut and turned the lamp on. “I’m sure I could go find you a spare blanket .”

“That’s okay. I’m not cold anymore. My body heat has been trapped.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

Tony turned onto his stomach. “These are nice pillows,” he said. “How’d you luck out like this with a friggin’ motel?”

“I must have good fortune,” Loki said.

“I guess so.”

Loki stared up at the ceiling.

“What are you thinking?” Tony asked.

“Everything in life is gone so quickly.”

Tony pondered this. “The sun’s not gone quickly,” he said. “The moon’s not gone quickly. The ocean’s always there. The trees are always there. The... you can always see the sky, can’t you? Coffee’s the same. Laughter’s the same.”

“I was talking about love,” Loki said with a frown.

“My point remains.”

“I don’t think you understand.”

“I think I do. There’s as much you don’t know about my past as I don’t know about yours.”

Loki kept her eyes on the ceiling.

“Then again, maybe I don’t know,” Tony said, moving to lie on his back again. “I’m just a guy.”

“Don’t be so harsh on yourself,” Loki said.

“Okay.”

Loki crept to lie beside him. “Why me?”

“It was fated from the moment you said something about a cockrat while beating the shit out of Thanos,” Tony said. “I felt a connection. I looked at you and thought oh my god, Loki has dirty humour, this is fantastic, I need to befriend them immediately.”

“Are we friends?” Loki softly said.

Tony looked between them. “I don’t know,” he said. “I guess it got a little complicated.”

“A little?” Loki said, baffled. “I’m falling in love with you. I think I am in love with you! You should not be in this bed and I have no idea why I offered. Your lifespan is the equivalent of a sneeze compared to mine and on top of everything, you’re engaged. That’s not little. That’s not even close to little. That is as far away from little as you could possibly get.”

“Maybe we just need to get into a fight or something,” Tony quietly said.

“I don’t want to get into a fight! I like you. I don’t want to lose you.”

Tony said nothing. He awkwardly pulled away, like maybe this wasn’t a good idea after all. Not that it was his fault; she *had* offered, and he was so prone to platonic intimacy that sometimes he forgot it might be a problem. Impulsive hothead meet hopeless cuddler meet oxytocin. How disastrous.

“I promised myself this wouldn’t happen again,” Loki said, teary.

“I... don’t think it’s fair to blame yourself,” Tony said. “You can’t control this kind of thing.”

“I could have turned you down when I had the chance!”

“Did you want to?”

No. Not even a little. Sure, it would have saved her some trouble, but it was the only thing that kept her afloat in the weeks that followed: without it, she might well have really killed herself like she said she would. She liked this. She was just afraid of the pain.

But damn it all—and so, drying her tears with a sleeve, she briefly remembered what the old lady had said to her and did what she always did in this kind of situation: she leaned to kiss him.

It was all sort of automatic, no telling how she wound up on top nor when they undressed. Tony kept the shirt and the covers around them, but not much else—turned to lie with his face in the nice pillows while Loki muttered something about how reckless this was. He wasn't quiet, and, as he fell apart beneath her, he couldn't help but fear for a moment his breathless moans would shake the thin walls; Earth was fickle and this wasn't a good place.

But nothing awful ever happened, and though the gravity of it all hung heavily between them, it was no burden. The fear faded into the night; the warmth outweighed their mortality.

If this was a mistake, then so be it: Loki could not bring herself to care.

‡

In the morning, while Tony slept like a rock under the piled up sheets, Loki had breakfast alone and reread Hemlock's notes. All of them; they were so honest and insightful that she just had to. The comments and responses. The clarifications. The little warning in the empty half of the page following a chapter's end:

Do not force your triggers. They will leave when they leave.

She read this until the text was burned into her eyes, thinking that it was probably something she should internalize given her track record of beating herself into a flashback out of frustration. Then she tidied up and left to get some air.

She felt very lost as she sat there, hunched on the curb with her tangled hair and half-buttoned shirt. Was this worth it? There was nothing better while she dealt with everything; it was her anchor amid all the misery. But what happened after? Was it fair to replace one agony with another?

Truthfully, she didn't know, and she decided she would see when she got there.

Tony was still asleep when she went back inside, so she got her coat and left once more for some coffee. Past experience considered, it was very likely Tony would give up on fixing his atrocious sleep schedule upon returning home and simply stay awake until the next morning, so it wouldn't hurt. What time was it there, anyway? Past dinner, wasn't it? Yes, that would be a nightmare to readjust to.

He was yet still asleep when Loki returned again. She set one of the coffees on the nightstand, by his face, and then went to fix the hair she had not bothered fixing before she headed out.

It was sort of nice like this. Familiar. She combed it out and braided it between sips and all was mostly well. Tony shifted eventually and muttered a tiny thank you, followed by an equally tiny, "Wait, are you still here?"

"No," Loki said.

"Oh. Okay."

Loki tidied up and went back to the bed. Tony looked like he had died in the night and was struggling to drink in a semi-horizontal position.

“Did I apologize for a few weeks ago?” he mumbled over a sip.

“You did,” Loki said. “Profusely.”

“Okay.” Tony sat up with great effort. “I guess I should get going now.”

“I could take you if you want. I don’t mind.”

“You already took me.”

“Tony!”

He broke into a hysterical cackle, which, on the bright side, helped wake him. “It’s fine,” he said when he eventually composed himself. “Really. It’s not a huge flight.”

Loki sighed.

“Also, I get sick headaches from teleporting.”

“Oh. That’s fair.”

Tony was still not wearing pants, and he paused to do that before scurrying to the bathroom to snatch the rest of the orange-scented shampoo. “What are your plans today?” he asked as he set up the suit’s casing.

“Existential dread,” Loki said.

“Oh no. Hopefully things go a bit better?”

“Hopefully.”

Tony made sure he had everything. “Would you... come visit sometimes?” he asked, stepping back towards the door. “Whenever that is. I don’t mind if it takes a while. I mean, I get it. Do what you need to. But... you’re still a good friend. I don’t want to lose that part.”

“You’re a very rare person,” Loki said. “You’re so... kind. Do you know that?”

Tony smiled. “I do,” he said. “I try very hard. Not everyone can tell. I think I come off as a jerk most of the time.”

“But the people who know you know otherwise,” Loki said, leaning on a hand. “I suppose I can relate.”

“Yeah, we have that in common, huh?”

“Mhm.”

Tony opened the door. “Okay,” he said, stepping outside. “Stay safe?”

“I’ll try my best.”

He clearly didn’t want to leave, but he managed to close the door. The moment faded. The room was suddenly very quiet. Loki, not knowing how to look away, did nothing.

Well, that was definitely on her this time.

But the dread would pass, and, knowing how precious this sort of thing was in the face of fear, she tried not to fight herself over it. She carried on with her routine. She found something to busy herself for the day. She let her hands heal.

Nothing bad happened.

Chapter End Notes

Loki, to the tune of that one Lord of The Rings scene: "After all, why not? Why shouldn't I keep him?"

Why AM I trying to finish a fanfiction despite not remembering anything about the characters or lore? Ummmmmmm #yolo I guess (by the way I am Still taking illustration requests if anyone wants to pester me — nothing sexy though because complicated reasons, sadly)

Sometimes You Don't Notice How Much You've Grown Until It Hits You in the Face

Chapter Summary

Progress is not linear. The form it takes may surprise you.

Chapter Notes

I drafted this in an old notebook in like three days during a stress-fueled delirious haze and didn't edit it properly. No, I won't stop overthinking everything my hands craft. Yes, I think I'm funny. Also, I'm travelling tomorrow so I'm posting this early. Schedules bore me.

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

“You know it wasn’t your fault.”

The little boy was in the chair, hands crossed in his lap and a wistful glimmer in his eyes; his tiny feet dangled. He looked like he had been here awhile. Behind him, the ship was dirty with ash and fallen debris, but there were no fires anymore. A stream crept through the mossy floor.

“We’ve been here before,” Loki said with a distant smile.

“Have we? I can’t recall.”

“I missed you.”

The boy returned the smile. “He’s pretty,” he said. “Does he like you back?”

Ah—who could say for sure? Tony was just the same kind of person as she was: dancing across the line between friendly intimacy and love without a single care in the world. Maybe he did. Maybe he didn’t. Did it matter?

“Whose fault was it?” she asked, toeing the stream in the ship’s floor.

“Someone’s, probably.” The boy draped his arms behind the backrest. “What do you think about starting a garden here?”

Loki glanced over the moss. “Here?”

“Why not?”

“I need to water it.”

“Maybe that’s the key.”

Lucid dreaming, huh? Not very many people in the world were this adept and she still suspected there was some untapped potential regarding processing trauma. This, in combination with the rest, might prove useful if she practiced. She looked at him again and asked, “Whose fault was it?”

“No one’s,” the boy said.

“What?”

“Remember the butterfly effect?”

“Yes, we’ve... talked about that.”

“Did we? Odd. I’m serious, though.”

Loki frowned.

“They gave you the attention you never received,” the boy said. “They gave you the power you never had. They gave you a way out. It was all you could do to believe. That wasn’t your fault, was it?”

“If I never jumped, they wouldn’t have found me.”

“But you didn’t know that.”

No.

No, she didn’t.

“What was that about the butterfly effect?” she muttered.

“Something about chaos,” the boy said. “Everything is and isn’t someone’s fault. Did your choices lead you here? Sure—but you can’t really be blamed for that. It’s a bit like if there was a wreck on a highway three states away because you talked to a stranger and then that stranger talked to their friend who called their cousin who works at a coffee shop and then the cousin was late and the person driving behind them couldn’t get their daily fix of caffeine because they were also late for something and then they ended up falling asleep at the wheel during rush hour. Ridiculous, isn’t it?”

“I should have known—”

“You shouldn’t have known anything,” the boy calmly interrupted. “You were hurting. You weren’t thinking straight. Stop that.”

“I’m sorry,” she softly said.

“Whatever for?”

A light crumbled behind them; she looked up at the wisps of violet. “So what do you want me to do?”

“Now, what kind of question is that?”

“Given how lucid I am right now, I figured it was worth a shot.”

“Lucid? What do you think this is, a dream? My—that must have been quite a fall you had.”

(Note: the people within your dreams are generally defensive of the fact that they are in a dream and will insist this is not the case, even if you are very certain that they are, in fact, just a part of your dream. Although their existence is confined to the limits of your mind, they are no less real. Be polite and do not startle them.)

“Ah.” The boy considered it, a hand on his cheek, and then laughed. “I want you to hoist yourself up with that spear, dust off your clothes, and go tell the rest of Asgard what happened. Tell them why you’re so upset. See what changes. Maybe it’ll be better. Maybe it won’t be.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Well, you asked me what I *want* you to do, not what you *can* do.”

“Alright, then. What can I do?”

The boy leaned back in his chair and mused. His perfectly groomed brows knotted upwards and his lips pressed into a thin line, and he wrung one hand with the other, clearly unaware of the movement. He thought about an answer and then he thought about something else. Who knew? “Don’t kill yourself,” he announced.

“Up yours,” Loki said, but the boy smiled: he was all kindness.

Then he was gone, and there was nothing.

As the days passed, all the good reasons to linger vanished. Her cover was in shambles; they knew she was here. Her time was getting repetitive. This place was making her nervous: she ought not to stay much longer if she meant to accomplish anything with herself. So, packing everything in her holding space and dissolving the wards around the room, she left to wander.

Though it was true she never really teleported if she didn’t need to, there was far too much nothing in the area to walk and she made herself comfortable bouncing between settlements. A small town by the sea; a giant city carved into valleys and hills; a village somewhere, its ancient wooden buildings spread thinly over the grass, where she stayed awhile. They didn’t get many travellers, but they were kind to her: they even gave her food for the trip. Passing through some dreamy flower fields and woods, she spent the nights curled under the stars with only her sword beside her and her coat as a pillow. She didn’t get cold; why not make the most of it?

It was familiar, and, although it didn’t solve everything, she found safety in the old routine. For a time, she could almost imagine she was off exploring with friends like she used to.

Once, as she was leaving town, she ran into a herd of deer and stopped for a very rudimentary conversation: it seemed they could understand her but she could not really understand them. “Hello,” she said as one of them sat beside her. “Have you been travelling long?”

The deer bowed.

“Where are you all headed?”

The deer got up and stuck its snout eastward; she glanced that way. There was nothing as far as she could see, save perhaps for some trees.

“That’s quite a journey,” she said. “I suppose I shouldn’t keep you.”

The deer came and butted her with its nose, and then it continued on its way. A few of the others did the same.

“Good luck!” she said as they trotted off; one of them bleated in acknowledgement.

And so the days continued. She didn’t write much, but she still had everything with her for when she felt like it—little vignettes of her fears and worries with no particular order to them. She ate well and didn’t have too many issues easing herself across the time zones; her hands were steady, and, although she stuttered a bit, she was able to sort her monetary concerns once out of Russia and stock up when she needed to.

Hemlock had warned her against this, but, as Loki slowly exhausted herself, she stopped for a moment in New York to see how they were faring.

It looked pretty good, everything considered. The demolished buildings had not been rebuilt and there were still a few chasms nearby, but most of the street had been cleaned and repaved; the foot traffic was mainly construction workers bustling with their machines. There were memorials littered around the sidewalks, and, turning away, she could almost smell the smoke again: the black had been burned into places. Closure was closure, though. Things were well.

It occurred to her as she left to thank Hemlock for the book, but the shop was closed when she passed it. There was a sign on the door:

I am recovering from surgery and there are not enough staff to take over. I apologize for any inconvenience. — The Owner

Well then! Loki smiled briefly and then continued on her way, which was to grab some more canvases. This was a bit of a struggle because she simply could not string a sentence together no matter how hard she tried, but she managed. Then she went back to her little house, dumped everything in the living room, and collapsed in a pile on the couch. She did not make dinner or do anything else. She just fell asleep there with her indecipherable back-and-forth sleep schedule and slept entirely through the night.

The morning was easy—even a bit boring. She ate and had her mildly dysfunctional amount of tea and then set to work on the chunky, partly carved horse head that had been gathering dust in storage. She did not see anyone and did not try to. Although the worst of it had settled, she still wasn’t sure how to face those who had been there that day; she still didn’t know if she trusted them or if, for any number of reasons, they’d even want to see her. No need: she had food for another few days and things to do on her own. Did they even know she was here? Nope. For all intents and purposes, she did not exist.

She tried to stretch the food but failed miserably, and, after hours of steeling herself the next day, she very, very reluctantly crept into town.

It wasn’t too bad: she could sort of blend in among the crowd, even with the expensive clothes and otherwise somewhat over-the-top presentation, and no one really bothered her anyway. The smaller shops she’d visited a few times had apparently missed her and were thrilled to see she was well;

one even gave her a free dessert with her usual things. She stopped for coffee and had a hesitant conversation while waiting, and, on the way out, she bumped into yet another kind stranger who complimented her on the coat. She was nervous, but, walking with him awhile, she eventually warmed up to the company. They sat for a bit so she could drink the coffee and kept talking. Turned out his wife was a seamstress, hence the interest: he'd sponged her taste for good fashion.

But of course it was getting too peaceful and, as Loki finished the coffee, something just had to happen.

There was a scream by the cliff and a very loud splash.

Maybe something else; it was too quick to tell. Maybe some frantic swearing. Whatever. The woman, bent at the edge to watch the water, was hysterical: the stranger scurried to her side as a small crowd gathered. Loki, already regretting getting out of bed that morning, left her things and joined them. There was no shore they could traverse, nor anything to climb: it was a sheer drop into the water at least fifty feet down. No stones to grip. Nothing to rest on. Sea-level ground was too far and the current was too strong; the waves were tall and frothing.

Over the void of blue and white, a dog's head poked out of the surface.

It would be suicide for anyone—better fit for early mourning than any attempt to help. But she wasn't anyone, and as the dog vanished again, she made up her mind in an instant. "Hold this," she said, throwing the velvet coat at the stranger, and then she kicked her boots off and took a running dive into the water.

—and how stupid

how absolutely and terribly stupid of her and she felt it the second she was in, floating weightless with her hair behind her and her breath held tight beneath the dead silence. The dark felt like all those lonely nights spent chained in a room and the pressure was like deep space on her bruised body and her wet skin was too familiar: she knew what came next. Never mind that, though, and she quickly righted herself and squinted into the saltwater blackness for the dog. She dragged it towards her and then warped them both to the cliff's surface.

The dog was conscious, but unable to stand; it staggered back against her with its dripping fur and then sank into her lap once more. Blood? Blood. Ah, shit. She healed it in a panic.

"Oh, that must have been terrifying," she said, her voice an uneven stammer, as she propped its head up with a wince. "I've got you. You're alright." She unstuck the tangled hair from her face and tried to check for more injuries. Water in the lungs. Anything. It was hard without focus, but she managed it somehow.

The dog gagged and then stood, shook its soaking fur out, and climbed up into her lap again and started licking her face.

"Alright?" she said, brushing the ropes of wet fur from one of its eyes; it did not stop bombarding her with licks. "Alright."

The stranger came up beside her. "How did you—"

"I don't know," she said, and then she let the dog run off and collapsed on the ground, suddenly and violently teary. "I don't know how I did that."

He held her coat without a word while she sobbed on the ground. The woman thanked her profusely, but she wasn't listening. The crowd slowly scattered. She couldn't tell where the sea ended and Thanos began; she feared she'd never made a difference with herself and this sort of thing would keep happening. She feared she would die like this.

But the stranger was very patient with her, and when she finally struggled to her knees with her red face and blurry eyes and pulled her shirt off to wring it out, there was no mockery. Nothing; had she not currently been rather ambiguous in the chest, he probably still wouldn't have even flinched. All he had to say was a soft, "That wasn't easy, was it? You should be proud of yourself. Not many people can do that."

"It was worth it," Loki muttered as she slid the shirt back on, and then her boots. She stood shakily and took the coat. "Thank you."

"I guess you can count on your magic to keep you safe. Nothing can stop you, huh?"

She looked out at the sea, wondering where she had heard that before. "Nothing can stop me."

‡

As with most things in life, the comfort waned. It was true what the stranger had said to him and his reaction to the whole situation had honestly been sort of underwhelming when placed beside his worst moments, but this did not mean Loki was suddenly able to take a steaming shower with the lights off; he struggled, in fact, to even keep up his hydration in the next few days. Still, it was nice to know he could just power through the fear like that sometimes, and he thought that, given some practice—perhaps not something so nerve-wracking as saving an animal from imminent death—he could find a way to build upon it.

He tried not to rush, though.

Mostly, he tried to just carry on as normal. He took some time alone and let himself come down from all the aftershocks—all the sudden panic and jolts back to that instant. He distracted herself. It was not the most minor thing he had ever done, though, and the story eventually made its way to New Asgard. Like Tony, Natasha was observant enough to piece everything together and was accordingly a bit worried; she came by one morning to see how he was, although supposedly it was to inform him that, thanks to some convoluted grounds including cultural loopholes and the fact that most of New Asgard sort of technically didn't fall under every single law (or something weird like that) everything was a go on the hunting and he would be able to use a bow after all, but he would still have to wait until hunting season and mind what he killed. Excellent diversion, Natasha! And pretty excellent news, admittedly. But not good enough.

"I brought a peace offering," she said, holding up a very large fish in a plastic bag. "Please don't tell me you're fine and then kick me out."

Loki took the fish. "Peace offering? This feels more like bribery."

"It's from Thor," Natasha said. "He thought you might appreciate the best catch of the trip."

"But he's making me gut it? How mean."

"Are you turning down the free fish?"

“No.”

Natasha removed her shoes. “Can I come in?”

“Well, you already took your shoes off,” Loki said, defeated. He went to store the fish; Natasha closed the door and sat in the couch. “I am fine, though.”

“You look like you haven’t slept in four days,” Natasha said.

“Funny. I slept ten hours last night.”

“Can I see your hands?”

Loki stopped. “Did Tony tell you about that?” he said, hiding them reflexively.

“No,” Natasha said. “I noticed it myself.”

“I didn’t mean to.”

“I believe you.”

Behind his coat, he felt the scabs. They were still painful; most parts were raw.

“Why don’t you heal them?”

“I don’t know,” he said, tucking them in the coat’s pockets. “I don’t mind. It grounds me.”

“That makes sense,” Natasha said with a nod. “Just be careful.”

“I try.”

“Do you want to join us for a game night later?”

Did he? He pondered it, and then, though still quite unsure, he said, “That would be nice.”

Natasha picked at a loose thread in the couch. Loki came over and sat beside her.

“Your hair looks good like this,” Natasha said.

It was loose and fell in heavy curls to the side, just like it had been doing more or less since his last shift a few weeks ago; Loki smiled. “Thank you!”

“What are your plans this morning?”

“I’m not sure yet.”

Natasha pointed to the carved horse head in the corner. “Did you make that?”

“I did! I’m trying to get back into carving.”

“It looks great.”

“Thank you. You know, it was really difficult because I wasn’t sure if I could control myself with a knife”—he swept the hair from his eyes—“but it’s all gone well so far. I’m proud of myself.”

“You should be,” Natasha said. “It must be tempting. It takes a lot of strength to hold back.”

Loki set his hands in his lap.

“Do you want some cream for that? It’ll help keep them from getting infected.”

“Oh, I’m... not sure,” Loki quietly said. “Um. I don’t know.”

“I’ve got a first aid kit at my place. There’s a lot left. Do you want to come with me?”

Was he freezing? He was freezing. How long before this got awkward? He looked down at his hands. “... Sure?”

Natasha got up. Loki followed her out.

It was honestly a bit uncomfortable; what did Natasha think about all this? He sat and said nothing while she rummaged through the bathroom cabinets. She returned with a fabric case and sat beside him at the table.

“Have these gotten infected before?” she asked as she flipped through the compartments.

“A few times,” Loki said.

“Are you keeping them clean?”

“No.”

“I could wipe them down, but it’s probably going to sting. Do you mind?”

“No.” He laid his hands flat on the table.

She tore open an alcohol wipe. “I’ve seen you clean things with magic sometimes,” she said as she passed over the scrapes. “Is that not an option?”

“I don’t want to,” he said above a wince. “It... feels like I deserve it.”

“It feels like it.” She took out a tube of antibiotic cream. “Do you think it’s true, though?” she asked as she unscrewed it.

“I don’t know,” he said.

Natasha was very gentle, taking care not to apply any pressure as she covered all the marks. For a brief instant, she reminded him of his mother. “That’s an important distinction,” she said. “You don’t say ‘I deserve it.’ You say ‘It feels like I deserve it.’”

“The end result is the same,” he said.

“But you realize it’s not you.”

He said nothing.

“Do you want me to bandage this?” Natasha asked as she put the cream away.

“Yes, please.”

The scrapes were too long for a standard adhesive bandage, so she got some non-stick pads and medical tape. “I like your rings,” she said, laying the pad over the cream. “They look good with the nail polish.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re very polite.”

“It was in the royalty handbook.”

Natasha taped everything down and then did the other hand. “How does that feel?”

Loki flexed his hands. “Good,” he said, and then he smiled and said yet another, “Thank you.”

Her smile was tired. “Do you want me to cover that too?” she asked, pointing to where his wrists peered from the end of the sleeves.

He blushed and immediately stuck both hands in tight fists on his lap.

“Is it bad?”

What constituted bad, anyway? He shouldn’t have been doing this at all. “No,” he said. “It’s about the same.”

“Do you mind if I see?”

Yes. Yes, he did. He minded very, very much. But, knowing it wouldn’t change anything if she did or didn’t, he anxiously unrolled his hands and rolled the sleeves up. His wrists were covered in scrapes on both sides; some of them extended to the palms. “Sorry,” he muttered, lowering his gaze.

“What for?” Natasha said as she turned his hands over to examine them.

“I shouldn’t be doing this.”

“We do a lot of things we shouldn’t do.” She took a fresh wipe and cleaned the scrapes. These were deeper; he sucked in a breath. “There are worse things you could be doing, anyway.”

“Are my hands cold?” he quietly asked as she passed over the palms.

“Only a little,” she said. “Why do you ask?”

“I always fear people can tell.”

“You’re not the only person with cold hands.”

Loki silently watched her cover the scrapes with the cream, and then with the bandages. Some of the scrapes were too odd a shape; she had to cut a few different pads and piece them together. Did she know? Maybe she’d guessed. Not that it made any difference.

“Is it a long story?” Natasha asked as she taped the one at the base of his thumb.

“I suppose it depends who’s hearing it.”

“Do you want to tell me?”

It hurt to bend one wrist; he winced as he tried to move his hands. “I fear what might happen if I did,” he said.

“You don’t need to.” She gently took his hands in hers, palm on palm, for a last look. “There’s not a lot that could surprise me. I don’t judge.”

He couldn’t remember the last time he’d just told anyone; had he even? Just like that? It was easier to act like he’d always been this way—no pain before or because. But maybe things were different these days. “I... don’t naturally look like this,” he softly said. “Not the skin. It’s long become my default, but it’s still only magic. It’s not perfect.”

“You’ve got tells,” she acknowledged. “Do they bother you?”

“I don’t like what I’m hiding,” he said.

She thumbed the bandages. Her touch was soothing; it felt nice to have her holding him like this. “I know there’s a story behind that,” she said. “I’m not going to tell you not to feel that way. But I want you to remember you’re always you, no matter what you look like.”

Like many other things in those few months, Loki found it odd how casually she had answered away such a long and complicated issue—very much like when Bucky had shrugged off the matter of adoption and just moved on. But odd as it was, he had enough sense to see how precious hearing such a line was to him and he felt incredibly lucky all of a sudden to have met her. “Thank you,” he said, even though he had probably said enough thank yous by now; he meant every one of them and he needed her to know.

Natasha put everything away for a final time and closed the case. “Do you need anything else?”

There was so much Loki could have asked of her that he didn’t know where to begin. He was afraid if he even tried she would get upset at him for asking too much; what didn’t he need? Better sleep. Better self-control. The strength to let his past die. As Natasha got out of her chair and pushed it in, he thought about it.

“I didn’t mean in general,” she said.

Loki gave no response on the matter. “I thought I could rest now,” he softly said. “Why does everything keep happening to me?”

Natasha paused with the fabric case in her hand. “I don’t know,” she said.

“I just want... quiet.”

He didn’t say anything else, and Natasha, suspecting he wouldn’t for a while, went to return the case and then came back to the table shortly. Nervous, he was already picking at the tape without realizing; why was he even here?

She leaned against the table.

“I think I need a hug,” he simply said.

“I can do that,” she said, and then he got up with a heavy motion and let her wrap her arms around him. This went on for what he worried was too long; it was a very warm and lengthy hug and he didn’t say a word, just wished he was somewhat shorter so he could rest his head on her shoulder. But she didn’t seem to mind.

“Thank you,” he said.

Turning back home for a few hours of downtime before whatever the night brought, Loki was able to calm himself and smooth the tape. It was busy when he showed up at Bucky’s house—him, Natasha, Thor, and most of the children. There was food and drink and a lot of chatter; no one noticed the half-dozen bandages on his hands between the excitement. They were just thrilled to see him and he was mobbed by the younger kids as soon as he entered.

“Peter thinks he might be able to join later,” Natasha said to him as he finally escaped and found a seat around the living room table. “Would you mind dropping him off?”

“Not at all,” Loki said. “I’ve missed him.”

“He’s mean,” Bucky said from where he was rummaging with a pile of boxes. “He keeps beating me in everything.”

“You just need to get better at everything,” Thor responded from the kitchen.

Bucky bolted straight up with a box in hand. “Say that to my face.”

Thor set his food down and locked eyes with him. “You just need to get better at everything,” he said with a smile.

“I’m never inviting you to anything ever again.”

“Be nice,” Natasha said. “Both of you.”

Thor held something up. “Hey, Loki! Catch.”

It was already in the air before he could ask what in the world it was; he leapt to catch it, startled. “What? What are you throwing sausages at me for?”

“Try it.”

“Is this a trick?”

“It’s spicy,” Bucky said.

“It’s not spicy,” Thor said. “Don’t listen to him.”

“Your tongue will melt. He’s lying.”

“You know I can’t lie to you.”

Bucky opened a box. “Say no to peer pressure.”

“It’s not spicy,” Thor insisted. “Brother, please.”

Loki, fully expecting it to be spicy and bracing himself accordingly, took a small bite. “It’s... sweet.”

“And you doubted me!”

“Ah. My apologies.” He ate the rest.

“Brother?” Bucky checked, glancing up at him.

“Gender-nonspecific sibling who thinks words are like the weather,” Thor said. “Yes?”

“Grand overlord of cool with a better fashion sense than you,” Loki said, sitting back down with a very dark but well-meaning smirk. “Get off your high horse.”

Bucky laughed.

“What are we playing?” Natasha asked.

“Modded limited edition Space Monopoly,” Bucky said. “You’re going to hate it.”

“Can I cheat?” Loki asked.

“Cheating is not only allowed but encouraged.”

“Sounds awful,” Natasha said. “I’m in.”

Bucky dumped everything on the table. “Hey, Mogrin. Come join us. I know you’re good at this one.”

Mogrin, who was picking at some cards with one of the groups, looked up. “I can’t help you win,” he said, although he came over anyway.

“How tragic,” Loki said, smiling at Bucky.

“Very tragic,” Bucky agreed with a sombre nod.

Thor threw another sausage with no warning; Loki scrambled to catch it by instinct.

“Nice reflexes,” Natasha said.

“Stop throwing food at me,” Loki said, sitting back down with a huff. He ate the sausage out of spite.

“So you don’t want free sausages?” Thor said.

“No, I want you to stop throwing them.”

Thor threw another one.

“Unbelievable,” Loki said, stopping it in midair with a flick of his hand. He floated it to Natasha, who took it gratefully.

No one could say for sure what happened next. Someone turned on some music; not good music, mind you, but acceptable background noise for a game night. The game wasn't particularly fun, either, but the commentary was good. They ate and talked about stupid things like whether or not it was possible to eat an apple in under a minute and which obnoxious customer had held up the line last week screaming about expired coupons. Bucky had too many games hoarded and they cycled through every single one: the entertaining, the boring, and the awful. Sometimes they were even worse. No great bother, though—not at all because somewhere between everything, if only for a moment, the fear faded entirely and the dreamy veil that had been sticking around since that nap on a couch in the Avengers compound lifted so gently that Loki didn't even notice at first. But he did. And the future was very, very bright.

Peter called a few hours in to ask for transport and met him outside the apartment. "Hi!" he said, gesturing for a hug. "It's been so long."

Loki accepted the hug. "I heard you're growing a beard."

"Yeah!" Peter pulled away to point at his chin. "It looks horrible so I'm shaving it, but I'm growing a beard!"

"Good for you! May you grow the longest beard in all of the land someday."

Peter laughed. "Like a wizard?"

"Exactly like a wizard," Loki said with utmost seriousness.

"Oooh. You know what? I'll think about it. What pronouns are you using today?"

"Anything you like."

"Neat!"

Loki laid a hand on Peter's shoulder. "Sorry if this feels odd," he said. "Take a deep breath; it'll help."

Peter was luckily much better at this than Tony: he landed with all his balance and no complaints of a headache and then went straight to the kitchen.

"I've brought a man!" Loki announced.

"Our favourite man," Bucky said. "Welcome. Feel free to eat all of the food."

Peter was already busy digging through the fridge. "What did I miss?"

"Space Monopoly and Loki setting a mouldy pickle on fire," Natasha said.

"Multiple mouldy pickles," he corrected.

"What?" Peter said, glancing at them over a box of potato salad. "Pickles can't mould!"

"Apparently they can," Natasha said.

"That's terrible."

“I agree,” Loki said. “Life was simpler without this knowledge.”

Peter took the potato salad and some juice and then joined them. “Space Monopoly?”

“Modded limited edition Space Monopoly,” Bucky said. “It’s different.”

“Oh no.”

“An understatement.”

Yes, Bucky lost many times in many things to Peter, including modded limited edition Space Monopoly, but he took it with as much grace as he could muster. The music got even worse. At some point, they weren’t even playing anything anymore and resorted to general shenanigans like gossip and throwing cards at things; Loki was stellar at this.

The other children did not stay too long, nor did Peter, who asked to be ferried back around one local time, fairly early back home. As game nights tended to do, the shenanigans got entirely and immediately out of hand now that it was only adults: apparently Thor had gotten ahold of some exceptionally high-quality mead—Asgard-style, or, in other words, very strong—which was a rarity here, and he and Loki made the best of it. Bucky was more interested in watching and Natasha somehow became the designated babysitter and it was a large bottle, which left... a lot.

“Are you enabling me?” Loki said as Thor poured him a glass in the kitchen.

“When was the last time you did this?”

“Hm. Fair point.”

“Are you still a lightweight?”

“Lightweight? Since when?”

“Since always.”

“Maybe compared to you.” Loki drank the entire glass in one take and set it down. “Another!”

“Or,” Thor calmly suggested, “you wait a minute and have some water.”

“Piss off.”

“He’s right,” Bucky said. “Hydrate.”

Thor filled the glass with water.

“You humiliate me,” Loki said, taking it.

“You know what’s more humiliating?” Bucky said. “Puking your guts out in a toilet.”

Loki drank the water and then held out the glass with an expectant glare.

“Yes, your highness,” Thor said, pouring him another measure. “Are you sure you’re not drunk?”

“Who gets drunk off one glass of mead? It’s mead.”

Thor coughed loudly.

“Eat me,” Loki said, and then he drank that in a single take as well.

“You’re not supposed to drink it like that,” Thor said.

“Only if you’re a coward.” Loki took his glass and went back to the couch. “I’m not a lightweight,” he muttered, reaching to turn up the music.

“Your whole face is red.”

“I’m not slurring therefore I’m not drunk. Go away.”

“Who’s going to tell him?” Bucky said with a chuckle.

“Don’t you dare,” Thor said.

“I’m not drunk!” Loki said, raising the empty glass. “I had a whole bottle of wine on an empty stomach once and wasn’t drunk and it was almost exactly as strong if not stronger. Stop bullying me.”

“How big was the bottle?” Thor asked.

“Bottle-sized.”

He laughed. “Bottle-sized!” he said, joining Loki at the couch with the rest of the mead and his glass. “Alright, then. I will also have... two glassfuls.” He poured one out.

Bucky pulled the Scrabble board from under the table and set it down with a thump. “I have an idea,” he said as he unpacked everything.

“Oh no,” Loki said.

“Oh yes. This will be hilarious.”

“An excellent test,” Thor said. “We get to see how long you can spell.”

“I will hit you,” Loki said, pouring himself another glass. He did not drink this one all at once.

“You love me.”

“I will hit you lovingly.”

Bucky drew a letter and then passed the bag: Natasha went first.

History considered, perhaps this wasn’t the best idea, and, like the last time, there was a lot that could have spoiled the mood: Loki had it on good authority that he became upsettingly emotional as soon as the slightest drop of alcohol entered his bloodstream and his emotions were already wreaking havoc as it was. But they were having enough fun and there was supervision anyway—enough to keep him from taking it too far and enough to hold him down if he started panicking—and so they just put on some better music, kept up the jokes, and slowly chipped away at the bottle. No one was really trying to win the game at this point.

Loki, on his fifth glass of very strong mead, stared at the board for a solid minute before slurring out, “How do you spell... plume?”

“Plume?” Bucky said, squinting at him.

“Yeah, like a... plume. Plume of smoke. Feathers? Plume. Pluuume.”

“P-L-U-M-E,” Natasha answered.

“Oh, it is a word. Plume.” Loki carefully arranged the letters with both hands. “Is that a word?”

“Yes,” said Thor, also on his fifth glass but much more coherent.

“Plume?”

“Yes.”

“That’s not a word.”

Natasha looked up the word on her phone and showed it to him.

“I think,” he said, leaning in very close because the words were way too small, “the, uh, the Allspeak is dying on me, I think. What are these letters. Help.”

“I think your eyes aren’t working because you’re drunk,” Thor said.

“I’m not! If I were that d-d-d-d-drunk I wouldn’t be talking good either.”

“Oooh,” Bucky said. “Combo. Also, I think you just proved him right.”

“He had five glasses too!” Loki said, angrily gesturing towards him. “How’s he not—he’s still talking and everything!—why couldn’t I be like this that night it would’ve saved me so much t-t-t-trouble—how are you not drunk yet?”

“Because you’re a lightweight,” Thor said.

“I’m not a lightweight! You’re a heavyweight! Everyone’s a lightweight compared to you.”

“Sounds like something a lightweight would say,” Bucky said, sliding a treble beside Loki’s plume.

“That’s not a word,” Loki said.

“Lightweight?”

He doubled over with laughter.

“Treble,” Thor said.

“Treble is a word,” Natasha confirmed, setting her phone on the table. Unfortunately, Loki was still struggling to breathe from laughing so hard and couldn’t look.

“Treble.” Thor poured out the last of the mead. “Interesting. You’re still not winning, though.”

“Who’s winning?” Loki exclaimed, sitting up.

“Not you.”

“What? No. I wrote... box. That’s a good word.”

“You wrote xoob and then cried when I told you that’s not a word.”

“No? No. No I didn’t. *Nei*. What?”

“You totally wrote xoob,” Bucky said. “X-O-O-B. Xoob. Definition unknown.”

“Words are made up anyway,” Loki said.

“Ah.” Thor nodded. “We agree on something. You know what? Points for xoob. Let the grand overlord of cool have their points.”

“Xoob,” Loki sobbed, laughing again. “I hate that.”

“But it loves you,” Bucky said.

“It loves me?”

“It loves you,” Natasha said. “It’s your xoob.”

“My xoob.”

“Hey, say hi,” Bucky said, holding up his phone. “I’m gonna send this to Peter.”

“Xoob,” Thor said with a chortle.

“Xoob,” Loki said. “That’s fantastic.”

“It loves you,” Thor said, smiling at him.

“It loves me?”

“Do you know who else loves you?”

“Xoob?”

“Me. I love you.”

Loki gasped. “You love me!”

“I love you.” Thor laid a hand on his head. “You are the best sibling anyone could ever have.”

The noise that left Loki’s mouth was untranslatable. He fell into Thor’s arms with a sob. “I love you too,” he said. “I think I’m a lightweight.”

“You had a fair bit. I’d call you something in the middle.”

“I’m gonna go get... water.” He stood and then immediately sat back down. “Actually, no.”

“I believe in you,” Thor said. “Go get your water.”

“Hey, I’m still walking in a straight line!” Loki said, trudging to the kitchen with the empty glass. “Sort of. I’m fine.”

“It’s good,” Natasha said. “I’m surprised you still have your balance.”

“*Ég’r göngumeistari!*” he shouted.

“Translation?” Bucky requested.

“I am the walking master,” Thor said.

“Oh, fuck, it’s hitting,” Loki said, setting the glass on the counter. “Oh no. Are you still recording? Peter, don’t say fuck.”

Thor guffawed.

“Why are you not drunk yet!”

“I am drunk. Just not as drunk as you.”

“And you’ve d-d-just... let me be the d-drunkest person in the room all by myself? How could you?”

“Xoob,” Bucky said.

Loki burst into another fit of laughter. “Stop,” he said between tears.

“We love xoob,” Thor said.

“Xooooob,” Bucky said.

Loki turned the sink on but was so busy laughing that most of the water went on his hands and not in the glass. He was still laughing when he turned the sink off. “Wait a second,” he said as he shook his hands dry, completely unbothered. “Wait. What. Wait, I did that.”

“Are you having a moment?” Thor asked.

“I’m having a moment! This’ll probably pass as soon as I’m sober and then never return again but I’m having a moment! I don’t think I can explain why it’s a moment but it’s a moment.”

“Good for you,” said Natasha, who, out of everyone in the room, was perhaps the only other person who had a clue. “Maybe it will happen again when you’re sober. You never know.”

Loki drank his water with the largest grin. “Xoob,” he mumbled, and then he carefully returned to the couch and collapsed there in an incomprehensible position. “Oh no, we’re out?”

“We’re out,” Thor said. “No more.”

“I think you’ve had enough anyway,” Bucky said. “This is a good spot. It’s all downhill after.”

“I don’t even... *like* mead.”

“Life is funny like that sometimes.”

“Mmm. You’re right.”

Bucky examined the board.

“You’re still not winning,” Thor said.

“Yeah,” Bucky said, and then he lifted the board, dumped all the letters into the bag, and set the board back down on the table. “Oops.”

“Do you think you’re clever?”

“Yes. Very.”

“I’d have done the same,” informed Loki, mostly horizontal with his head on Thor’s lap.

“You would,” Thor said.

“New round?” Bucky suggested.

“Over my dead body,” Loki said.

“Are you sleeping?”

“No.”

“Not yet, huh?”

Loki crawled off the couch and went to dig through all the games under the table. Then, deciding that the pictures were not doing a good enough job at compensating, he gave up and said, “I have officially lost the ability to read.”

“You should go find it,” Bucky said.

“Not today, no.” Loki stood and sat back down on the couch. “Oh—I *like* this song.”

“Are you the dancing queen?”

“I am! But not right now. I think *ég’r of drukkinn til að dansa.*”

“I think you’re exactly drunk enough to dance,” Thor said, most certainly scheming: Bucky, horrified, fought a laugh.

Still not a very good idea—but, stumbling right back off the couch with a defeated grin, Loki grabbed Thor by the hand and said, “Well, I have *nothing* to lose but my chains. Will you be my dancing king?”

“Always,” Thor said, and that’s how they spent the rest of the song: with a beautifully uncoordinated and drunken couple’s dance that would end in nothing less than someone stepping on the other’s foot. But they were all smiles about it—just like those old days as children who didn’t know or care any better. What a blissful pause to the madness.



Bucky, of course, was still a fiend and set up another game meanwhile. This was, to be clear, a mistake, and when they got down to it everything continued for so long that by the time they were even close to halfway through the sun was up. Natasha checked out much earlier and somehow, even with the music, Loki eventually fell asleep leaned on the couch arm, although he stirred when Thor carried him to the spare bedroom.

“Sorry,” he muttered into the pillow.

“What are you apologizing for?”

He turned onto his side. “The... I don’t know.”

Thor tucked him in. “Goodnight,” he said.

“Mhm.”

The door closed.

It still hurt to put any weight on his hands, but it was milder than before and the rest didn't bother him much. Better than the last time this happened; he had missed this kind of night. Beneath the open window, he drifted back asleep quickly and had no nightmares.

Chapter End Notes

Xoob

(Boy I WANT to draw Thor and Loki dancing together to Dancing Queen. Maybe I might. The world is my oyster or something. [Update September 6th, 2021: I did. Fuck yeah.] Also, if anyone needs me to tag something, do tell me! I think I'm at a point in the story where I desperately need to update the tags.)

The One Where It Gets Better

Chapter Summary

Loki catches himself spiralling and goes to the best person he knows.

Chapter Notes

Lol schedules. Lol. Lmao. No. I'm overthinking this chapter too because I'm fun and quirky but I can always come back and tweak it when I finish the story so it's probably okay. Please send me illustration requests because I am so bored and sad and I need to draw something. My hands crave lines. Lmao.

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

In the morning, or what little remained of it after their very long and busy night, Loki had breakfast with Thor, who had also slept over, and Bucky. He was slow to wake, mostly silent and a bit woozy from his less than adequate rest, but no one minded; no one pestered him for speech or snapped when he couldn't manage something simple on his own. They recapped the night's events and went on their ways.

Nothing else happened, although as Loki finally convinced himself later that day to clean the fish and then got to work, he could not get his mind off how silly it was to have to tidy his hands magically. To tidy the counter, and the knife, when he could be wiping everything down with just a wet rag instead: sure, it wasn't as efficient, but wasn't it simpler? He remembered very well all he had done in these last few days and yet he lost himself in the freshly dirtied bandages on his wrists. How he was scared to change them. How none of this was as easy as it should have been.

Thor would feel awful if he knew, and, desperate to spare him the guilt, Loki didn't speak of it.

Not a word.

He cleaned everything just as he usually did, even the bandages: turns out it wasn't an impossible manoeuvre and it only took a little more precision. It was a decent solution, but it would have been better if he asked Natasha to reapply everything. Unfortunately, though, he did not care enough to try. In fact, he was sort of tempted to rip off the bandages and reopen the wounds. He wanted to, just to spite himself. He did, actually, and then he cried over it.

It was worse than just the scratching alone; those were often only raw, and this time, fragile under the half-healed scabs, they bled. His whole wrists and his hands and his fingers were wet with blood. It burned worse; these hurt the most the day after. And so there went everything—there went all that work, didn't it? He liked himself like this. He liked the control: it wasn't like with Thanos. He liked how it grounded him. And so he kept going, even though he knew he shouldn't, and it spiralled like a storm over the next few days. He stopped eating. He stopped hydrating. Ah—he

stopped sleeping too, by choice. Why bother? His magic could sustain him. Better he take the punishment anyway: what the hell was he thinking shredding his skin like that after so much progress? Tearing his already recent wounds knowing he would only sink deeper? Might as well give up; he'd just keep coming back here.

He was like this for a week before he caught himself, and, quite terrified it would end in suicide, he appeared one day on three hours of sleep at Tony's cabin.

"Good morning!" Tony said at the door.

"No, it's not," Loki thinly responded, hands folded before him.

Tony's heart sinking was visible. "Oh," he said, and then he looked around like he wasn't sure what to do and asked, "Do you want to come sit down?"

"May I?"

"Of course. You're always welcome here."

Loki stepped inside and quietly eased the door shut.

"What's up?" Tony said, plopping himself into the couch's crook.

"Oh... things."

"That doesn't sound promising."

Loki sat beside him. "I... think I need you," he softly said.

Much like his reaction at the door, Tony's expression was very honest: he did blush a little and he did try to fight a smile and he looked a lot like he didn't want it to matter—that they should stick together after all because they were a lovely and whimsically well-fitting pair. He leaned on a knee. "Can I see?" he said, peering at the red scabs.

Loki rolled his sleeves up.

"You don't want to heal them?" Tony said above an audible cringe.

"Not particularly," Loki said.

"Is that why you came?"

"I suppose."

"Are you eating?"

"No."

"Would you eat if I made you something?"

"No."

"Do you want something to drink?"

Loki paused. “No.”

Tony leaned back. “Do you... want a hug?”

“That doesn’t seem like a good idea.”

“Has that ever stopped you?”

Never, honestly; Loki liked his bad ideas. He scooted over, mindful of the sore wounds, and leaned on Tony, who laid an arm around him. “Am I really welcome here?” he quietly asked.

“I like your company,” Tony answered, perfectly nonchalant.

“But... Pepper.”

“Pepper”—Tony breathed in, perhaps considering a long-winded paragraph but then deciding against it—“is not who you think. Surprise! You get to know this very cool insider information now, including that she had a girlfriend for like two years on and off this one time long, long after we officially decided we were in a relationship. And I think you’ve actually sort of grown on her, anyway. I promise she doesn’t mind.”

“I think I’m intruding,” Loki said, tucking his hands in his pockets.

“No, you’re not,” Tony said.

“No?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“I am.”

“... Thank you.”

Tony was very warm, a bit orange-scented from his last shower, and his touch was familiar. For a while they just sat there and did nothing; it was a nice break from life’s usual chaos. Loki, heavy in his arms, suspected he would fall asleep like this if he let himself. He wondered how foolish it would be to lean in a little deeper and kiss him, and, quite truly, he considered it. But he never did.

“What are you up to these days?” he asked.

“Oh, uh... childcare planning,” Tony said.

“Really? That’s exciting.”

“Yeah!” Tony exclaimed. “Yeah, it’s crazy. I’m still trying to wrap my head around it.”

“It is an odd feeling,” Loki agreed with a nod. “Are you nervous?”

“I’m so nervous! I keep freaking out that something’s gonna go wrong. I don’t know how people do this.”

“You’ll be fine.”

“You think so?”

“I’m sure of it.”

Tony exhaled slowly. “Yeah, I’m probably riling myself up over nothing. I guess you know more about this than me.”

“Is Pepper here?”

“No, she’s out. She’ll be back later.”

“Mm. Maybe I can give her some advice.”

“That would be awesome! We got a few books off a family friend, but I know they’re not gonna cover everything. I’m sure she’d really appreciate it.”

Truthfully, this was not an easy topic. There were too many tragedies tied to it and it hurt to understand that it was not always so simple as falling in love and having it stay; it hurt to see someone achieving all this just like that, no grief or pain or madness in sight. But like that old lady had said, it didn’t do much good to avoid it entirely: better to have loved and lost than to never have loved at all, wasn’t it? Loki cherished these moments, and, always a little cold under all the sentiment he burned, he cherished the few times he let someone slip through the fear. And it was just that, and, suddenly awash with a million different bitter memories, he sat up and asked, “Are we lovers?”

“Do you want to be?”

Although this was not the first time Tony had asked—implied it, at least, because it was hard to remember this kind of thing—Loki was still a bit taken aback. “I don’t know,” he said, because he didn’t: he wanted to leave just as much as he wanted to stay.

“Maybe you don’t need to know,” Tony said.

“I like your arms around me. I know that.”

Tony smiled.

“May I have that drink now?”

“You may. Would you like to try some blackberries?”

“Oh... that would be nice. Thank you.”

Tony got up carefully and went to the kitchen. “On a slightly related note,” he said, “do you know anything about gardening? I kinda want to grow some vegetables in the back.”

Now that was a hell of a *déjà vu*; Loki, remembering at once how he’d suggested it to himself while a bit more lucid than normal, thought about it. “It’s not particularly difficult. Some plants are hardier than others. You’re free to try those first.”

“Tomatoes?” Tony suggested.

“Sure. What’s the worst that could happen?”

“I end up with a bunch of dead plants and no vegetables.”

“How frightening.”

Tony looked like he was about to say something about them parroting each other’s advice back and forth without listening to it, but then he said nothing. He put the kettle on. “Did you ever figure out what’s up with the tea thing?”

“It’s different,” Loki said.

“Different?”

“Not the same.”

“As?”

Loki gestured vaguely.

“Makes sense,” Tony said. “And that would apply to everything, huh? Whatever is different.”

“I was expecting something less underwhelming.”

Tony made a sound halfway between a sigh and a laugh. “Sometimes answers are underwhelming,” he said, returning with a little bowl of blackberries: he stole one as he sat. “Do you have any plans today?”

“I’d like to keep my wounds closed,” Loki said. He took the bowl in his lap. “I fear that’s too lofty a goal.”

“You can try it regardless.”

“And if I fail?”

“Then you rest and try again tomorrow.”

Just like that?

“It’s a process,” Tony said, very wise with another stolen blackberry. “Sometimes it doesn’t work the first time. Sometimes you backslide. That’s okay.”

“I shouldn’t,” Loki said.

“Well, of course you *shouldn’t*.” Tony nearly rolled his eyes: what a stunning revelation! “But you still do. And that’s okay because at least you realize, and at least you’re trying. You caught yourself before it got worse and that’s a huge step. Be proud of that.”

Loki picked at the blackberries. “I should heal myself.”

“You could,” Tony concurred above a third stolen blackberry. “I don’t think you need to; you’ll heal anyway. Why don’t you challenge yourself and wait until everything heals on its own? Don’t start anything new.”

“Sounds terrible,” Loki said over a bite.

“Sure. You can also just take care of yourself when it happens. Keep everything clean and safe and be... I don’t know. Kind. Sometimes your head gets the better of you and you deal with it as it comes. That’s how you deal with a lot of things.”

Loki took another blackberry.

“Oh! That reminds me.” Tony dug out his wallet and flipped it open. “I got my one-year chip back last week!” he said, pointing. “I am officially one year and four days sober.”

“Good for you!” Loki said.

“Now”—Tony shut his wallet—“I may have developed a slight caffeine addiction in the meantime, but that’s a fair exchange to keep my liver.”

“One thing at a time, right?”

“Exactly! I’m proud of myself for making it this far.”

The kettle clicked off. Tony got up and went to fill a mug with some random tea; Loki scooted to sit in his former spot.

“Why don’t you come get some gardening equipment with me?” Tony asked as he tidied everything. “Might help clear your head.”

Should they? Maybe it would; still, Loki could not say for sure that he wanted to. In fact, he didn’t want to do anything. He would rather just sit here. “I think it might be a little late for gardening,” he said.

“Absolutely not!” Tony said. “I’ll garden anyway.”

“Oh.” Loki placed the empty bowl on the couch arm. “Alright, then.”

“So what do you say? The day’s still young.”

“Right now?”

“Why not?”

“I suppose we could.”

Tony was thrilled. “There’s a whole gardening place nearby!” he said. “I should be able to find everything.” He returned with the mug. “Have you done this a lot? Or not really?”

“I have some good experience,” Loki said. “I could show you a thing or two.”

“Neato.” Tony sat. “Well, thanks for offering! I appreciate it.”

Loki took the mug.

“So what else have you been up to?” Tony asked. “Anything?”

“Not much,” Loki said. “I just... read. Or write. Or paint. Or sit and do nothing for hours.”

“I guess that still counts, right?”

“Sure.”

How long had it been since they saw each other, anyway? A few weeks? It felt like longer. It felt like so long. This couldn't keep happening; what was to be done about them?

“What are you thinking about?” Tony asked.

“Nothing.”

Tony, like he often did, had his worried smile that looked like he might cry—the very honest one that Loki had not seen him give anyone else in their time together. “Do you want to come take the guest room?” he softly said. “You look like you're trying not to fall asleep.”

“I thought you wanted to go get gardening supplies,” Loki said above a hesitant sip.

“We can go later. You can have a nap first. I don't mind.”

“Alright.”

Tony was patient, and he waited until the mug was empty to show him where the guest room was. It was smallish, but very cozy: there was a lovely quilt on the bed and a window behind the headboard, through which the entire lake was visible. “Feel free to open it,” he said, fixing the curtains.

“What if I don't get up until evening?”

“Then you don't get up until evening. We can always go tomorrow. I don't really care.”

Loki sat on the bed. “Where did you get this?”

“There was this place this time with some people who sold these sort of things somewhere. I, uh, don't remember.”

“It's nice.”

“Isn't it?”

Loki lied down and pulled the quilt over him.

“Okay, I'm gonna be downstairs,” Tony said, ducking out of the room. “Come find me whenever.”

The door closed softly. Loki tried to get comfortable, failed, and then sat up and slid the window open a crack. There was a slight breeze; the curtains swayed a bit at the sides and he thought he could smell pine. He lied back down. He wasn't sure how he would fall asleep, but he had done it millions of times before and so he could probably do it again. So, reluctantly, he closed his eyes.

Although he would never know this, Tony came in once to see if he was still breathing. The hours were otherwise unremarkable.

Like most times this happened, the sheets were in a pile when Loki eventually awoke and his hair, though he had tied it, was once again tangled around his shoulders. But he felt well-rested and it

was still light out, so he declared it a victory. He took a few minutes to orient himself and then crawled out of bed.

Tony was fiddling with some screens downstairs. It was a neat little place; although it wasn't quite as impressive as what he'd scored in the compound, everything was there. Loki sat nearby and asked, "I thought you retired?"

"I'm working on it," Tony said. "This is for fun, though."

"What time is it?"

"It is"—Tony glanced at his watch—"two forty-seven. You slept for almost four hours."

"Oh, wow."

"Any cool dreams?"

"Nothing exceptional."

"That's good, right?"

"Ah. I suppose."

"Ready to go now?"

"Are you?"

"Of course." Tony set his things down. "Wanna grab something to eat on the way back?"

"Well, I don't *want* to."

"Would you be willing to accept something to eat if I offer?"

"I can try."

"That's enough for me."

Loki followed him outside.

There was a lot of empty land in the back, free of all the dense trees surrounding the area. It wasn't huge, but it could more than feed a family with some effort. "The soil here is really good," Tony said as he trudged through some pinecones, "but it needs"—he kicked a rock—"tidying. I think that should cover everything. What about you?"

"It looks fine," Loki said. "Other than all the rocks. It shouldn't be a problem."

"There are way too many rocks, though."

"Oh, yes. The rocks will be a pain."

"But rocks never stopped anyone."

"Nope."

The lake seemed bigger from here. It was very still, with very clear water that stretched beyond the horizon, and, lingering for a moment while Tony continued to the car, Loki tried to understand it. It was just... a lake. For all the scrapes on his hands, it didn't bother him; he could almost swear he'd even swim in it someday. But he suspected he would get lost wondering and so he turned and caught up with Tony—still shotgun, as always.

"I'm gonna get you houseplants," Tony suddenly said as they backed out of the driveway. "So many houseplants."

"Thank you," Loki said, "but please reconsider."

"Do you know how good plants are for depression?"

"They're plants."

"They give you purpose, though! You need to get up out of bed in the morning so you can take care of them."

"When did you become the expert on this?"

"I'm the expert on everything."

Loki sighed.

"What are you sighing for?" Tony said, glancing suspiciously at him.

"Your confidence awes me."

"Yeah, it does."

Loki opened the window. "What do you know about cats?"

"What?"

"Oh, you said you're the expert on everything."

"Yes! Cats... always land on their feet."

"Why, though?"

Tony stared hard at the road. "Cat science," he said.

"Cat science!" Loki exclaimed with a gasp. "Ah, thank you. I am enlightened."

"Uh-huh. How do you build a clock?"

"Analog or digital?"

"Smartass."

"I've never heard of a smartass clock."

"Okay, what's the distance between Peru and Egypt?"

“At least twelve feet.”

“You can’t keep obscuring your lack of knowledge with witty answers.”

“Yes, eventually this conversation will end.”

“You’re very lucky I’m driving right now because I promise I would have hit you by now.”

“You don’t have it in you.”

“I would hit you lovingly.”

“Oh! I didn’t know you liked that.”

They stopped at the most obnoxiously timed red light in the universe.

“You baffle me,” Tony said.

“You say that”—Loki leaned to turn the music up—“like it’s a bad thing.”

“Am I? No, I’m just pointing it out.” Tony switched to another station. “Dude. Lady GaGa?”

“I admire her as a person.”

Tony paused. “Okay, fair,” he said, and then he switched back.

“You should get an aloe vera. They’re very useful.”

“I will get multiple.”

“Grow herbs in your kitchen!”

“Hell yeah.”

“And flowers in the front yard.”

“All the flowers.”

The obnoxiously timed red light turned green.

“Okay, so where did all this plant knowledge come from?” Tony asked as he accelerated.

“Spellwork,” Loki said. “I thought it was obvious.”

“You grow everything yourself?”

“Not everything. Many things.”

“Cool.”

The gardening place was not especially far and they were there before the end of the next song; Tony was the first inside, sprinting in with a cart. He did have a list, in fact, but most of their time was just whatever caught their eye.

They paused at the fancy pots.

“I need to talk to the person who thought a planter shaped like pants was a good idea,” Tony said, holding up the object in question.

“A panter,” Loki said.

Tony looked at him in disgust.

“A... plantser.”

“I don’t know you,” Tony said, setting the plantser down.

“You can’t escape the truth.”

“I can and I will.”

Loki took the plantser. “I’m getting this to spite you.”

“I’m not paying for it,” Tony said.

“I’ll steal it and frame you.”

“No, you won’t.”

“Watch me.”

“I refuse.”

Loki continued down the aisle with the plantser.

“Get back here!” Tony said.

“No.”

Tony jogged after him. “What are you even gonna plant in that?”

“Mint,” Loki said. “I’ll make tea with it.”

“How are you going to drink it knowing it came from this abomination?”

“Passionately.”

“I hope your mint doesn’t grow.”

“Thank you.”

Tony took the plantser and put it in the cart with a sigh.

“Does it still rain often?” Loki asked.

“Often enough. I could probably get away with not watering anything. Can’t say the same about the indoor stuff, sadly.”

“Truly awful.”

“Yeah.” Tony stuck a foot on the bottom of the cart so he could ride it. “I need to get a hose,” he said, kicking himself forward. “I have one somewhere, but it’s way too short. And one of those neat little nozzles for it. Yes, I could pull a me move and just do some crazy irrigation system but I won’t.”

“That would be a bit excessive.”

Tony picked up the longest hose. “Look at this! It’s red. I’ve never seen a red hose in my life.”

“It was made for you,” Loki said.

“And a matching nozzle!” Tony held up a red one.

“Perfect.”

Tony stuck everything in the cart.

It was not much comfort to Loki to know that he would have really loved to see Tony take a green one instead, and, with the worst of pangs, he pretended it had never crossed his mind at all and followed him to the next stop. They got the rest of the tools and a pile of seed packets and then they went to get some potted plants: one large aloe vera and some assorted others, one of which was supposed to flower eventually. They also got some slightly less terrible pots and a few bags of extra soil.

Tony was still enraged at the plantser. “Your taste appalls me,” he said as they paid.

“That’s the point.”

“Unbelievable.”

“I don’t know what you expected from me.”

“Reason, I think.”

“That was your first mistake.”

Tony continued riding the cart to the car. “Are you gonna help out with everything?”

“I might,” Loki said. “Maybe with the flowers.”

“Oh my gosh, please tell me you’ve had sushi before.”

“... What?”

“Have you had sushi before?”

“It’s been years, but yes. Why?”

“There’s a sushi place like two blocks away and they are *amazing*. You up for it?”

If he was offering, sure: why not carry the momentum a bit? So they did that. It was small and quiet and they were the only ones there, which was actually sort of nice other than how awkward Loki

felt trying to curb his emotions. But other than that, it was nice, and although he did not eat enough, he ate something.

They got coffee on the way back, too. Overall, it was very ordinary. Nothing happened.

Tony left everything on the porch except for the seeds, which went inside so the wind wouldn't snatch them. He sorted through them. "Okay, these are yours," he said, throwing him the extra herb seeds.

Loki held up a pack. "When did you get lemongrass?"

"When you weren't looking. That's good for tea, too." Tony paused to check something. "Are you staying for dinner?"

Definitely not! Loki almost dropped all of the seeds at once: this relationship was way too old for him to jump in unprompted and that was without the "why am I spending all this time with you if I'm trying to fall out of love" part. He couldn't just *stay for dinner*.

"You're not intruding," Tony softly said. "I'm inviting you in."

"I want to hear it from Pepper."

"Okay."

What was it, anyway? Forty years at best? Tony wasn't nearly as durable as him: what if he died in an accident tomorrow? This was stupid. This was more than stupid, in fact. What an absolute disaster.

"You don't need to stay if you don't want to," Tony eventually said. "Maybe I shouldn't have asked."

"I... do want to stay."

"But you're afraid."

"And yet I keep coming back."

"Funny how that works sometimes, isn't it?"

"You're just so welcoming."

"And you want me to throw something at you and tell you to leave."

"Well, I don't *want* you to."

Tony nodded. "Yeah, that is pretty fucked up."

"You know you kissed me first, right?"

He stared at the seeds on the counter. "Yeah," he quietly said. "I'm sorry. I did this to you."

"But I'm alive because of it."

"That's the most important thing."

Loki tucked the seeds in his coat pocket.

“I know as long as you’re alive you’ll figure it out,” Tony said. “You’re a very capable person and you’ve survived everything that’s come at you so far.”

“That’s mainly because I do a terrible job at suicide,” Loki responded, not even hesitating.

“Maybe it’s the universe telling you to keep living.”

“That seems unlikely.”

“No, I’m serious.” Tony turned to lean against the counter. “I know you know your way around death and you know how bodies work,” he said, holding up a hand: please bear with me. “I know you’ve meant it before and on every account you should have succeeded at some point, but you haven’t. I don’t think that has anything to do with you because as far as I can tell, it’s always been external. How did I walk in on you both times? That was crazy. So I definitely think it’s like fate or something.”

“I don’t believe in fate,” Loki said.

“Neither do I,” Tony said.

Loki thought about it. “Maybe you’re right, then.”

“See? Nothing can stop you.”

Weird.

“Nothing can stop me,” he softly agreed, smiling.

“So in the meantime,” Tony said, “why don’t you go clear out some rocks and things? No, I’m not trying to bully you into unpaid labour. Just so you’re not sitting around staring at the wall until dinner.”

“Alright,” Loki said, and then he headed back outside and left Tony to sort seeds alone.

It was still warm and the late sunlight marbled the forest floor in orange. Honestly, it didn’t look that bad: he could probably get the worst of it done in an hour or two. If he cared to mess around a bit with some spells, he could probably also figure out a shortcut, but it didn’t feel fair to throw magic like that and he didn’t mind anyway. He grabbed a rake and went to destroy the ocean of pinecones.

All things considered, it was still sort of difficult to keep himself distracted. He liked this; he wasn’t much for such mundanity, but after so many disasters, he appreciated it. As he picked away at everything, though, what haunted him was that this had happened because of one single split-second decision upon a burning starship. He wanted to be back there again. He wanted to turn down all of it: the illusions, the blind warps, the random strangers whose names he did and didn’t remember, the risks, the wins, the losses. The happiness he wouldn’t have known he was missing. The pain he would have avoided. Every big and little respite. He liked this, but the complexity of his consequences was a very frightening thing to grapple with. All the chaos in the world couldn’t prepare him. He feared what would come after: how many more chains was he unravelling just by existing? What was he supposed to do next?

He stopped to chuck a large rock into the woods and then continued building his little pile of foresty crap. It didn't take too long; the pebbles could be tilled over and would allow good drainage, so he only really removed all the bigger debris. He pushed everything to the chucked rock and then went to see if there was anything else. Yep: here he was, being very, very normal. Just... gardening. No battles. No disasters. Maybe he needed this.

After a meaningful round of distracted tidying, he left his tools and went back inside wait no he didn't Pepper was by the door when he popped around the corner what the fuck was he panicking yes he was uhhhhh act normal!

"Oh," she said, looking up from her things. "Where have you been? I haven't seen you in months."

Silver tongue activate! Say something normal. "Tony bullied me into unpaid labour," Loki stammered, presenting the rake in his hand.

"Again? I'll... talk to him."

"Wait"—Loki left the rake—"again?"

"Again," Pepper said, opening the door. "Tony!"

"Yeah?" he yelled from the basement.

"Did you bully Loki into unpaid labour?"

"What? No! I specifically said I was not doing that!"

"You can't keep making people do your chores."

"They helped voluntarily, thank you very much! I did not make anyone do anything. I kindly requested."

"You haven't seen me in weeks and the first thing you did was kindly request me raking your yard," Loki said.

"That is not true!" Tony yelled. "I gave you food and then told you to go take a nap before you pass out. Why are you so mean to me?"

"It's a sign of affection!"

"You're a sign of affection!"

"Stop brooding and get up here."

There was a loud crash followed by a door slamming.

"I think I see why he likes you," Pepper said, carrying her things inside. "You two are like a mirror image of each other."

"Is that good or bad?" Loki asked.

"Good, hopefully."

Tony came up beside them. “Wait, are you done?”

“No,” Loki said. “I slept and did absolutely nothing.”

“No!”

“Yes. The ground was very comfortable.”

“I can’t believe I trusted you.”

“Neither can I.” Loki closed the door. “I *would* like a thank you, though.”

“Thank you for not spending the last hour and a half tidying the yard so I can start a garden there,. I’m very grateful.”

“You’re welcome. The yard looks much better now that I didn’t spend the last hour and a half tidying it.”

“Have you had dinner?” Pepper asked.

“It was more of a late lunch snack,” Tony said.

“For you, maybe,” Loki said; Tony shot him a look.

Wait, Pepper didn’t know too, did she? She looked... worried. “I’ll make enough for both of you,” she said. “Just in case.”

“Thank you,” Tony said.

Somehow, this was only getting more and more awkward. Scratch that, actually: what was worse than awkward? Horrifying? Unbearable? The worst thing in the entire multiverse multiplied by three?

“I’m... going back outside,” Loki quietly said, and then he opened the door, closed the door, and went to have a polite breakdown on the porch steps.

Okay, so maybe this was a bad idea. He stared at the wounds on his hands, which were covered in dirt, and tried to breathe. What the hell was his problem, anyway? This wasn’t the first time he’d done something like this and he certainly hadn’t felt like he was intruding then. He certainly hadn’t cared; if someone didn’t like him, that was their concern, not his. But it sure was now. This was a terrible idea, really, and he ought to leave the planet and cut contact already. Just like last time. Just like always. Better he burn it early and run. People weighed him down too much. Not like he had a choice, though, did he? He didn’t look away from his hands.

Pepper sat beside him. “You look very nice today,” she said. “Do you need me to refer to you a certain way? I’ve seen a few people call you they but I wasn’t sure if that’s what you want.”

“It’s all the same to me,” Loki said. “Use what feels comfortable. I’m happy with everything.”

“Right now or in general?”

“In general. My appearance has no bearing on it.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

A fat bumblebee landed on his hand. “What am I to you?” he asked, watching it crawl around.

Pepper looked like she didn’t know what to say, which was strange because she seemed to always know what to say. “Someone who makes Tony happy,” she said.

“I’m sorry for everything.”

“I know.”

The bumblebee, not interested in the topic, began to clean its antennae.

“Do you hate me?” Loki asked.

“Not at all,” Pepper said. “I like how you’ve changed.”

“But I tried to kill him.”

“A lot of people have. Most of them don’t apologize. You need to understand that... I don’t hold grudges like I used to. So I see how you’ve grown and how you’ve tried to make up for the past and I respect it.”

“But I haven’t grown. I’ve done nothing but repeat myself. You know I tried to kill him again recently, right? Does that sound like growth?”

“The way he described it to me, you didn’t. You were trying to scare him.”

Loki looked up just as the bumblebee flew off.

“You could have easily killed him,” Pepper said, thoughtful. “But you didn’t. What’s your side of the story?”

Loki looked at his hands again. “He’s right,” he softly said.

“I’m sorry it had to come to that.”

“You mean almost killing him because he was being too kind to me? He didn’t deserve that.”

She said nothing.

“Is this the part where you tell me to back off because he’s yours?” Loki asked, expecting it.

“No,” Pepper said. “I don’t own him.”

“You’re so... calm about all this.” Loki leaned on a knee. “Thank you for not kicking me out. It means a lot to me.”

“Stay as long as you need to. I just want to see you well.”

As much as he tried Loki couldn’t convince himself she was lying even though she could have been; it sounded like she didn’t care after all. He switched knees. “What’s for dinner?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I’ll think of something.”

They were silent for a while before she stood and went back inside. Not knowing what else to do, he got his tools again and continued working. He did it sort of to spite himself, but also because it kept him busy and because he realized he had missed hanging around nature like this—mundane, sure, and probably beneath him, but comforting in a familiar way. Maybe this was the key.

He must have overstayed a bit because, as he was catching his breath on an old stump, Tony came by with a small plate.

“You know you can come inside, right?” Tony said.

“I like it here.”

“Sure. But you can come inside if you want.”

“I do like it here, though. Honest.”

Tony looked out at the clearing. “I thought this would take longer.”

“I’m not done.”

“How do you feel about taking care of everything on your own? If you’re really that into it. I won’t mind.”

That was a lot of responsibility, and, afraid something would come up and it wouldn’t last, Loki truly didn’t know what to say this time. Maybe he ought to say yes: he had a feeling this would be good for him and he had nothing to lose *but* time.

“You don’t have to decide now,” Tony said.

Loki cleaned his hands. “I... would be happy to.”

“Oh? I thought you were going to say something about unpaid labour again.”

“No. I like this. It’s a good distraction.”

Tony nodded. “Yeah, if you think it’ll help, go ahead. You know more about this than I do, anyway.”

“Only that you should have started earlier in the season.”

“Eh. That’s life sometimes.”

“Fair enough. I’ll find a way.”

The food was getting cold. The forest, no longer orange under the evening sun, felt empty amid the bugs and muted birdsongs. Maybe it wasn’t even real.

“You’re thinking it again,” Tony said.

“I am not,” Loki said.

“Look, you’re not the first person to share a home with us. I promise it’s not weird.”

“And you’re not the first person I’ve shared! I have no issues with the concept. I have issues with this specific situation here with you and Pepper of all people. It’s stressful.”

“What makes it different?”

He didn’t know, honestly. Maybe how it happened. Maybe the whole mortality thing. Maybe everything. It didn’t matter.

“Too deep,” Tony said. “I should let you eat.”

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight. Don’t stay up too late.”

“I won’t.”

Tony left the plate and went back inside. Then there was nothing, and the night, gentle beneath the forest, carried on.

It was hard sleeping and he sort of wanted to, so, quite early in the morning, under a warm sunrise, Loki took everything and went to section the land. He must have been predictable because there were some blueberries and a bun he could definitely eat by the seed packets on the counter, and a note that said “Please don’t garden on an empty stomach!”, both of which had probably been there since sometime last night. Well, alright then; he took those too and had them while trying to visualize a layout for all the different vegetables.

He was a bit worried he’d do something wrong and he didn’t know for sure that this had been a good idea, but he tried not to think about it and focused on what he did know from the last time he did something like this, which was to roll up his shirt sleeves because this was about to get very, very messy. Leave adequate room between rows for walking and label them: he did this the lazy way, which was taping the empty seed packet to a branch and sticking it at the end until something better could be devised. Try not to feel like an idiot for digging in the dirt instead of tomfooling around a big city committing extravagant and unspeakable crimes. The usual. He got a lot of work done, though, and the only thing that truly hindered him was the realization that it would not rain today and he needed to water everything himself. The plan, unfortunately, did not go that far.

Okay, no problem. No problem, right? Yeah.

He switched the hose to the incredibly innocuous mist setting and gave it an experimental and very brief test spray. Nothing bad happened, so he did it again. Emboldened, he speedily cleaned the dirt from his hands and then dried them, although that might have been a bit much; not to let his memory get the better of him, he pretended he had not done this and somehow went to water all of the freshly sown seeds.

This was, to be fair, much more than he had been capable of at his worst point, but it was the nature of these things to feel frustrated with the pace: when would he be able to have a hot shower again? What about his other issues, like startling on a hair trigger and the borderline obsessive fear of being used? He, unfortunately, was selective with his patience and this was not one of those things he liked to be patient with. But good enough, huh?

He tidied everything and sat on the old stump.

Honestly, this felt pointless and he was still trying not to think about his situation too hard, but at least he was accomplishing something. He rolled his sleeves back down and gave the yard a long look, as if it would make the seeds sprout faster. It didn't, so he got up and went for a walk through the woods. He walked to the cabin again and double-checked the seeds hadn't magically sprouted, and, seeing that they hadn't, he went inside to find something to drink because he realized he was probably on the brink of heat exhaustion; this weather wasn't for him and the physical labour didn't help.

Tony was sprawled on the couch with some files. "Good morning!" he said, peering over the pen. "Gosh, how long have you been up? I didn't even see you."

"Since dawn," Loki said.

"Really? Wow, it's been... hours. It's almost noon."

He collapsed on the other end of the couch, suddenly aware that he was definitely dying.

"Is it hot out?"

"I don't know."

"Must be. Jeez." Tony struggled off the couch and went to get a glass of ice water from the kitchen. "You okay?" he asked as he handed it to him.

"My heat tolerance is appallingly low."

"Yeah, huh? Want me to go grab you a fan?"

And remind him of his appallingly low heat tolerance? No way. Loki angrily drank the ice water; Tony, quite unstoppable, went to grab a fan from the storage closet down the hall and set it up in front of the couch.

"At all hours I am at war with myself," Loki said.

"Same."

"Is it, though?"

"... Same-ish."

Well, damn. Loki dragged the fan over so it was right in his face.

"Did you get a lot done?"

"Mhm."

"Everything's planted? I don't believe you."

"It is."

"But you didn't water it."

“I did.”

“You did! What the heck, that’s awesome. I’m so proud of you.”

“Over some water?”

“Yes.”

How hot was it outside? It was probably just him. Funny, though; he had never thought twice about it until he knew, at which point it became yet another tell to obsess over.

“I guess you’re not hungry right now,” Tony said, taking the glass to refill it. “Are you?”

“No.”

Wrong answer? No—Tony just plunked the glass on the table and sat back down with his things. “Be careful,” he said. “I don’t want you to get heat stroke or something.”

Loki stretched to pick the glass off the table. “I won’t,” he said, but he suspected he might have: he was not invincible and sometimes it was the little things that got him.

“Now I feel bad! Maybe I should pay you.”

“No need. I’ve been paid in satisfaction.”

“Assuming anything grows.”

“It will.”

“Yeah? I’ll trust you on that. Thank you for all the very hard work you’ve done, even if you wanted to do it.”

“I do expect half of the harvest.”

“Half? That’s reasonable.”

They sat together in silence for a very long time. Loki finished the water and hugged the fan for dear life.

“Sometimes you don’t realize you’re overheating until you’re cold again,” Tony wisely said.

“Every time I go out in hot weather I remind myself that I cannot bear hot weather and every time it does nothing.”

“That’s life.”

The hands looked good, though; Loki peered over the fan at the scabs, which were infinitely less red than the day before. “Must be nice not overheating if you breathe wrong,” he said.

“Is there lore about this too?”

“Is there?”

“Lore! See, I don’t have an excuse. If I overheat it’s because I’m an idiot.”

Loki laughed. “You?”

“Me. Smartest idiot alive.”

“Ah. Well...” Loki paused, eyes on his hands. “I was born in a *very* cold place.”

“That would do it,” Tony said, nodding wisely. “Some people just never get used to certain weather no matter how long they try.”

“How unfortunate of me,” Loki said, although for a moment he wanted to say something else: did Tony know? When did all the nervous half-truths start adding up? But really more than anything, did it even matter?

Clearly not to Tony, who only nodded again and said, “That’s why we have fans.”

There was none of that usual after-weight that Loki felt when he was this utterly forthright about anything, let alone about himself—maybe only the urge to go stick his head in the freezer before he died. He didn’t feel helpless without the lies or stupid for trusting someone like this. He mostly felt... nothing. And it had been a very long time since that had happened and, perhaps just confused beneath such an old calm, he simply shrugged it off and sustained the fan’s loving embrace.

They were there for a while, no conversation over whatever Tony was working on. Then Loki, after ascertaining he was not developing heat stroke, put the glass away and did something very responsible: he went to find some clean bandages for his hands before the scabs caught on an edge. Not nearly as responsible as healing them and getting it over with, but close enough, and he could swear he saw Tony smile back when he stepped onto the porch much more prepared now to plant some flowers.

The rest of the day was slow and uneventful.

Pepper was awkward to adjust to, but she was kind to him and didn’t mind the company. Loki had some of the most pleasantly mundane conversations imaginable with her when they saw each other; as far as she cared, he was still just another good and wondrous person that Tony loved and good to have around—amusing, and very handy with plants. And very polite, by the way, which she appreciated.

Everything was incredibly ordinary, and as the week passed watering the garden and watching for sprouts, his hands healed on their own.

Loki did admittedly go back and forth a lot, zipping between places to keep his mind busy and grab things when he needed, but that suited him. One of those days, he ran into Natasha and Thor in town and managed to stay longer than a minute.

“You *are* blossoming,” Thor said to him, noting the braided hair and jewelry and nail polish and otherwise high-end presentation give-no-damns appearance—not least of all the ambiguous shift Loki was growing immensely fond of. “I’ve never seen you like this.”

“I must have been stifling myself,” Loki said. “Maybe Earth was good for something. Everyone here is so different.”

Natasha looked at his hands but saw nothing; he caught the relief in her eyes. “You get used to it,” she said. “Earth is awful sometimes, but there are things you’ll never find anywhere else. Good

things.”

“It’s strange, isn’t it? It’s like an acquired taste.”

“Exactly,” Thor said.

“So you garden now?” Natasha said, maybe also noticing the dirt Loki hadn’t cleaned off his hands that morning.

“I’m trying,” he said. “It’s very peaceful. I’ve missed it.”

“I hope it works out.”

She was definitely thinking the same thing he was: how in the world would he water everything himself if he couldn’t even drink from a glass on some days? But, for some odd reason, it was different, and between the eternally useful mist setting on the hose and the calm environment, he could bear it just fine.

And it was fine, for the most part.

Although the timing was risky and he ought not to tempt the fear, Loki did eventually find it in himself to write down some of what was bothering him—perhaps because of Natasha and perhaps because of Tony and because of everyone else who didn’t know the history and didn’t care and only saw him. All the anger about his birth. All the panic and shame and disgust and whys and why nots when he wasn’t shifted and what a horrible hell it was: no words in any language could ever describe the sheer helplessness of being stuck in a body. Littler things, like how he always had his tells at the back of his mind. Bigger things, like how spell-binding cuffs and a certain temperature could short the in-betweens of his glamour and burn his already sensitive nerves without leaving a mark. Things like the scars. All the crap, and maybe then some: he hardly covered everything.

And then he did something very unlike him, and very, very terrifying, and found Tony alone one day while the momentum was still going and asked, “Would you let me show you something about myself?”

Tony was certainly caught off guard, but the answer was always yes. Just like the other times: starry-eyed and innocent wonder. Not knowing how or why. Not caring.

Loki thought otherwise, of course. The problem was there was a lot—and, although it still wasn’t like him to care what others thought, these things were different: laughing at the status quo and accepting the parts of him that had caused nothing but pain weren’t comparable. These scars were different. It wasn’t so simple, and so even when he sat down with Tony in the other chair and even knowing that Tony didn’t give one good damn about any of it, he hesitated. He thought he should say never mind and run.

Still, he let the thinner glamour fall.

“There goes one,” he said.

“I knew,” Tony said, eyeing the long scar across a cheek.

“Did you?”

“It doesn’t hold when you’re dying.”

Loki couldn't help but chuckle at the brutal frankness. "None of them do."

Tony leaned on the table. "Do you trust me?" he softly asked.

"Often," Loki said. "I don't think I'll ever trust anyone entirely. I trust you as much as I can."

"Are you ashamed? Or is it just hard to look at them?"

Probably the latter; scars had never been something shameful growing up and this many were only to be respected. But maybe it was the former too. Maybe it was more than could be described.

"I think you look very cool," Tony said, quite sure of himself. "Like a warrior."

Loki, hoping to prove him wrong but knowing he would only do the opposite, unbuttoned his shirt without a word and left it on the table. "Tell me I was imagining it," he said, turning in the chair to show his back. "His name's not here, is it?"

"It's not," Tony said.

Loki lifted the hair from his neck. "It's not?"

"It's not. I swear. It's just... normal scars."

He let his hair fall and looked up.

"I still think you look fine," Tony said. "Are there a lot? Yeah. But they don't look bad. The rest of you's in one piece. I can recognize you. They don't take away from anything. That's good enough for me."

"Truly?"

"Truly."

Loki toyed with the shirt.

"What are you going to tell me?" Tony said, suspicious but not maliciously so.

"That was only one of them," Loki said.

"I know."

"You... know?"

"Uh-huh."

Loki tried to process this.

"You haven't really been subtle," Tony said, leaning back in his chair. "I've just been piecing everything together based on all the random trivia you've been dropping since we met and all the things I've picked up from Thor and your very, very low-effort explanation for your MO on Titan. So, uh, yeah. I know."

"That's it?" Loki softly said.

“... Yes? Was I supposed to say something else?”

“The usual reaction is either fear or disgust.”

Tony looked like he was remembering something. “Not from me,” he said, his voice firm but gentle. “Never from me. I don’t do that.”

“I shouldn’t have dragged you into this,” Loki said.

“You don’t have to tell me anything you don’t want to. I’m only here because you asked.”

Loki went quiet.

“Why *are* you telling me this?” Tony risked, resting his arms on the table.

“Because I don’t want to lie about who I am,” Loki said. “Because I’m ashamed of my past and I don’t want to be. I don’t want to hate where I’ve come from. I don’t want to dread all those spells failing. And I do trust you. And it feels good to be honest with you. And I know you like listening. So... please.”

“I’m listening,” Tony said.

“I don’t like that all of this has only ever been associated with pain.”

“All of it?”

“Tony... the last time I cleared the magic it was to kill someone. Is that positive to you?”

He thought about it. “Well, I think,” he said, “that you could probably reframe that. You’re very powerful when you’re not toning down your existence for other people. Aren’t you?”

“I don’t want to be powerful,” Loki said. “I just want to be.”

“Okay, hold on.” Tony got up and went to the kitchen for a glass of water. Then he sat back down and set it on the table. “I am so hot and we are out of ice. Help me.”

Loki tried to decipher the request and failed spectacularly.

“Please?”

“You want... ice. In your water.”

“Yes. Please.”

Loki considered it. Then, slowly, he reached out and laid a few fingers on the glass. It frosted over and then the water crystallized around the sides; he pulled away just as the skin started going blue.

“Thank you,” Tony said.

“I don’t understand.”

“Sometimes in order to accept something about yourself you need to make it into something boring and unremarkable. Congratulations! You can make ice. Use it for dumb shit like making drinking water colder. No one’s stopping you.”

Tony, admittedly, was right. Still, it was difficult to take to heart, and, turning to glance at the plants on the windowsill, Loki wondered how long it might be before he did.

“You’re always a person,” Tony said with a much gentler look. “No matter what anyone tells you. Nothing about you can take that away.”

“You don’t know what it’s like,” Loki said.

“No. I don’t. I probably never will. But I’ve been made to feel like that over other things and I think you can find some value in what I’m telling you.”

“Over what?”

“Some people are very offended by me being attracted to women and men.”

“Still?”

“Yeah. We’re getting there, but... yeah. It was a lot growing up.”

“What a miserable planet you’ve got.”

“Agreed.”

Loki looked at the frost-covered glass.

“Character growth!” Tony announced. “Yeah?”

Yeah. It wasn’t easy; even though it was a true form and only a matter of deactivating a spell, it wasn’t a *default* form and so it took conscious effort. Remembering the gentle chill of freezing the water, and after a second to close his eyes and calm his breathing, and after some brief recalibration and double-checking and struggling to will the sensation a little deeper, Loki felt the glamour slide off quickly.

“Hey, it worked,” Tony said. “Looks great.”

“Mm.”

“How do you feel?”

Loki didn’t open his eyes.

“Hey, come on. Lemme see. It’s fine. You look fine.”

“I think... I look like a monster.”

“I don’t think you look like a monster. You still look like you. Just different.”

“You’re afraid.”

“Why would I be?”

“I... I don’t know.”

“Look at me. I’m not afraid of you.”

Loki, ashamed he had even bothered, hunched in his seat with his head down.

“Do you think you’re a monster?” Tony softly asked.

“That’s what Asgard said,” Loki muttered. “That’s what the stories said. That’s what my own family said. I know they still think it sometimes.”

“I don’t think you’re a monster.”

“You’re only saying that to make me feel better.”

“I can’t lie to you. You know that.”

“Even the worst liars are lucky sometimes.”

“Okay. If I flinch, I give you permission to hit me.”

“Tony—”

“No, I’m serious. Gotta have some accountability, right?”

Loki swallowed hard and then looked up at him.

“Hey, there we go,” Tony said. “Hi there. How is it?”

“Naked,” Loki said. “And... hot.”

“Hotter than before?”

“Noticeably.”

“It is pretty warm in this room. Can I—”

“Don’t touch me.”

“I wasn’t going to.”

“I’m serious this time. Don’t touch me. I’m too cold for you.”

“I highly doubt that.”

“Tony. I mean it.”

He got out of his chair and walked over. “Yeah?”

“Yes,” Loki said, looking up at him. “Don’t try it. You’ll only—hey!”

“Oops.” Tony removed his finger from Loki’s shoulder. “Wow. So cold. I have frostbite in my hands now. That’s sarcasm, by the way.”

“I don’t want to hurt you,” Loki whispered.

“You’re not. All this is just cool. Cold tap water temperature at best.”

Loki tucked his hands in his pockets.

“But not that, huh?” Tony said, catching the motion.

“That *will* give you frostbite.”

“Then I’ll get you gloves. Problem solved. You can be like Elsa. No, I won’t elaborate.”

Loki wisely ignored the reference he didn’t understand. “I can’t even kiss you like this,” he said.

“So? Kisses aren’t everything.”

“Aren’t they?”

Tony, with an exasperated smile, said nothing. He turned and trudged down the hallway to his room and then emerged a minute later with a pair of black leather gloves. “Fleece-lined and very durable,” he said, offering them. “And your size, I think.”

Loki stared dubiously at the gloves. Well, he didn’t have much to lose; he took them and put them on.

Tony held out a hand. “Go for it.”

“No,” Loki stammered.

“Can’t you heal me if something goes wrong? Seriously. Just... try.”

Not many things in the universe had made his stomach drop so suddenly as the thought of touching a loved one with his unglamoured hands, even gloved; he could still feel the empty racing heart pit seconds later and it only got worse as he gave it more thought. But, before he could decide, Tony clasped his hand for him. He jerked away in a panic.

“I can’t even tell,” Tony said. “Honestly.”

“But—”

“No, really. Your hand is completely insulated right now. I can’t tell at all. Look.” Tony took Loki’s hand in his once more. “See? Nothing.”

The grip held. The glove didn’t freeze through; no one was hurt. The world didn’t end. And so, slowly, Loki teared up and pressed his other hand to Tony’s. “It was that simple?”

“It was that simple.”

Loki got out of his chair and hugged him.

“And now I’m not overheating anymore,” Tony informed, returning the embrace. “Not all of it is bad.”

“You don’t know how much I needed this.”

“I’m glad I helped.”

Loki, of course, had grown to love himself otherwise and knew it would take a hell of a lot more time and probably some radical self-reinvention to even consider letting this become the default, but it felt lighter on his mind: here was at least one positive memory of him like that and a reminder that he was not what anyone thought of it, and he valued it coming from Tony because they didn't teach those things here and there was no such bias. And, in any case, he could leave one of the layers off. The scars stayed for good.

"I like this one," Tony said, thumbing the scar on his cheek as the colour faded. "I think it adds to your look."

"Is it alright if I keep these?"

"The gloves? Sure."

And so that was it, and, although none of it was perfect, it was a start.

The hours were easy and the sprouts in the yard looked lovely. The letters to himself added up slowly: little bits from his childhood, arguments and injuries he did and didn't fully remember, lovers and loved ones he had cherished. Never quite the Statesman incident and rarely the specifics of the rest of it, though he was dutiful when something came to him. He made it as angry and as sad as needed. He poured out everything. This, like most of what he did those days, did not suffice on its own to solve anything, but it was comforting to see it in words and it felt like the more he went over specific incidents the less they bothered him. Occasionally when he remembered a particularly graphic horror he didn't even flinch, which was, in any way he looked at it, a very, very good omen.

Tony found him at the shore one evening, with his toes—and only his toes—in the lake.

"I must be moving too quickly," Loki said.

"You can take a break if you need to."

The water was cool, clear but sandy at the edge.

"No?" Tony said, kneeling to test the water with a finger.

"I fear I'll lose the momentum."

Tony shimmied his slippers off and joined him. "You might," he said. "You might not. I guess it's not a risk you can take."

What a good time this would be to lean over and hold each other. But, watching the tiny waves at their feet, Loki could not find a way. Not tonight.

"Maybe someday," Tony said, looking up at the starry sky.

"If I ask you again, will you finally be honest about why you've done so much for me?"

Tony looked at him.

"I know you've told me before," Loki said. "Don't give me that look. I mean you're always so... general."

“Am I?”

“You are.”

Tony leaned on his knees. “Because you’re exactly like me,” he said, “and I don’t want you to be like me. I want you to be better. I want to see you be better.”

This time it was true: Tony had clearly been skirting around it those other times, piecing it behind genuine but non-specific confessions in the hopes it wouldn’t be obvious. There was no such mask now.

“Honesty takes courage,” Loki said. “I admire that in you.”

“It’s more a matter of me saying the first thing that comes to mind without thinking, but yes.”

“But that *does* take courage. Not everyone can say the first thing that comes to mind.”

“So decrees the expert.”

“Only someone who lies too much.”

“Same thing.”

“Is it?”

Tony thought about it. Then he shrugged.

“I miss parties,” Loki said.

“Was that the first thing that came to your mind just now?”

“Fourth, actually.”

“Hmm.”

“The really big ones. The ones you get lost in because there’s so much going on. I miss those. I feel at home there.”

“Weird. I thought you were an introvert.”

“I am. I need to be alone at times. But I do love people.”

Tony nodded. “I hope you can go to big parties again soon.”

“I hope I will.”

There were many more things Loki hoped, among those that he could eventually dip more than just his toes in the lake, but that was a given. Maybe someday.

“Thank you for trusting me,” Tony said. “It feels very special. I know you don’t trust many people.”

“I trust the good ones,” Loki said. “Thank you for putting up with me. Not many people can.”

“Same.”

Loki smiled.

“It’s supposed to rain more over the next few weeks,” Tony said, “or so the meteorologists claim. It should be good for the plants.”

“I suppose we’ll find out.”

They sat there for a long time, watching the stars with their toes in the lake, and said nothing further. Everything else faded into the cool night air.

Chapter End Notes

schedules aren't real actually I will now disappear to scream at the intermission I left until the last minute to write.

Intermission #5: Everything Gained

Chapter Summary

The insight within aloneness is precious.

Chapter Notes

hey guys sorry for the slightly late update i'm literally unpacking my childhood right now #lol #liveloughlove. 2021 has done some very strange backflips but i am finally in a loving and safe environment and this fic and its readers are doing the world for me at this point in my life. yes i just spilled my whole life story in the chapter notes but i am sure this is nothing new. take this weird and aggressively candid intermission that i 10000% projected on. yes i am ok it was cathartic

(i also accidentally went a little Ham so please take a chapter-specific content warning for implied miscarriage and abuse talk)

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

Tony,

I am not sure what time it is for you but I know you will see this eventually. I needed some time alone and am off hunting in Norway. Please don't worry about me; I am very calm here and I have not had a nightmare in weeks.

Write back sometime. I hope you are well.

With love,

Loki

†

One never did stray too far in these situations: wanting to leave but not knowing how or why, knowing something had to change but fearing what it was. And so he never went any farther than Earth even though he could have—just him, armed with only an enchanted bow and some food as the days fell away. Wondering where it all went wrong. Wondering more how he had ever liked the before.

The truth was he hadn't, and it was a very slow and very strange conclusion: didn't he loathe this planet? Didn't royalty suit him? Yet there was some kind of comfort there and he suspected it came back down to the routine he'd never asked for. No one ever realized how much control lied in the other hands until they were gone, even him: all that sly opposition and yet he'd been dressing how he was supposed to, acting how he was supposed to, doing everything to be like everyone else without even noticing. Opposition, but only an acceptable amount. And so there was the hardest truth. He didn't *like* the death. He didn't *like* losing his home. He didn't want it to happen this way. But he felt so, so free.

He didn't have to please anyone. He didn't have to follow anyone. He could just be. No one had stopped him; he had always picked his own paths through existence regardless of any advice for or against. And yet it was true. No helplessness this time. No masters.

Seven years was a very brief length behind a busy millennium—seven years starting and ending in chaos from wars to secrets to pain and loss and everything in between. Time spent alone, dead-eyed in a little white cell for someone else's mistakes. Places he saw and people he met. Homes gone and forgotten. Seven years wasn't long; how could one life change so much? And why did it feel so much better?

Well. He knew.

I miss those long nights under the stars

Safe between winter's cold green glow

And my beloved's warm and tender arms

When the fire died and we were all that was left

Two weary souls

And the ash's smoky breath.

Sleep never came but I didn't need it to;

No dream would ever match

The joy I felt with you.

No fear left for the wolfsongs

Far, but never safe —

Frost beneath my fingers

Wholehearted hands to guide the way;

Faithless, but to pray, not lost beneath the snow

Foolhardy, but wise, set eagerly forth

Perhaps unprepared, yet with too many secrets to say no.

No warspoils tonight

Gold steadfast through the pain;

Only fated love by firelight

Tired, but not battle-lain

With the dawning sun on our backs

Thin before a timeworn road

Lighter hearts than bags

Smiling on the way home.

The bow's fresh sigils glittered as he pulled the string back.

Loki,

Thank you for writing. I wasn't sure where you'd disappeared to and was wondering if you're alright. I didn't know you hunt! Good luck. I am sadly very stressed right now. Pepper was sick this morning and I'm having trouble with some forms, but I'm trying my best.

Please keep writing. It's always exciting to get a letter from you.

Love,

Tony

He did understand, or at least he tried to understand. It was never about Thanos but about what led to that. That it was a culmination of things gone wrong and a face to the abstract grief that he had carried around for most of his life. Because this happened to the lonely, to the broken, to the outcast and out-of-place that craved power and belonging. They took it in whatever form it came. And so to him the scars on his body weren't just a reminder of torture but a reminder of how long it had taken to get there. A physical manifestation of how much he could take before he couldn't anymore. Enough was enough and something had to change.

It was this and all those little things that he kept pushing aside in lieu of a better excuse. He deserved it. He was overreacting. He felt too deeply. In a way it began to feel like he had learned to lie not to protect himself but to cover for others, to give them deniability for their actions. Stepping back for an instant, everything seemed so clear he couldn't understand why he had ever thought anything else. All those memories of isolation and alienation. All the times he fucked something up without doing a single thing wrong: it was *his* fault, even if it wasn't. Easier to blame him—easier than facing the truth: “I wasn't kind to you. I wasn't fair to you. I wasn't right.” As he traced the

steps from Thanos to his father to every friend and lover that had ever stabbed him in the back, he wondered how much of the universe was just recycled grief. Repeating history, or maybe something else. Or maybe it didn't even matter.

"It's not important what the intent was," said the woman seated beside him on the fountain, lighting her third cigarette in a row; her black lipstick was smudging off and her thin, jewelled hands were shaking. "It's not important what they meant by it. What's important"—she paused to lower the cigarette, pinning it between two pointed fingernails—"is that it hurt you."

"They always say the same thing," he responded, turning to watch the shifting colours as the water shot skyward. "They call you ungrateful. Unappreciative. You're overreacting. You're imagining it. Sometimes you're even spoiled. I still remember"—he turned again—"every person who has ever said to me that that's just the way it is: that all that pain is normal and it's because I had my life handed to me on a silver platter that I can't put up with it."

"You're just too sensitive," the woman announced, laughing over the smoke. "The real world's full of shit and it's not my fault your family was too soft on you to teach you that. That's what my ex said when I finally snapped. I still don't have all the feeling in this hand." She held it up: there was a scar through the centre that looked like it was from a butter knife.

"You fucking royals," he quoted back, cold sweat chuckle to match her laugh—almost crying as the familiarity of her words set him before broken bones and a litre of blood. "All you do is whine."

She tossed the hot butt in the fountain. "Pain is pain," she said. "It doesn't matter what anyone thinks of it. They don't get to define it for you."

"Ah. But it's not so simple."

She tapped her cheek with a nail, right where his scar was. "It never is."

Don't look. Don't speak. Just keep going.

He still had the list down: empty rooms, fluorescent lights. Too much white. Tap water, but only a certain kind. A particular scent. Colours someone had once worn and words he had once heard. Walking a specific way and speaking like he used to. Sometimes even mirrors; if the mood hit right, he only remembered every time he had ever inspected his injuries in one. Touching his hair wrong. A food the wrong person had loved. A name. A song. Nothing around his neck—not chains, not collars, not even a tie drawn too tight; he couldn't do it anymore. Nothing around his wrists, either. Nothing anywhere, in fact: you would hardly even catch him with a belt some days, let alone all of the madder shit he had adored before the fall. If he dropped something, he couldn't kneel to pick it up. He couldn't look at anything on a leash or ride a horse anything but bareback, and, by the way, he did both: he ran into someone and their therapy dog once, thoughtfully considering it for himself only to conclude it wouldn't do given the circumstances, and, not a day later, stumbled upon a different someone who cared for horses and offered him a few hours in the hopes it would lift his mood. He couldn't get yelled at, nor yell at someone: each had happened too many times. Often he couldn't be alone in darkness anymore or tolerate his wanting body despite loving it more than he ever had: neither was any comfort after the countless memories flooding the gaps reopened, most older than he could know. Sometimes he could only sit and cry all day because the list was

everything—nothing safe and nothing he could even look at. Nothing at all. A thousand years was too much.

He still couldn't understand how the massacre on the ship had let loose so much else, and, increasingly lost within the ocean of his mind, each night was a little more lucid. "The best parts are gone," he once said in a dream as he picked at some lukewarm coffee. "The worst parts haunt me. Most of it's nothing but a blur. I don't know how I got this old."

"And so you grieve," said the man in the other chair, because that was how dreams worked and of course he knew precisely everything regarding the matter.

"But how much?"

The man thought about it, and then he thought about it some more. Then he shrugged, drank his equally lukewarm coffee, and said, "Someday you'll know."

Loki, understandably disappointed but having expected the answer, nodded and said, "I hope someday is soon."

*but to that end I am still me
as loving seas and galaxies
instantaneous, only alight
for long but brief eternity
marvellous in passing
as past morning's day
beloved impermanence
to all infinity.*

-

Tony,

I am not dead! Hello. Please water the plants. I have no idea what I am doing with myself and have not found the chance to stop by and I suspect you are reluctant to take over. Tell me if Pepper still needs any advice; I can make time if necessary.

—Loki (Yes, I magically sent a postcard. Yes, I am in Las Vegas. Do not question me.)

Loki,

Respectfully, please get the hell out of Vegas at your nearest convenience because that is a terrifying image of you and you will go mad with power. That said, I'm glad you're having fun! Stay safe. Pepper said to ask you if there is anything on this entire planet that can prevent morning sickness because she has tried literally everything.

—Tony

Tony,

I regret to inform you that it is too late. I have reached my final form. Respectfully, I refuse. I have some less common remedies (attached) that have worked for me in the past, but, as always, please consult an expert before trying any of them. Otherwise, I will send her all the good luck I can spare.

—Loki

P.S. I have rediscovered my talent for pole dancing.

REDISCOVERED???

“What do you want out of this?”

He, for the record, had no clue. Or maybe he did; he supposed he must have had some kind of inkling the same way he often did when he did things on a whim. Nonetheless, he simply lowered his water and admitted without a single worry, “I don’t know.”

The contact information had been entirely drawn from thin air and the names were fake but he suspected the woman knew: he was not a very subtle person and he did still have some heroics from the last few months to back up his identity. It wasn’t like it mattered, though. He’d be off again by morning most likely on another haphazard adventure.

“You don’t seem sober,” she said.

“You don’t know that,” he responded with an abrupt laugh, quite aware he had nothing on the accusation, and then he finished his water and set the glass on the table. “Maybe this is what I’m always like.”

“It could be,” she agreed. “I don’t know you very well. Is it?”

Yes! Yes, it is. But he also didn’t particularly care much and he knew they would never see each other again and so, in fleeting honesty, he said, “I do hope. It hasn’t been for longer than I can remember.”

She hummed thoughtfully.

“I just need someone to tell me I’m doing the right thing,” he answered after a while, staggering up for more water from the sink. “Is this it? Drunk walk-in counselling?”

“Ideally you wouldn’t be drunk,” she offered, although she wasn’t mad about it.

“I’d never come otherwise,” he said as he sat back down. “Look: I am trying my best to be better. In all this time I’ve never, ever done that and it’s hard and painful and awful and it doesn’t always go well and I wish I didn’t have to do this but I’m trying the very best I possibly can and I just need someone to tell me I’m doing *enough*.”

“If you’re trying your best then it’s always enough,” she said. “You should be proud of yourself for making it this far. Not everyone does.”

He knew it was true for he started crying the same way he always cried when someone poured the truth over him. He chuckled a little and nodded to himself and drank his water and then cried and didn’t stop—just quiet tears above an eternal smile; did he ever really even care anymore about appearances? Did anyone give a damn? Not at all.

He wouldn’t remember much as the day went on, but he would remember this.

Turning back we also find the sublime

and all the sweetest dreams in autumn light

stardust drenched in wonder

spirited in time. Still

I find myself lost.

This time it wasn’t a surprise: right across the counter as one of them took a sip of coffee and the other took a tremendous bite of bagel, the dingy news channel on the dingy television announced something about how 114 Asgardian refugees and change had made it to Earth a few days ago. Better landing. Better shape—no still-bleeding injuries or fresh tears. Some kind of accidental detour after all; it was the only safe route after everything Thanos had done, although circumstances had made it safer to come here now. Not that it particularly mattered.

Loki, still lost in daydreams and passing sleeplessness, would never know how the rest went, but for a moment he only felt wondrous chaos. Did he feel relief that there was more? Did he mourn everyone else he had watched burn? Or did he only close his eyes and become a void again? Maybe instead he just calmly continued drinking and did nothing at all while his tablemate, who might or might not have recognized him, stumbled on some comforting words. “Someday I will see them again,” he mused above the coffee, “but I think for now I need to rest.”

“And that’s fine,” the other person said. “You don’t have to rush. It takes a lot of strength to face something like that. See them when you feel ready. Never see them, if you want.”

He wouldn’t dream of it, but it was a comfort: he didn’t need to do a thing.

Tony,

I am sure by now that you have tired of my pestering (and also the fact that I simply will not contact you in, say, a “reasonable way” instead of abusing one of the most comically efficient yet absurd spells I know) but I wanted to ask how everything is going and also apologize for never returning your last message in case there was anything you needed to tell me. I fear you are still not sleeping properly and expecting a child will not have made it any easier. I do remember that rain check if you ever need it.

On another note, if anyone in Asgard ever asks for me, would you apologize on my behalf? I am busy these days and honestly unsure of when I can face them again given recent circumstances. Please tell Thor I love him and have not abandoned him.

—Loki

I will try my best. Thor says he never once thought you had abandoned him and to take all the time you need because he only wants you to be happy again. Bucky also said don't die. I'm reluctant to ask because I know this is a stressful topic and you're already going through a lot, but would you be willing to come to my wedding?

I appreciate the caution. I truly wish I could attend but, as you mentioned, there is much on my mind and I fear it would not be good for me. It has helped tremendously to distance myself and as much as I would like to join you, I am wary of stopping now. Please forgive me. You have all of my blessings and I hope you have a wonderful time regardless of who attends. Remember that a wedding is only a wedding and all that matters is you have Pepper by your side.

Thank you for being so honest. You have nothing to apologize for and I wish you the best of luck with all that you're doing. None of it's easy and it takes courage to recognize that.

—and was that all?

Turning back into the dream's veil, he would never quite know for sure. Courage, but he wouldn't believe it. Some dreams were better held before they vanished: better tried before their time than left to slip away, never to return when next they were needed. This, he had always known. And so although he wasn't prepared, he held on to this one.

Red hands. Old smoke. Aye: would he have a little destruction today? He stared up at the ship from behind a slightly younger him's eyes, weather-worn but no less for it, and tried to breathe. This wasn't happening. This didn't happen. He was never here. This hurt too much; this would drown him if he lingered on it. Better he wrap it tight in a lie and cast it aside before it started dissolving what he had of a heart; better, huh?

But he wasn't afraid, and, not at all rattled, he slipped away to find a passage elsewhere.

Doorway one: his weightless form fell backwards behind the glassless windows, whimsied stardust down some gap between the worlds. Don't wake up now or you'll miss it. Blue-green eyes filled with tears. Magic burned. For a moment there was more; they were staring at him on a dusty planet as he stopped, cold but not icy, calm but not collected. Someone was screaming something about purpose—better not flinch while they worked him over. Thanos was already dead, no stranger to this part, and the wide-open mouth of rotted horror didn't answer.

“But *I'm* not afraid,” Loki said, turning back into the music with a bright and luxurious outfit: black lace, green silk, jewelled and braided hair. Those very special kind of shoes fit for shows. Gold between skintight frills.

He was never afraid: who, him? He was all laughs and hauteur—the don't-stop-me-now type, life of the party, life of everything. Never short on sass. Never short on wit, sharp and clever like all royalty in one single body. Disaster on a dare. Let the worst come: he always had a dagger or several up his sleeve.

He probably had too many drinks, but there was never any telling in this universe; life existed by the instant, snap snap snap between every sketch and scene. Must have said too much. No escape from his demons, even here: they cut him on a wrong turn and bled him almost dry. His knuckles were bare and dusty when he made it back out to the old bathroom, blue, pink, white fluorescent lights in a flickering haze. Dirty sinks, but he didn't mind; the taps worked fine. A polite reminder taped to the mirror read employees don't touch and another beside it read pain is free but love kills, both of which would either make all sense to him when he awoke or not even a little. The reflection was swimming: he looked wired beneath his pale, unmarked skin. Nothing to see here, and, unafraid, he vaulted up the counter.

And maybe Thanos was someone else now.

Behind the last turn, the mirror was empty now: its broken glass that he'd tripped through stared like fire into him. This person hunched on the front steps with a thousand-mile gaze and bloody bruises beneath their dress was different. Blue-green eyes, but you wouldn't know it; more than one person had been lost today and the blankness was too deep. Arms curled around their swollen belly like it wasn't too late to defend a little harder.

“Maybe it's not worth it,” they said, their voice a thin and cracking whisper.

Loki stood before the locked door with a dagger, prepared to fight back where they were no longer able. “Did you have a name?” he softly asked.

“Not yet,” they said. “I suppose I'll never know. But I'm not afraid.”

Loki tested the doorknob with his other hand. “Not the first time,” he mused, perhaps just as tired: the two of them weren't so different like this.

“I'm sure it was my fault anyway,” the other one decided, quite sure of themselves, as they hauled their beaten body off the steps. “I knew this would happen. It always does. Maybe someday I'll finally learn to stick to the hookups.”

As these things went, it was easy to slide the blade between the jamb and slice the deadbolt loose: it melted like warm butter beneath the edge. “Take care of yourself,” Loki said, opening the door with just a push. “You'll be needing your strength soon; now's not the time to let your wounds fester.”

“I promise this is the last time,” they lied honestly. “I’m not afraid.”

He stepped through a blustering night into more chaos.

This city was burning: it wasn’t his first. He walked down the ruined streets with the now-sceptre at his side, horns high, as the bodies toppled behind him. He wasn’t afraid; he liked this part. A scream or two. Sirens. Monsters in the sky—kin across spacetime, kin in mind and soul but not their forms. Who was going to stop him now? Apathy like rage. Breathless wonder. You can’t touch me: I claim my throne here.

“This is your fault,” said his brother’s voice behind him, but he didn’t turn.

“Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown,” he said, no room for sympathy, as he tapped out a path like the sceptre was a walking stick. “But I most certainly am not afraid.”

Many would claim it false that the deeper a dream the purer its essence and the more coherent its insight, for no one had ever been able to stay asleep long enough to test the theory nor had the science to prove it true: wasn’t it just a cheap plot device in the same category as consciously using the brain’s entirety? But Loki had spent enough time prodding the metaphysical to know otherwise, and, determined to ride this one to the end of the line, he held on. The others weren’t so kind: they kept screaming at him as he made for another passage through the shifting streets, once somewhere he knew and now a raw dreamland filled with scattered pieces from the different centuries. They burned because of him. Kin in spirit, but not in time: what was one city to a starship? This was always his fault.

Thanos, ever watching, lingered between the lines. “You’re losing yourself,” he said, almost like he believed he was winning. Proud of all the ashes he had and hadn’t spread himself. Proud of all the pain, just like everyone else.

“All I am will never leave me,” Loki said, quite aware of his glammers stuttering: so what? “No matter what happens, I am never anything but myself. Identity is much deeper than the body.”

And the universe, much deeper than a city’s wastes, was wild.

It was already storming again, a torrential downpour like someone had turned on a faucet inside the black clouds. Explosions of thunder loud enough to shatter his eardrums and lightning harsh enough to blind him. Wind pounding with enough force to uproot a few trees. This must be his fault: what did he do this time? This didn’t happen by chance. Nature alone never fought so violently.

“Why can’t you be more like me?” his brother growled behind him.

Loki turned to look at him between the rain in his eyes. “Why can’t you just stop,” he said, “and accept me for who I am?”

A bolt of lightning struck mere inches before him, singeing his face. He stumbled back with a wince, but he didn’t run: he wasn’t afraid.

“I’m not the only one,” Thor said.

“You’ll never be the only one,” Loki said. “The world fears people like me. But nothing anyone says to me can make me fear myself.”

Another lightning bolt exploded head-on, him and everything around him with it, and the night collapsed into a blizzard.

“You’re still a monster,” his father said as the glamours fell apart.

“We all are,” Loki said, clear eyes and unburnt blue, while the snow covered him. His arms, a mark each for everyone he’d ever loved and lost, were healing well. The gold was too heavy; for now, he was stripped to a long black skirt and nothing else. Bare feet in the ice.

“Whore,” someone else whispered as he padded up the stairs.

“But whatever,” he called back down the flight, “is wrong with that? I like my body. I’ve no shame in using it; why should I?”

They ambushed him at the top, threw him to the floor with hit after hit. Threw something, just to be sure: broke an old plate and then broke his belongings beside it. Broke a bone.

“I did all this for you and this is how you repay me?” the static screamed, like a fritzed recording, as everyone and no one clawed him up. “After everything I did for you, this is how you repay me? After everything I loved you, this is how you hate me? I did everything for you, you spoiled brat. This is how you repay me after everything I slaved away for you? Other people have it worse, you know. After everything I’ve been good to you, you should repay me. You’re nothing without me and this is how you r-r-r-r-r-r-r-repay me?”

“I don’t owe you a thing,” Loki said, kicking them off. “Not now that you’ve hurt me and certainly not before. My life is not a debt.”

“Why don’t you just try harder?” growled a different him as he clambered to his feet and made for the skyscraper’s windows.

“I don’t need to prove my effort to anyone!” he said, turning mid-run to wave at her smudged-eyeliner scowl, and then he shielded himself and leapt backwards with all his weight. Starlight falling with the glass down the side of the tower. Ancient folk songs and discarded poems. Lucky herbs and charms.

There was nothing for a moment, and then there was everything.

“I shouldn’t have bothered,” said Tony, his unmasked face a cynical shadow, as he caught him in the air: the thrusters righted them, but they were still descending. “Why do you even try at this point? I don’t think anyone can fix you.”

“I don’t need to be fixed,” Loki countered with a smug smile and wink.

“I don’t know what Thanos saw in you!” Tony said, hoisting him up a little tighter against the armour with an exasperated sigh. “You really are useless. All you do is cry all day.”

“Whoever said I need to be useful?” Loki exclaimed above a laugh. “My value doesn’t depend on what I accomplish.”

“I bet everyone’s lying to you,” Tony said. “They don’t like you. Not really. Do you think they’d ever like you again after all the shit you’ve done?”

“I do! And if they don’t, why should I give a damn?”

They were slipping again; Tony pulled him up with another wince. “Well, I think,” he said, “that Asgard hates you. I mean, it’s your fault they’re dead. How come you survived but all those kids didn’t?”

“Because the universe is unfair,” Loki said, “and I don’t control what it does.”

“I think you should die,” Tony said, loosening the grip to a single hand on his wrist. “What do you think?”

“I think I don’t care what you think,” Loki said, and then he slipped out of Tony’s armoured fingers and sank into a manic free fall. No bother to him: by the time he was getting close to the busy downtown streets, he was dressed in wings and feathers only long enough for a soft landing.

Then there was silence, and, turning back towards the drizzle to all the old wooden buildings lining the sidewalk, he found a rickety gate and opened it.

The woodswere clear of the vehicles above, no great task to cross. His scars were unhealing and seeping fresh blood; the chains followed him there. Their shouts were louder the farther he walked, but he wasn’t afraid. This bastard son knew better: was it truly all his fault or were they just lying to cover up their own shit? How many things had he no control over? How many things couldn’t be his fault if he wanted? You fool; it wasn’t your fault they lost their temper again. It wasn’t your fault they tortured you. It wasn’t your fault they died. It wasn’t your fault you feel too deeply. It wasn’t your fault you weren’t enough for them. It wasn’t your fault you’re not like them. It wasn’t your fault it took so long. It wasn’t your fault you had to lie. You are and you aren’t only a person: you deserve to be treated like one and it isn’t your fault when they don’t.

But the little boy thought otherwise, and, as the trees parted, he could no longer pretend.

Loki sat beside him on the window seat.

“I am afraid,” the little boy confessed to the bedroom walls, his tiny voice as fragile as his trembling body.

“Of course you are,” Loki said. “It’s too early for you to be fighting. They should know better.”

“It doesn’t end,” the boy said. “It never ends. I need to breathe.”

“I know.”

And then the boy started crying, and, collapsing into Loki’s arms, he sobbed, “I can’t breathe.”

“You must be breathing if you’re talking to me,” Loki said, pulling the boy close. “It *is* frightening, but I promise if you just keep breathing, every breath will get a little easier. But you need to keep at it.”

“They’re going to hurt me again,” the boy sobbed, nigh on a whine—you know the one.

Loki was very calm, though: “Nothing will hurt you while I’m here,” he said.

“But you’ll leave eventually.”

“Not this time. Why don’t you come with me? I’ll keep you safe.”

The boy jerked away, his teary eyes wide. “I can’t!” he shrieked, looking up at him in a panic. “I can’t just leave my family. I can’t. I need to stay here. I’ll get in trouble if I leave.”

“I have a very special secret for you,” Loki said, “and they would never, ever tell you this because they know how powerful it is: sometimes it doesn’t matter. Sometimes they say that because they’re afraid of how much better you are without them. You don’t need to stay with anything or anyone that no longer serves you. You don’t need to keep loving that which has hurt you. You don’t need to suffer for anyone’s sake but yours.”

“But I don’t know how to leave,” the boy protested.

“Often you won’t,” Loki said. “Familiarity is comforting, even when it’s painful. Often you’ll be tempted to return to it even when you know it will only set you back again because at least you know your way around it. But at some point, you need to go. That’s always the hardest part. And if you can do that, you can do anything.”

“Do you promise?”

“I do.”

The boy, much less teary now, hugged him.

“Let’s start over,” Loki said. “I won’t let anything hurt you this time. Alright?”

“Alright,” the boy said, and then there was nothing: they just sat there on the window seat, drenched in midday birdsongs and a flowery breeze, and waited the rest of the dream away.

Chapter End Notes

:)

Everything Was Beautiful and Nothing Hurt

Chapter Summary

Hope returns.

Chapter Notes

regular update: im LOSING IT! im going MAD! im having a character arc. i will infodump in the end notes.

thank you everyone for being so patient with me :) i didnt want to rush this chapter and i hope its the finale this story deserves. with love.

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

The leaves were orange this time, though there weren't many: it was mostly evergreens around the cabin, a dark ocean of pine above the dying underbrush. Not so orange as the evening sky, which looked like it was on fire. All along the front of the cabin, the flowers were in full bloom. Violet on the windowsills. Blue and pink beneath the porch. Yellow beside the steps. In the creeping shade, the place looked utterly magical.

It was quiet inside, and, ducking into the bathroom with a sleepy limp, Loki switched on the sink and washed the blood from their knuckles.

They couldn't quite remember the face, but it wasn't relevant. They couldn't remember the adrenaline pouring through their lungs. The red nail polish was scuffed and flaking and one of the rings had a bad scratch on the side; a single shirt cuff's thread had unravelled and left the button dangling at an odd angle. A bit of pain all around. Still, they rather felt nothing: it could have been much worse than this and the rush was intoxicating, and, catching an exhausted but satisfied glance from the reflection, it was easier to take than anything else in the universe. They shut the tap off and dried their hands on their fur coat, and then, just as the slightly open door opened all the way, they stooped to turn on the tub faucet and plug the drain.

"What the hell happened to you?" Tony asked from the doorway.

"Bar fight," Loki said, dumping too much soap in the water. "Don't worry. I won."

Tony, quite lost for words, watched them step away and sit on the plush storage bench against the opposite wall to remove the coat.

"I partied too hard," Loki lamented as they unbuttoned their already half-buttoned silk shirt to reveal a few bruises on their chest and arms. "But I partied! Things *are* getting better."

“When did you start taking baths?” Tony asked, looking at the filling tub.

“Oh, I didn’t. This is my first bath since before Thanos ambushed us on the ship. Very exciting.”

“Are you scared?”

“Always.”

Tony sat on the sink counter.

“How’s Pepper?” Loki asked, glancing up from their wingtips.

“Still pregnant,” Tony said.

“But she’s taking it well?”

Tony shrugged.

The nail polish on the toes was luckily faring much better; the red looked good in the day’s last light, which was casting a long shadow across the bathroom floor. Loki tucked the socks (green argyle, and they would tell you this because they loved them and would not let them go unnoticed) into the shoes.

“You look very nice like this,” Tony said as Loki removed their earrings and all the jewelry on their hands.

“I do look very nice like this!” Loki agreed with a smile. “Vanity is fun.”

The tub filling was not exactly quiet, and, without any conversation to drown it out, it was all that could be heard. Tony hopped off the counter to check the water level.

“You can join me if you want,” Loki said, removing the leather pants that had torn in one of the shins. “Don’t mind the temperature. It must not be as hot as you’re used to.”

“That’s okay,” Tony said.

“Sorry for stealing the bathroom. This one has soap in it.”

“I wasn’t complaining. I just didn’t expect to see you here.”

“Certainly not. One never expects me.”

True words, no doubt. Tony went to shut the door; Loki, against any sensibility in the universe, was in the water by the time he returned. “You are beyond my understanding.”

“Where else would I be?”

Tony, deciding to be just as nonchalant about this, left his clothes on the floor, and a wedding ring atop them, and sat in the other end. “Weirdo.”

“I try my hardest.”

“What did you get into a fight over?”

“Someone called me a slur, so I punched him in the face.”

“Dude.”

“You wouldn’t have done the same?”

“Yes, I would have, but... dude. Choose your battles or something.”

“I did. I chose to punch him in the face.”

Tony was either looking at the nail polish or the blood. He slid down the back of the tub so only his head was poking above the water. “You’re so calm,” he said. “Did I miss something?”

“Of course you did,” Loki said. “You missed a few months of my life. That’s quite a bit of something.”

“Ah. You’re in witty response mode.”

“Better than panic.”

“Are you panicking?”

Tony did not have the near-crying half-stoic look in his eyes this time: he sort of just asked it, no hesitation or worry, like it was any other question at all and not an accursed mantra from those many months. Presumably it was the ceremonious somersault back to the old swagger that was doing it, and, with a thin chuckle, Loki stirred the soapy water with a hand and said, “Not today. I suspect it’s the lack of sleep. And the confidence from punching someone in the face.”

“I hope it lasts,” Tony said. “I like seeing you like this.”

Poor decisions, were they? There was no telling. Going on a weeks-long adrenaline-fuelled adventure with no time to rest was probably a poor decision. Fighting a guy over some words, risking a freshly wiped criminal record in the process, instead of flipping him off and walking away was probably a poor decision. Sharing a bath—attempting it, even alone—was probably a poor decision. But sometimes in life it was better to be a little reckless and stupid than to die of too much worry: if the choice was between this and suicide, then this won by a mile.

“Earth,” Loki grumbled, leaning on the side of the tub.

“Earth,” Tony agreed with a disgusted eye-roll.

“Have you been watering everything?”

“Dutifully. Should be good for harvesting.”

“Do I still get half?”

“Of course.”

Neither of them said much else. They just sat there in silence as the last of the sunlight vanished and did what people often did when they took a bath together late at night, which was, in fact, mostly nothing—although, on an odd minute when Loki wasn’t looking, Tony swam over to lie in their arms and then pretended he had not done so.

“Maybe I am a fool,” Loki said, obliging a gentle grip around him.

“No more than anyone else.”

Loki pulled him in and kissed him on the forehead. “How very foolish,” they murmured, brushing the wet hair from Tony’s eyes. “Not unlike this universe, I suppose.”

And so that was that night, and, luckily, it was restful.

In the morning, after breakfast, Loki went to see the backyard garden. Everything was tall and vibrant and most of the vegetables looked ripe or close to ripe, likely a week or two away at most. They were already counting out half: what in the world could they make with all that? Did they have to start cooking proper meals for once? Unbelievable. In any case, there was not much reason to linger after that: Tony had places to be and so did Pepper and there were no other particular tasks that needed doing, so once it was confirmed that nothing was wrong with any plants, Loki went off into the city to see what they had missed. It was the usual boring sort of trip, the kind where they mostly just got something good to drink and talked to whatever interesting person they ran into and stopped to watch all the strange happenings—things they otherwise had no reason or excuse to do. They did, though, finally head back to that bookstore to check if it even still existed and, in the likelihood that it did, thank Hemlock, which had not left their to-do list since the last time they checked: it would probably only keep nagging them if they didn’t.

Certain things in life, blessedly, still went well most of the time, so Loki successfully remembered in a non-creepy friend way that Hemlock tended to work mornings and, upon ducking inside, received a very enthusiastic, “There you are! How are things?”

To be honest, it caught them by surprise: they stopped and thought about it while the door slowly closed and then forced a wheezy laugh and walked the rest of the way in and said, “I don’t know! You?”

“My chest is flat,” Hemlock declared with utmost seriousness.

Loki gasped. “No!”

“Yes! Look at this shirt.”

Loki leaned on the counter. “Lace!”

Hemlock excitedly smacked the shirt. “*Lace!* You have no idea how long I’ve been saving this.”

“You look wonderful,” Loki said. “May you wear all the lace your heart desires.”

“But you,” Hemlock said, pointing. “You look absolutely breathtaking today. Please continue.”

“I will try my best,” Loki said with a blushy smile, and then they went to look at the new arrivals while Hemlock resumed sorting boxes as usual. They returned shortly with a sensible amount of books and set it on the counter.

“How’s that book I gave you?” Hemlock asked, pulling the first novel off the stack.

“I liked your notes,” Loki said. “I wouldn’t have enjoyed it as much on its own.”

“Did it help?”

“A little.”

“A little is better than nothing. I’m glad to hear that.”

Loki tidied the stack of books. “I am very grateful,” they said as they smoothed a dust cover. “It was an important starting point.”

“As it was meant to be,” Hemlock said. “I did put a lot in there, but I was hoping you would find other resources. I guess you did.”

Off the record, they were trying rather desperately to keep from panicking over something small and silly again and they suspected Hemlock could tell at least a little bit—that they were counting heartbeats and wondering if it would last into the evening. But it wasn’t so bad this time and all they really did was offer another tired smile and say, “Enough to keep me afloat, I think.”

“Good,” Hemlock said, setting the second-last book down. “I can’t swim, so you’re already doing better than I am. I float like a rock.”

Loki tried not to laugh but then laughed so hard they choked.

“Anyway.” Hemlock scanned the last book. “I’m glad.”

“Is that new?” Loki asked, leaning around the books to read the name tag on Hemlock’s shirt.

“Not really,” Hemlock said. “I’ve had it for a while but I... didn’t have the guts to wear it.”

Under the name it said PLEASE USE ZE/HIR PRONOUNS FOR ME. Loki squinted.

“But you’re not that type, are you?” Hemlock said, smiling that thin, corpse-like smile as the scrutiny dragged on probably too long. Maybe a little worried. Just a tad. “I can’t imagine *you’d* judge me for it.”

“No,” Loki said, standing straight again with their very certainly still ambiguous voice and appearance and over-the-top grace—in case anyone had forgotten; they sure hadn’t. “Never. The Allspeak’s just slow to learn sometimes. It’s not translating it right.”

“Oh. Uh.” Hemlock dug under the counter and pulled out a card listing all the forms—ze, hir, hirs, hirsself—and some example sentences. “How’s that?”

Loki read through it a few times over. “That works.”

“Okay, good.” Hemlock returned the card. “I guess I should ask what you go by, too.”

“Everything,” Loki said. “As long as you’re polite about it.”

“Cool.”

Hemlock was, understandably, quite shocked when Loki offered to pay with normal Earth currency instead of the beautiful joke that was throwing gold at frivolous and sundry items. Ze gave them a tragic and mostly baffled look.

“Not everyone would have it,” Loki said. “So sad. I miss the reactions.”

“It was funny while it lasted,” Hemlock said. “Such is life. Bag?”

“Not this time,” Loki said, warping everything right into storage.

“That is awesome.”

“It is.”

“Take care?”

“I’ll try if you do.”

“Sounds good to me.”

Loki double-checked they had everything and then headed off to do more nothing.

Although they had surely expected it at least somewhat, it still came as a surprise that people did recognize them on the street and in the good way this time: one random stranger excitedly stopped them to say that one of the survivors had been her cousin and that he was doing very well thanks to them. Someone else simply admired the effort. All the selflessness before fear. It was rare, and, after so many years taking negative attention over no attention, it was the world. This was how things were supposed to be—soft and kind and without so much *aggression*. Without needing to defend every second. Without being that: the snide and smug villain who hid behind sarcasm and rage. Not this time.

Anyway, then there was Peter.

“Hello!” he said, coming down to meet them at ground level no sooner than they looked up from another coffee. “Where have you been?”

“Around,” Loki said. “Is your voice deeper?”

Peter practically squealed. “It is! I thought it was done dropping, but it got a little deeper recently. It’s crazy!”

“Congratulations?” Loki tested.

“Yes. Absolutely. Uh, I’m kinda busy right now so I can’t really stay but you can always come by my place another time and see if I’m around. We could just hang out.”

“I’ll remember that.”

“It was nice running into you! You look really good.” Peter hopped into the air again. “I’ll see you later.”

“Have fun!” Loki called after him.

They did eventually get to hanging out, which would consist of a restless video game marathon with Bucky in New Asgard later that week. Bucky had missed them both, but, perhaps more importantly, so had everyone else—those who had made it there on another ship not long ago. It had been so many months since Loki had seen any of them and they were so sure that it wouldn’t be as difficult as they were making it out to be, but, maybe just burned out from the days, they could only manage some brief hellos to whoever they ran into. Even the Valkyrie; things were

easier between the two of them since living together all that time and she was just as relieved to know they had also made it out alive, but for the better part of every interaction outside, they weren't thinking. The ship parked in the clearing above the cliff looked very powerful, more so than anything Loki had seen in years: they wondered where it had come from and what everyone would do with it now that the waters had calmed. Maybe take it for another spin one day. Maybe nothing.

“There's a feast tonight,” Bucky said to them and Peter as he switched out a game.

Loki looked up.

“Can I come?” Peter asked.

“Why do you think I mentioned it?”

Peter was rightfully thrilled, food and all that. But Loki had to think about it. There had been no proper feast or anything like it since long before the attack on the ship, if even that counted: at most they gathered in someone's bedroom or an empty hall with a meal or a few and chatted for a bit because no one ever really had the energy for anything more. And then everyone died and there was nothing. Nothing at all—Loki had been too busy grieving to ever ask if these things had resumed. Too afraid. Too lost. How could they?

And they were afraid to try again.

But in a rather delicate twist of fate they nodded and said, “I wouldn't miss it.”

“Thor said he'll get your favourite food,” Bucky said. “Whatever that is.”

Loki raised an eyebrow. “The one with ingredients only found on Asgard?”

“He seemed pretty sure. I trust him.”

“Sounds exciting,” Peter said.

And very terrifying. But maybe also a little needed after all this time; taking the controller again with tired and well-scarred hands, Loki was very certain of it. So they stayed.

It was still somewhat early when they first popped their head outside for some air a short while later—just half-empty tables and chairs being set up in the good spot near the fire pit while a few people sorted through general plans. The season was getting late, but at this point they wouldn't need much of any light and so that was mostly it: lots of plates and cups and a great many other items beside a freshly kindling fire at the other end. Someone playing a lute instead of helping. Someone else complaining about how hard it had been to find a certain dessert. All as real and as familiar as it came.

The truth was for a moment it still hurt—burned and ached and felt like nothing more than a toxic reminder of something that had once been and once gone and taken everything with it. All this that had hurt so much for a million equally woeful reasons. All this that Loki didn't know how to think about. But the song that someone was playing was so sweet and lovely that above anything else they could only laugh to themselves and shut the door to Bucky's house and then walk right down for a better listen.

“There you are,” said Thor, spotting them from across the table.

“There I am,” they said back.

“What have you been up to?”

“Everything.”

At the other end of the table, Natasha set a box before some plates and unpacked to the sound of an old folk song.

“I like this look,” said Thor, sitting beside them.

“I like yours,” Loki said. “Your hair is very pretty at this length.”

Thor tapped the charms in theirs. “Not long enough for braiding,” he lamented.

“Hardly,” Loki said. “Shall I try?”

Ah—maybe so. Thor smiled, a bit overeager to get out of work for a minute, and turned to let them comb through the waves. “I’ve tricked you,” he said.

“The nerve,” Loki muttered, although they were everything but even slightly upset.

“I’m sure the back is impossible to braid,” Thor unsubtly announced.

“Mhm.” Loki tucked the ends flat. “How awful.”

For another moment they could really only look at each other and say nothing. Loki would have said “I love you” and pretended everything had always been like this. Thor might have asked for more details regarding the last however many weeks or months to distract from what he and everyone else was certainly thinking: will this hurt? But he only smiled again and resumed his work. Loki, already with a plan of their own, vanished promptly for some last-second harvesting.

They did think about simply running around back and snatching half without any warning, but it looked like Tony was on the premises and so they stopped to notify him and, while they were there, ask with utmost sincerity if he would attend the feast. And then feel very bad for asking that after ditching a wedding. And then feel even worse knowing with near-certainty that there would be a lot of drink. And then say something along the lines of “Never mind!” and scurry off to pick some vegetables. Tony considered it, though.

“Do you want any help?” he called as they flung their coat onto the porch and ran to grab a cabbage.

“Nope! None at all.”

Tony watched with both awe and alarm as they sliced the cabbage free with raw magic. “Any plans for that?”

“I’ll make soup!” they said, raising the cabbage above their head. Then they dimensionally pocketed it and grabbed another. “Half is half.”

“Isn’t it in a few hours?”

“And?”

“How... fast can you make soup?”

“Oh, I’ve got a few hours. That’s more than enough time.”

Tony sat nearby. “You seem well,” he said, perhaps hopefully.

“I think I’m having a good day,” Loki said, continuing down the rows for a little bit of everything: they plucked out a fat carrot and dusted it off.

Tony whistled. “Looks like it’s been a good week.”

Loki glanced back at him with several carrots in tow. “Yes! It’s been a fantastic week. And I really hope I haven’t just ruined my luck by naming it. But it’s a very, very good week.”

“Maybe it’ll be a good month,” Tony said, and Loki gave him a breathless smile.

“Maybe it will,” they said. Then they warped away the carrots and carried on picking.

It didn’t take long: they didn’t need much and they were so excited all of a sudden that they sped through it like nothing, and, with all of their vegetables, they hurried inside for some spices. Most from pots. A few dried. Then they hurried right back out.

“Good luck with your soup!” Tony said.

“Thank you!” Loki said. And then, just as swiftly as they left, they stumbled into Bucky’s house with everything and got to work. First things first: they found Peter, who was still playing solo. “I have a plan,” they declared; he turned. “Can you help me cook?”

He scrambled off the couch. “What? What are we cooking?”

“Soup!”

Oh, definitely: Peter wrapped up what he was doing and then joined them in the kitchen for last-second soup help.

This was the good kind of last-second plan—the kind Loki wished they did more of and the kind that just made them laugh and keep laughing as they rummaged through Bucky’s things for pots and a cutting board. The real kind. Once Peter got over the general shock of it all and had a moment, he put on music too and bounded into it. Of course, he probably suspected to some degree that the reason he’d been asked for help was as a safety net in case of panic, and, if he asked, he would be right, but who was he to care? Teamwork was as lovely a thing as soup.

It did take a while, but by the time it was getting dark and the last of the tables and tools had been set up and everyone had gathered they had gotten most of it done. They appeared suddenly and with great fanfare carrying a cauldron full of soup.

“There you are again,” Thor said with a laugh.

“There I am again!” Loki excitedly shouted. “I come bearing gifts.”

“Soup,” Peter said.

“Soup!”

Thor came over. “Did you make this?”

“I helped,” Peter said, raising a hand.

“He did!” Loki said. “Come on; clear some room. I can’t hold this forever.”

Room was cleared. They set it down and then leapt into the nearest empty seat with Peter, at which point Bucky banged a pot and said, “Round of applause for the soup! Can’t live without it.”

The entire crowd of hundred-and-some present cheered.

“I haven’t tried it yet,” Loki confessed.

“And I’m sure it’s amazing,” Bucky said. “Good job.”

They had to smile: how long had it been since they were applauded like this? Anything further and they might just as well have started crying. “Thank you,” they said, and then they fixed their coat under them and waited for any announcements.

Here was the part they had expected at least a little and dreaded at least more and, in all sincerity, that almost pushed them to tears like the praise hadn’t, where, as was very customary on such occasions after long and cold disasters, Thor sat at the end of their table and opened a prayer to everyone who could not attend. All those wounded and left behind. All those hopefully having a feast of their own in the golden halls. It was sombre for a moment, empty and gentle in thoughtful silence, and Loki already knew well that the losses here weren’t distant—no such blessing as a yearly acquaintance from yonder or a seventh cousin thrice-removed. Not even them: some of the friends they’d seen burn had been dear. But they didn’t cry this time; all they were was quietly grateful as Thor spoke. Then it was over and they resumed the best of it. No panic, just joining everyone laughing and scuttering around picking foods off the tables by firelight. Listening to someone sing along to the lute. Loving life like nothing had ever happened. Norns knew there had been everything: no one here was subtle and Loki knew that look in some eyes like the back of their hand. Most of all they still worried about the children and their new families amid the rubble. No one cared much, though. Not in this moment.

As the sunset settled to a blueish half-evening sky, there was one truth they could sincerely tell themselves: they belonged here. And they did an excellent job of it! Never forget when they weren’t sulking somewhere with a plate of food they were the backbone of these events, dragging everyone into traditional games and passing jokes and desserts with the children and making sure the party didn’t die. A goat ran through the crowd with a bunch of grapes in its mouth and more instruments appeared. The banter returned and at one point Loki shifted into a goat himself and the two teamed up right until they had to shift back in order to fire a witty retort to someone.

Perhaps more than anything else, while they were dancing with someone they didn’t remember ever meeting before this, they couldn’t believe their luck when they spotted both Tony and Pepper with the usual gang—Thor and Bucky and Natasha and all the others.

“You!” Loki said, jogging over.

“Me!” Tony said. “I made it after all.”

“He likes your soup,” Thor said.

Loki feigned shock. “I don’t believe it.”

“It’s true!” Tony said. “I had three bowls.” He held up his empty bowl as proof.

“Three! Have you even tried anything else?”

“Obviously. What do you take me for?”

Someone who would eat soup and nothing else, of course; Loki only laughed. “Hold on,” they said, jogging back down the tables. “I’ve got something.”

They returned momentarily with a single pickled herring.

“You didn’t!” Tony gasped.

“I did. For you.”

Tony bravely took the pickled herring. “Thank you,” he said.

“You’re very welcome,” Loki said with a smile.

And then everything settled down and the night resumed as usual: good music, good food, and good friends. No good drink, for there had been little to begin with and most of it had vanished instantaneously, but maybe that was better. The last time Loki had really and truly lived like this had been before the fall, and, knowing that there were no secrets left to spoil anything, they trusted it. They kept trusting it until morning. This time, it was true: not a single bad thing happened.

Perhaps the only unexpected part of all of this was when the Valkyrie, no stranger to the feeling and keen on everything that could have and might have resurfaced at any point starting with the prayer, caught them as they were leaving later the next day to make sure they were alright. “Take care of yourself,” she said.

“Do you?” Loki asked.

She smiled, clearly already regretting coming. “I try my best.”

“Good,” Loki said. “I wish you well.”

“Bad idea,” she said, but they knew she didn’t mean it. They smiled back and then continued on their way—wherever that was.

In between all of this they still occasionally wrote, and they realized one of those days that they had written much, much more than they ever thought they had: hundreds of pages of poems and paragraphs tied into a neat stack with a string. Some of the angriest and ugliest half-coherent scrawls right beside the most whimsical odes ever to cross their hands. Sometimes memories. Sometimes feelings. It was background noise at this point and perhaps it hadn’t done a thing—wasn’t even a good idea or anything they should have ever even tried. It didn’t cure the grief. It didn’t cure the rage. It didn’t cure the panic. But at the end of everything it was always precious honesty: no more lies about their life. And that was the best part.

Certainly it was better than expected: a thousand years was a lot to work through, after all. Still, there were times. One night, after waking in cold sweat from something old and forgotten—something better off not named because it was right up there with Thanos and the last few years: feel free to fill in the blanks—Loki could swear they were exactly where they started and nothing would ever change no matter how long they kept at it. But it was said in some circles that by the time such things were remembered they were no match for their bearer and perhaps it was true: a thousand years was also a lot of time to grow and deep roots like these didn't budge so easily.

Wandering some hours on that same night, Loki eventually found himself by the lake again, and on another lucky coincidence, so did Tony.

Maybe he wasn't surprised: he had grown just as accustomed to these sorts of strange sleepless nights and when he glanced up from the porch to see them seated at the shoreline with just slightly more than their toes in the water, he didn't even blink. Nor was he surprised to hear singing; he simply leaned back down on the banister with a glass of water and listened. He was almost certain he had heard Loki's genuine, unafraid voice—a few times through different walls, once or twice in some other hazy place—but he realized after a few lines that he hadn't: he had only hoped. In the thin night air, the chords carried almost magically. Like sinking into another spell of theirs.

What a funny thing about the Allspeak, and perhaps about the way Loki had learned to laugh at its rules over the years, that resulted in Tony hearing not an English approximation of the words but instead their truest form—the way they were written eons ago in an ancient tongue which could neither be understood nor needed to be. It wasn't much; it was just an old hunting song to keep the silence less maddening. But it *was* lovely.

Tony listened for ages, sleep-dazed and unspeaking, until he leaned too far forward and the porch suddenly creaked loud enough to be heard from the shore.

Loki stopped and looked over their shoulder.

“Um... please don't stop because of me,” Tony managed to say. “You have a beautiful voice.”

“Thank you,” Loki said.

There was only more silence for a while; what else was he supposed to do? But then he left his water with a tired sigh, went down to the shore, and sat beside them.

“That was it,” Loki said, quite adamant about not ever singing with company. “Sorry.”

“Why not find something else?”

“I'm shy.”

Tony gasped. “No.”

“Yes. Really. At least regarding this.”

“Do you want me to leave?”

Loki thought about it. “No,” they said. “I was getting lonely here anyway.”

“Oh. Okay.”

The stars were breathtaking: millions of speckles over a wide glimmer of violet. Moonlight and scattered meteors with no clouds in sight and planes that almost looked like ships as they crossed the galaxy's shine. It felt like... home.

"How did this happen?" Loki softly asked.

"Which part?" Tony asked.

"All of it."

Tony leaned on a knee. "Do you ever miss being back there?" he asked, looking up.

"Sometimes," Loki said. "There's nothing like it. Once you get a taste of the universe, everything else is stifling."

"Would you go back if you could?"

They kept their gaze on the galaxy's arm. "I can."

"But you can't bring yourself to leave."

"No."

There was another fleeting stretch of silence between them.

"We don't have much time together anyway," Loki eventually said, lost in the depth of it all. "I just don't know if I should... maybe spare myself that grief. Out of sight, out of mind, right? Maybe it would be better to get it over with early."

Tony said nothing.

"I could always take that ship they've got parked out front. It's got everything: self-sufficient food and water, warp drive, cloaking, weapons. Practically impossible to come by. I think I'd manage with that. They don't have a use for it."

"I think you'll get lonely," Tony said. "Won't you?"

"I might. Maybe I'll invite someone to come with me. Maybe I'll find someone along the way. I don't know."

Another far-off airplane flickered into the sky. Tony squinted.

"I must sound so melodramatic," Loki continued after a moment. "I think I'd be alright. There have been others. The ones. Soulmate after soulmate after soulmate. You *are* special; we're a good match and it hurts to try and compare you to someone. But I've lost people like you before. I've been deeper in love than this before. I'll survive. I just... don't want to."

"No one would," Tony said. "These things don't get easier. You just become numb to them."

Like all the tears in the universe frozen in time. Loki stared at the sky.

"Did you ever give any second thought to..."

“Help?”

Tony looked at him.

“I think I need to remember how to trust people first,” Loki said.

“I’m people,” Tony said.

“Only one.”

Tony looked disappointed by this fact. “What are you doing now?”

“Foundations,” Loki said.

“Okay. I was worried you were trying to deal with the heavy stuff by yourself.”

“If it comes. I don’t force it.”

“Are you managing? Foundations?”

“I don’t anger so easily anymore.”

“Hey, that’s a start. I know that was a really big one for you. Do you think once you figure that part out you’ll reach out to someone? I don’t want you just trying to talk yourself through everything on your own. Like... moving on. It’s really hard to do by yourself, even if you know how it works. It doesn’t take much to get sucked into panic with no way out. But... I guess you know that too. I don’t need to tell you how to do things.”

There were fireflies out, only a few flickering behind the trees; they seemed to join the shooting stars and airplanes. Loki had forgotten about those. It was strange and lovely.

“Do you think there’s something out there that could make me live as long as you?” Tony distractedly said. And then there was everything, because Loki knew there was. And they couldn’t answer because there was more:

For what?

“I think we miss too many beautiful things because we try to make them last forever,” Loki returned, eyes on a fading meteor, with all the raw and simple honesty of someone who had lost too much. “Sometimes you need to just... let go.”

“You don’t want that,” Tony softly said.

“I never do.”

They saw the next meteor together.

“Good night to stay awake,” Loki murmured, leaning on Tony’s shoulder. “I would have missed this.”

Tony reached an arm around them.

“I just... wish it were simpler.”

“Simple is boring,” Tony said. “Boredom isn’t better.”

“Better than the alternative, isn’t it?”

“No. Not always.”

Loki said nothing.

“I know you’ll figure it out,” Tony said. “No matter what happens. You are that type—the universe hits you in the face and you just pull your latest trick and go ‘Come at me!’”

“Or the mask falls and I start crying,” Loki said. “I think it’s gone for good this time.”

“I think you’re most powerful when you’re unapologetically genuine.”

Honestly and truly and sincerely—the kind where they went, “Ah, I am a lost and terrified mess of emotions; what of it?” because there was nothing more powerful than indifference in the face of judgment. What was haughty bravado to simply not caring? Here I am: I exist, I have problems, and you’re not stopping me. That was a lot more powerful than hoarding lies. Honestly.

“I love you,” Loki whispered, and then they finally kissed him.

“Do you want to go somewhere?” Tony softly asked as he pulled away.

“I would like that very much,” Loki said.

What happened next is up to you.

At all times these things were nothing but complicated, and, like much of it, Loki imagined it would come back to bite them someday: there was a good reason they didn’t let themselves get close to anyone and this was one of them. But they knew what they had said to be true—that sometimes it didn’t matter. Maybe they just had better concerns than a little heartbreak. Maybe they didn’t care. Staring into the lake later that same night with the dawn on their back, they decided they didn’t need to know.

They formed the package of letters they had been writing in those past few months, untied it, and slowly pieced everything in order. Pieced it out again. Read it in orders that didn’t even make sense, only because they could. Broke up the worst parts. There was a lot, and, even with the fairly cohesive summary in their hands, there was a lot they had missed: this probably wouldn’t be the last time they did it. It surely wasn’t as simple as this regardless and there were pages of painful details and pages more that would come, but in that moment it was the universe. And they knew what they were doing. They took out a fresh sheet and wrote this:

None of this was my fault and it will no longer hurt me.

Then they took the papers, walked into the lake up to their knees, and burned everything.

The ashes sank into the lake. The flames faded. The world carried on. Nothing else happened: they didn’t magically feel better or forget the memories, although they were sure they could have found a way. There was only the thin smell of smoke and the cold water pressed against their skin, bare beneath rolled pants. An afterglow in their eyes and dead silence. Above them, as clear and perfect as the glittering stars, an aurora began creeping across the sky. Nothing changed but their hope:

they weren't losing it this time. Maybe they would make this a regular ritual. It felt good. Turning back, they felt power they hadn't felt in centuries.

When they saw the ship again after finally falling asleep, it was calm: it was messy and burnt and wouldn't ever recover, but nothing was wrong. No flames. No bodies. Thanos, the eternal everyone-and-everything seated on the steps with all of his weapons and bloody hands, watched them.

"You don't belong here anymore," Loki said, lucid enough this time to mean it fully.

Thanos stood, clutching one of the many weapons, and stared them down. "You have no power over me," he said.

"Yes, I do. Get out."

He would have killed them. His eyes had that old darkness and his colossal fists around the hilt were raw from the white-knuckle grip. But then he simply vanished. No smoke, no glitter. Gone. Just like that. And then Loki smiled and, knowing that at least for now they were safe, they burned the ship and found a different dream to spend the night in.

In the morning, after breakfast, they went with Tony to harvest the rest of the vegetables. It was good: everything had grown wonderfully and there was a rainbow of different foods to be had. With some decent preservation, it would last through the winter and beyond. Tony, of course, gave them what remained of their half, and they did something very bold with it: they froze the excess themselves.

"Growth!" Tony said, watching the blue slip away from their hands.

"Growth," Loki agreed. "Slow growth, but growth nonetheless."

"What are your plans now?"

"I think I'll go look around Earth some more. There's a lot I haven't seen."

"Sounds good! Send me another postcard."

"I will."

Tony stopped them for a hug. "Stay out of trouble," he said.

"I am trouble," Loki said with a smile. Then they were gone.

Come some other sleepless night here or anywhere else, when the moon was bright white and the stars glittered above them and they could see their breath, they were sure there would be that fear again. There was no hiding any of it these days—fear of what had been, fear of what was, fear of what would be—and to be very honest, they would be lying if they said they knew how they'd take it or if they wouldn't find themselves at the bottom again. But they also supposed they ought not to care so much: how many tricks did they have under their sleeve, anyway? What did they really know about life, love, and everything? About loss, and, if they felt particularly mischievous, about a brief vacation to a realm they shouldn't otherwise have access to? About pain? Was anyone stopping them?

Nope.

So at least for the moment, they were fine. Like everything else, they would burn that bridge when they got to it: there were better things to worry about than what had and could have hurt. This universe wasn't getting to them anymore.

All they had to do was keep their head above the water.

THE END

Chapter End Notes

i cannot explain what this story means to me.

3 years ago, i watched infinity war in theatres with some ex-friends; they wanted me to come with them so i did! i wasn't particularly into marvel but i had watched some movies before and was very, very fond of Loki and remembered this pretty quickly. needless to say i was not prepared and i wrote this fic to cope. it was supposed to end with thanos's death, but as i wrote i realized how much potential this story had and so i instead began to explore the topic of trauma, depression, and anxiety—things that, as some or all of you have probably gathered by now, i struggle heavily with. i lost the original plot and turned it into wholehearted venting. the more i wrote, the more i discovered about myself and the more i projected. some of the things i wrote were almost exactly taken from my own experiences. i am sure this was extremely obvious.

i (the author sometime after posting this chapter) confess i regularly come back here and wonder how to make the infodump less infodumpy because... it is. but clearly this has not gone super well for me and it still feels important to get it off my chest, so heres a brief summary of things that happened as a direct result of writing this story:

- i realized i have cptsd, which led to a lot
- i finally deciphered my gender, which led to even more
- i realized i was PAGAN!!!!!!!!!! which was INSANE and fucked everything up holy SHIT you guys i cannot convey the bullshittery that resulted from this. MY hyperfixating ass immediately had a paranoid breakdown that the gods would smite me for writing a funny little fanfiction about a guy based off a god that i BELIEVE IN?! and then i had a spiral and then i just absolutely shat myself for the next year and i am STILL actively shitting myself! UNBELIEVABLE!!!!!!!!!! i am not explaining how i realized this but as everyone knows 2020 was Unhinged and Awful and i may have gone a little mad. last i checked everything was cool though and Loki is supportive and just wants me to vibe and be happy. i will not elaborate on how i know this.
- i started mutilating my holy body <3 #testosterone #blessed
- i went to ART SCHOOL! and then immediately started processing several decades worth of trauma :)
- which is also why im typing like this actually. sorry for the eye gore it feels itchy to type normally and i have to actively focus when im writing now lol
- due to the very convoluted nature of my situation and me projecting the fuck out of this and

adopting this character as a direct proxy for Bad Feelings and also because of the weird pagan shit and also because of a lot of other things a vaguely triggering screenshot from A Certain TV Show i had planned on watching whose existence i have now decided to ignore forever that an ex-friend sent me somehow singlehandedly kickstarted my 'oh ok maybe i do have trauma' arc and i am quite positive that would not have happened without this fic so like. word
- girl

- most notably, i am alive.

on my darkest days i sat and wrote for hours. sometimes that was all i did. this story kept me sane and i truly believe i would not be where i am today without it, and so perhaps in a way i am glad that movie fucked me up a little: it was a strange way to get here but i am grateful for everything this story has given to me and i will never forget it.

this was a true labour of love and i feel it is the kindest thing i can do now to go back for a final edit and polish. there was a lot i never added the first time around and a lot that isnt how i wanted it to be, especially in the early middle, and as im simply not ready to let go thats where ill be for a while. on that note, this is the best time for anyone to mention any constructive criticism, illustration requests, and anything else! please do.

i am mostly dead on social media but you can always find me here. i love all of you so much and i am so thankful for everyone who joined me on this journey. stay tricky.

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