

As One

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As One

by [silver_drip](#)

Summary

Loki is surprised to find he's bonded with a Symbiote, Tony.

Notes

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- Inspired by [Restricted Work] by [babyblueglasses](#)

Frail bones snapped as Loki bit into the raw fish. The coarse scales and slick flesh felt divine going down his throat—a combination of rough and smooth. He'd never experienced anything as delicious in his very long life.

He dumped salt into a vat of water before chugging it down, uncouthly smacking his lips in satisfaction.

In a daze he headed back to bed. In the morning it all felt like a dream, but the warm feeling in his stomach and how languid he was made him question that.

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Loki was reading a tomb from an ancient civilization that he'd procured on one of Thor's idiot jaunts. He'd locked himself away in his room, but that would only get him so far. Soon either his mother would cajole him out or Thor would quite literally break his door down.

He would use his time wisely until such unpleasantness occurred.

He became engrossed in the knowledge that was once commonplace, but was new to him.

--But then his hand moved, reaching for a pen then crossing out a section and wrote a contrasting point that made much more sense. It wasn't in his handwriting though, far too sloppy.

Loki promptly closed the book and distracted himself and buried the occurrence deep enough that he didn't remember it the following morning.

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Loki paused at the full-size mirror as he went to grab his silk robe. He was nude and a few stray drops from his shower glided down his body. He had the odd sensation of looking at a stranger. He'd always had a wiry frame, not sickly, just thinner than everyone else.

And his muscles were always defined, but now they had a pleasing bulge—Not as obnoxious as Thor's, but noticeable.

He had to wonder if it was a product of his new craving for raw fish, chocolates, and saltwater.

Loki flexed once more with a grin before grabbing his silk robe

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"No," Loki said before he could even process Thor's request for them all to go to Muspelheim.

Frigga made a tutting noise from her side of the table. “Loki, you two watch out for each other. You have to go.”

“You’re not his babysitter.”

“I’m not his babysitter,” Loki voiced the thought that he’d had a thousand times before—and said in his mind once in a foreign voice.

Frigga’s blue eyes went wide and Odin firmly put down his cutlery.

“I am not some child that needs to be looked after!” Thor sputtered out, his face going red as he stood, knocking over his chair.

“Bullshit,” the voice said.

Loki primly lifted his goblet. “You’re throwing a fit right now and proving my point.”

He heard a chuckle mingle with his own amusement.

“Loki,” Odin growled out. “Measure your words. Thor was gracious enough to invite you along. You should be grateful that someone wants to spend time with you.”

Loki glanced at Thor. He had his hand on the pommel of his hammer.

“Maybe Thor should measure his actions. You don’t see me grabbing a weapon at the dinner table.” Loki took a sip of wine.

“You’re being unfair,” Frigga scolded. “Thor, sit down. Loki, don’t be rude. You’re going with Thor. You’re brothers and he just wants to spend time with you.” Her words wrapped around him, but instead of cajoling him like it usually did—it had no effect.

Loki furrowed his brow in confusion.

“It’s a spell,” something inside him whispered, a warm embrace acted as a wall, not letting Frigga’s through. *“Pretend it worked.”*

“Fine, but when I want to leave I will.”

Frigga smiled. “That’s all I could ever ask.”

*

Loki escaped dinner as soon as possible to the sanctity of his room. Without delay he performed a battery of diagnostic spells.

“Or you could just ask.”

“Who—What are you?” Loki hissed, gripping his head.

“A traveler—an explorer.”

“Where are you?” he asked, dreading the answer.

“Loki, you already know the answer. I know that you know the answer.”

Loki collapsed in a chair, summoning up a hand mirror. He realized his usual dark circles under his eyes were gone and his usually slicked back hair was loose. He looked slightly younger, well rested. He had been sleeping better, now that he thought about it.

“You—You are the one who has been giving me cravings! Why? What are you doing to me?” He narrowed his eyes, glaring at his reflection.

“Calm down, darling,” the voice soothed. Loki centered himself. *“Yes, you’re so good for me, baby.”* Loki didn’t know how he felt about the pet names and he didn’t have time to contemplate them. *“I’m going to pull out slowly. Just remember to breathe.”*

Red looped around Loki’s wrist. He dropped the hand mirror, but was otherwise frozen. The red had a tinge of gold and shine. It was warm against his skin. From his palm to the tip of his finger it flowed to the ground pooling on the stone floor.

He shuttered, a strange type of pleasure, but as more came out he began to shiver—a feeling of loss.

A shape rose from the pool, undefinable until it wasn’t. A kind smile and golden eyes. The other... man? Person? Thing? Sat on the table across from him—a line of red still connecting them like a red string of fate.

“I’m a sybiote. Or at least that’s what I’ve been called during my last few expeditions.” The spoken words resonated in his mind, an echo—No, a harmony in conjunction. “Name’s Tony. I’ve been... caring for you.” He made a hand gesture, long fingers ending in dagger like points. “I’m not a *he*,” Tony corrected. “My kind has no gender.”

“You’ve been ‘taking care of me’?” Loki’s eyes narrowed. “Why? No one does something for nothing.”

They leaned forward, tapping his claws against their chin. “My suspicious lovely.” Tony stood, only to move to beside Loki on his couch. Their fingers dulled before brushing through Loki’s hair. Despite his tension Loki melted and leaned into Tony. Their skin was warm, in motion, almost massaging him. “You’re not wrong though. I can’t survive without a host.”

With great force of will he pulled away. Loki immediately felt a loss, indescribable, all but at the tip of his finger where they were still connected. Loki wanted to pull them back to him—*into* him. It was a strange revelation that bordered on being sexual. What was Tony doing to him?

“When did you—How did you?” Loki couldn’t quite find the words.

“Nearly six months by your measurements. I was in stasis in the artifact you found, the puzzle box. I was waiting for someone clever to come along and solve it.” They smiled, all

sharp teeth and alien charm. “You solved it, my brilliant Loki.”

Loki took in a breath, trying to settle himself. “And what do you want from me other than my body?” He realized he felt empty without Tony inside him.

“I want us to...” Tony made a vague hand motion, “grow together. You’re a scholar and part of me being an explorer is learning new things.” Tony took Loki’s chin so that their eyes met. “That’s the reason I put myself in a puzzle box, to find someone as brilliant as you.” Their thumb brushed against Loki’s chin, soothing and breath-taking. His eyes became hooded, reveling in the feeling. “We’ll be stronger together than we could ever hope to achieve apart.”

And wasn’t that just tantalizing? Loki had spent most of his life feeling lesser than Thor—He felt so alone, yet here was a being that promised him companionship. It felt like a trap, but Loki was desperate enough...

He licked his lips. “Yes.”

Tony smiled warmly. They grasped Loki’s hand and kissed his palm. “Thank you.” Loki’s heart raced as Tony came inside of him.

*

“Trust me. It will be hilarious,” Tony said in his mind, humor clear in their voice.

Loki shifted in his bed, awake but unwilling to leave. It had never been a problem before. He figured Tony had a hand in it. “A moment of inattention could lead to disaster.” That had been drilled into his mind since he first picked up a sword.

Loki could almost sense Tony rolling their eyes. It was strange that he intuitively knew. Tony had only revealed theirself yesterday evening, yet they were intune.

“Yes, I have countless eyes and they’re all rolling,” Tony dragged out. *“And I’ll happily use them to watch for any danger.”* Tony moved Loki’s hand, pulling the soft blanket higher to his chin and fending off the outside world. That was another thing Loki had to get used to, his body acting on Tony’s command. It didn’t bother him for some reason, possibly because looking back on it now he saw other incidents of it happening and not one of them hurt him. *“I’m here for you.”*

Loki nearly choked. He had no idea how much he needed those words until he heard them.

He cleared his throat and reined in his emotions. “Yes, well, if you insist.”

Loki dragged himself out of his bed and got ready for the day and his outing with Thor. He hated Muspelheim so of course that’s where Thor wanted them to go. The heat clawed at him. He dressed in enchanted clothes that would ward him against the all-encompassing heat.

“Mhh, so clever,” Tony purred, rumbling warmth in Loki’s chest. *“Heat weakens us.”*

“Your sweet words are falling on flat ears.”

Tony snorted. *“You can’t lie to me, lovely.”*

Despite himself, Loki blushed.

He went to breakfast.

*

Loki hurried through his meal, not because he was eager to leave—rather, he wanted to escape his mother’s pestering. He’d never noticed it before, but it seemed like every other word out of her mouth was about his duty as a younger brother to protect Thor and not dishonor Asgard by outshining him. How had he been so blind to this before?

“It’s a type of manipulation magic,” Tony said to him.

Loki clenched his teeth. That couldn’t be it. It didn’t make any sense.

Tony was blessedly silent, yet Loki felt their cynicism.

Thor prattled on between their mother’s comments. Odin loomed over them from their ornate seat at the head of the table. Power emanated from him, a pressure that would crush anyone that questioned him. Loki had always been aware of it, but now it felt different, more blatant.

Loki could feel that Tony wanted to say something, but refrained.

*

The blackened ground cracked under his horse’s hooves as he rode with Thor and his friends. More light came from the open lava pits than the hazy sky. Muspelheim was truly horrible. And yet Loki was holding back a smile.

“You are making a mockery of our adventure!” Thor shouted.

Loki steadfastly ignored him, keeping his focus on the book he was reading. Tony had complete control of his body and was watching for danger.

Sif made a swipe for his book, but Tony steered the horse out of her range. She swore under her breath.

“Stop acting like a child,” she chided.

“I’m reading a book. That’s far more adult than your galivanting around,” he said in a dry voice. Electricity made the air buzz. “Uh-uh, Thor. You know what happened last time.” The harsh sky was acidic. If Thor caused a storm, the rain would fall upon them and unleash a burning havoc. It was probably the only good thing about Muspelheim.

Thor growled. The electricity thickened the air.

Frandal steered his horse closer. “Loki, be reasonable.” There was an undercurrent of tension in his voice.

“Thor demanded I come with you all. I decided I’d use this time to read.” In a flash Loki’s hand lashed out. A beat later a venomous creature fell dead with a dagger through its throat—And Loki had yet to take his eyes off his book. “It seems like I’m the only one who’s paying attention on this ‘adventure’.” Tony was cackling so loudly in Loki’s head that he nearly missed what the others said. They only blathered complaints so he didn’t miss much. Thunder boomed overhead. The first drop of acidic rain hit the ground, hissing.

“And the coup de grace!” Tony chimed in, their joy practically quivering in Loki’s chest.

Loki summoned a shield all around him that had a green hue to it. They shouted at him as the rain grew harder and their skin began to burn. Loki read his book and reveled in the chaos.

*

“I don’t understand,” Loki said, playing stupid. It was a technique he’d never used before, but with Tony egging him on... “I did everything you asked me to. I accompanied Thor to Muspelheim, I didn’t complain, and I saved Thor from being attacked by a monster. Was that not what you wanted me to do?”

Frigga’s lips thinned into a hard line.

“Don’t make excuses. It’s unbecoming. Why did you not shield Thor and your friends from the rain?” Her voice brokered no argument.

“I trusted Thor’s keen battle senses. It was a perfect way to take out many enemies and cool the volcanic ground so it was less likely to buckle. Was that not what he was doing? If not, wouldn’t that mean he couldn’t control his temper and it was his own fault that it rained?”

Tony snorted. *“You’re brilliant, my lovely.”*

“Had you not been teasing him—”

“We all tease each other,” Loki said, interrupting her for the first time he could remember. “When I was younger I came to you many times when Thor called my magic dishonorable, when Sif said my skin looked pasty, when Frandral said daggers were the weapon of cowards. You always said they were just teasing me, and I shouldn’t let it get to me.” Frigga tried to speak, but Loki plowed on. “I was only teasing them as they did me. Perhaps you should give Thor the speech you gave me.” Loki widened his eyes, not giving the game away.

“None of their teasing caused you bodily harm like yours did in turn. What you did is malicious.”

“Mother, is your memory failing?”

Tony’s pleasant surprise and boundless joy gave Loki’s goosebumps.

“How dare you—”

Twice in as many minutes did he cut her off.

“What of when Thor encased me in my sleeping bag on our first adventure and abandoned me to the wild? Or when they blamed me for trespassing on holy land and I was beaten by the locals? Or when they stole my daggers on a quest and I drained so much magic defending myself that I fainted in the middle of a fight? Or when Thor first got Mjolnir and I was left with only my daggers that couldn’t stand one hit from it? I remember coming to you many times to ask for something to defend myself, yet you dismissed me. Mayhaps you should see a healer if such memories allude you.”

“In coming!”

Loki pulled up one of his strongest shields in an instant. Frigga’s blue magic rebounded off it. She made a slashing motion with her hand, cutting her bounced magic in half before it could hit her.

“Ah, so this is where Thor gets his temper-tantrums from,” Loki couldn’t help but say.

Frigga’s nostrils flared before from one moment to the next her expression became soft and motherly.

“I don’t know what has gotten into you lately,” Tony snorted, “but this behavior is unacceptable. I will discuss with your father what punishment is fitting. You are to go to Thor and apologize to him for your actions.”

Loki bowed, but didn’t let his shield down. “As you wish, mother.”

He left and ignored her order, instead going to his chambers to laugh and celebrate with Tony.

*

Loki woke up to perfection the following day. Tony was beside him, against him—in him. Tony chuckled, massaging Loki’s back, combing red fingers through his hair, a hand on Loki’s hip with their thumb rubbing soothing circles.

Loki dragged in a breath, feeling lazy and pampered—loved. Soft lips pressed against the back of his neck. Loki almost wanted to cry. He’d never experienced ecstasy like this before.

He was loathsome to break it, yet... “Were you like this with your other hosts?” he asked, breaking the moment. Tony froze before continuing encasing Loki in pleasure.

“No, the other people I traveled with usually had no idea I was there. But with you... with you, I knew that you needed someone on your side.” Tony’s breath caressed his neck, making Loki shudder in pleasure. “I didn’t like how others treated you. They used insidious spells, honeyed words, and blatant hypocrisy. I would have made myself known to you earlier, but I had to show you I meant no harm first. I want you to be happy.”

Loki squeezed his eyes shut, trying not to cry.

“You can let it out,” Tony whispered, “I won’t judge you—I’d never judge you.”

Loki sobbed in a way he hadn't done since he was a child. Tony held him tighter, whispering comforts and promises of his devotion.

*

As Loki went to exit his room, feeling light and unburdened, Tony took control and stopped him.

Loki's curiosity was quickly answered. *"Thor and his friends are waiting outside of your door. I think it is an ambush."*

Loki sighed, some of his good mood slipping away. As entertaining as it would be to see the nearly bald and eyebrow-less fools, he'd rather not deal with their idiocy.

He teleported to just outside of the feasting hall. It would have been faster to teleport into the room, but Odin would scold him for being 'lazy'. Dread started building up in his gut. As entertaining as it was yesterday to cause a bit of havoc and point out his mother's hypocrisy, the consequences would doubtlessly be painful.

He entered the feasting hall and was met with silence. Neither of his parents looked at him, but he could feel the tension in the air. The gold-clad guards that flanked the doorways stood a bit taller, shoulders farther back. Loki wondered if they would play some part in this.

The food had yet to be served. They were waiting for Thor. Loki realized with a simmering bitterness that they had never waited for him before. Once again he wondered how he'd never noticed that.

"We'll talk about it later," Tony promised.

Loki acknowledged him with a feeling of acceptance. It was different, and he was slowly becoming more aware of his own emotions and how they affected his outlook. And with Tony as a constant presence and helping him identify his emotions, he felt self-aware. He understood that a good portion of his foul mood often centered around how others treated him, rather than it just being a part of his personality.

Odin slammed his fist down, making Loki flinch and pulling him out of his thoughts. "Collect Thor," he ordered a guard.

Loki held in a sigh. Thor's absence was only building up Odin's anger. No doubt that would only worsen Loki's punishment.

The only thing that kept Loki from fidgeting nervously was Tony's presence and the knowledge that it would cause Odin's wrath to grow.

Five minutes later Thor was ushered in, his face red. Whether that was because of the skin damage from the rain or anger was unknown. His eyebrows and beard were gone. The hair that had been untouched under his helmet was shaved into a short Mohawk. Loki refrained from laughing. Which was made more difficult with Thor glaring at him.

He stamped to his seat across from Loki's. Thankfully, the table was too wide for Thor to kick him, as he would have doubtlessly done.

Food was hustled out, still warm since the spell for heating up food was taught to all the kitchen servants. It was common place there, yet none of them were made fun of for using magic. The hypocrisy was widespread—it coiled around every facet of his life.

Thor growled as he ate. The ever-present thunderclouds that had been there since they returned boomed so loudly it could be heard through the thick walls of the palace. Frigga was vivisectioning her meal into smaller and smaller pieces before using her fork to peck at it. Anger was shown in every movement Odin made.

No one spoke, except Tony, who whispered comforts into Loki's mind.

Odin finished eating before all of them. Loki set down his silverware before Odin could order him to. Breakfast was over for him. He'd have to go to the kitchen later, perhaps eat some succulent raw fish...

"Loki, once more you have used trickery and acted dishonorably. The pain you inflicted on Prince Thor and noble warriors would be justification enough to be thrown in the dungeons and be forgotten, but I am merciful." Loki could feel Tony rolling their eyes. "You will have your magic taken until you have learned humility."

Loki's blood ran cold. "All-Father, please! My magic is entwined with my soul—"

Odin let out an animalistic shout, causing Loki to cringe. Odin slammed the base of Gungnir down, a resounding clang that vibrated the whole room.

"Calm down," Tony ordered him. *"Focus on your magic, pull it close to your heart."*

Loki followed his orders desperately and too panicked to think for himself.

A white miasma came from the spear then incased Loki. Like a thousand needles it pierced him, searching, trying to destroy him. It found his magic, but was met with a barrier—met with a wall of Tony's power.

Odin frowned before his attack redoubled. Three times it bashed against Tony's defenses and on the third got through—reaching his magic, a white-hot brand.

"Pull!" Tony shouted. In tandem they yanked his magic out of Odin's clutch, a putrid stalemate that weighed on Loki's soul. It was a fight that seemed to go on for eternity.

Odin changed tactics as Loki clutched the table in a white knuckled grip. Odin's magic twisted around Loki's, barricading and entombing it. Knots in all sorts of designs locked Loki's magic in place. It should have burned at Loki's magic, poisoning it, cutting into it, but instead Tony acted as a protective coating, immune to the pain.

The air was sucked out of Loki's lungs when the deed was done and Odin's magic left him.

Black spots obscured his vision, but before he could faint, Tony took control.

Working through Loki they stood tall and without remorse. They cocked an eyebrow and had a flat look on their face. “Interesting,” Tony said in Loki’s voice before turning around and leaving.

*

Loki blacked out on the journey back to his room, waking up in his bed. His head was pillowed on Tony’s lap. They were whispering comforts and promises that everything would be alright.

Loki’s breathing quickened to a throat burning pace. Tony placed a hand on his chest and his breathing slowed.

Abruptly, Loki clawed at Tony’s hand, pushing it away. He got off the bed, his heart hammering in his ears. “This is your fault! I should have never—I *would* have never acted this way on my own!”

Tony cocked their head to the side. There was a red string coming from their finger to Loki’s foot. He wanted to sever it, to act on his anger and fear, but knew that would only make things worse.

Loki crouched down, grabbing his knees and squeezing his eyes shut, trying to block out the world.

He heard Tony move to in front of him. They began humming a wistful tune then singing. Loki felt himself easing, his tears coming slower. Loki took in a shuddering breath before opening his eyes. They were sitting in front of him. Tony opened their arms to him. Without thinking Loki fell into his embrace. He nuzzled against Tony’s neck.

“It is my fault. I pushed you too far too fast. I thought,” Tony paused, their arms tightening around him. “I just wanted you to be happy. I thought if you saw what they were doing to you that you could break free from it.”

Loki laughed dryly. “Break free of what? My family?”

“I wanted you to know that they treated you differently than their biological son.”

Loki blinked in confusion. He turned the word ‘biological’ around in his head. He knew the meaning, yet how that fit into their conversation clouded his mind.

Tony tensed up around him.

“Shit,” Tony whispered. Loki could feel his sorrow and regret. “I thought you knew.” Loki shook his head, unable to think.

“What... What the bloody hell are you talking about?” Loki tried to untangle their limbs. Tony didn’t put up a fight, despite Loki sensing that they wanted to hold him against their chest. Loki’s face flushed with anger. “What nonsense are you going on about? I am the trueborn son of Queen Frigga and the All-Father!” His magic pulsed with fury, crushing itself in the confines of Odin’s magic. Tony frowned, their golden eyes pleading. Loki shook his

head. “I won’t tolerate such lies! Such malicious fabrications!” He sneered down at Tony, feeling betrayed on the deepest level. “Go away! Just leave!”

Tony gaped at him before nodding. “I’ll keep Odin’s magic from you, but put my consciousness in the puzzle box. When you’re ready to talk just touch it.”

The red cord between them snapped and Loki felt crippling loneliness. He didn’t let it show through his anger though.

Tony gave him one more look before twisting in on himself while walking to Loki’s nightstand. When he was done a golden puzzle box sat on the small table.

Loki sunk back into himself and cried.

*

Loki woke up feeling cold and alone. He searched inside himself before remembering that Tony was gone, only a remnant remaining as a buffer against Odin’s magic.

Loki gagged, his stomach heaving. Nausea filled the place that Tony was supposed to be. He hurried to the bathroom and dry heaved. He hadn’t had anything to eat since the disastrous breakfast that was, he checked the time, thirteen hours ago. He heaved bile, stomach acid splashing into the toilet.

He stood on shaky legs and went to one of the chests in his room, pulling out an anti-nausea potion. He chugged it down and became ravenous. His room always had fresh fruit in it, but that wasn’t enough. He craved raw fish and the tang of saltwater. But without his magic the trip from his room to the kitchens could spell disaster. Thor would doubtlessly think his punishment was too kind. His wrath would only be sated with Loki’s blood.

With numb fingers Loki pulled out his armor from its cabinet. He’d usually use his magic to put it on, to contend with all the hidden buckles and ties, but without access to it his opulent armor became unwieldy. His fingers were numb making the task twice as difficult and far longer than it needed to be. He looked himself over. His skin was bone white and had a sickly sheen to it.

Loki armed himself with daggers, but they were his secondary pair that he had less practice with. His main ones were inaccessible in his pocket dimension. He paused at the door, listening for anyone that could be waiting in ambush. But there wasn’t a sound.

He felt naked as he left his room. His skin felt like it had been scrubbed with metal flecks, leaving him bare and raw.

Loki schooled his face into something that he hoped was unreadable. His steps felt heavy and far too loud as he made his way through the palace. Every shadow made him tense. The gleam of light off the guard’s weapons skyrocketed his heartrate. Eyes were all over him, baring down on him, nearly crushing him.

He did not know how long it took him to get down to the kitchens. At the odd hour only a few servants were around to see him. In the back of his mind he thanked his younger self for never playing tricks on them. Even back then he'd known it was foolish to raise the ire of those that made his food.

One of the servants bowed deeply. "My prince, please allow me to pack for your journey." Loki nodded curtly, realizing that in his armor it looked like he was preparing to leave.

"It is to be a long quest," Loki said, his voice thankfully not breaking. Even in the presence of a well-mannered servant he felt vulnerable and anxious. "Add a jug of salt and cast a preserving spell on plenty of raw fish." The servant didn't question his strange orders, working quickly.

Loki kept casting his eyes about the warm kitchen, looking for an attack. It took everything in him not to jump when the servant set the large bag in front of him. Loki would usually magic it away, but now he could only carry it.

The stuffed bag was obscenely loud as he walked through the corridors. When in his chambers he dropped the bag heavily before going to his store of potions and using many of them to place wards on the door and his armor. It marginally made him feel better.

Loki pulled out a pair of raw fish and bit into them. Tears escaped his eyes. He could no longer hold back his thoughts. The pain of his magic being strangled, being defenseless, and the bitter lies Tony poisoned his mind with. It was too much. After hastily eating he went back to his bed, unwilling to take off his armor and the little security it gave him.

The night passed without sleep, only tears and denial.

*

It was the following evening and Loki still hadn't gotten out of bed. With Tony his bed took on a different meaning. It had been a place of comfort and adoration. But without Tony it felt foreign and empty.

He couldn't take his eyes off the puzzle box. So much was going on in his head that he couldn't hold a thought. He twisted a lock of his black hair around his finger, black, where the rest of his family had blond. The many inconsistencies on how he was treated compared to Thor.

He forced himself out of bed and made himself a glass of saltwater, something that he'd never seen anyone else do before. Memories of Thor spitting out brackish water on one of their outings in Vanaheim. His family's golden skin, while his was nearly white.

Loki set down his glass, the *clack* making him flinch.

How they gave Thor Mjolnir, yet when Loki hinted he too would like a mythical weapon they had called him ungrateful.

His only saving grace was that no one had tried to disturb him. They probably thought he was pouting. Instead he was trying to traverse a world-shattering idea without finding any merit to it. But the evidence kept building up...

He blinked. His skin was clammy. With little appetite he picked at a roll of bread.

The way Frigga said he was too sensitive yet pandered to Thor's mood swings.

Loki was always punished severely while Thor got a slap on the wrist despite doing far worse.

And never, never, never being good enough in Odin's eyes.

Had the deck been stacked against him before he'd even been able to walk?

His body felt sluggish without his magic. He had always turned to it for comfort far before Tony invaded his life. His insides scraped raw and limbs bloodless.

Loki crawled back into his bed, trying to pinpoint where everything went wrong. Tony had... They had wedged themselves in Loki's steady life. He was a prince of Asgard, to feel pity for himself was to spit on the people with actual problems. Yet Tony made him acknowledge that not everything was right in his life, that things could be *different*, could be *better*.

Like a fool he'd bared himself to Tony and they walked all over him.

Time passed in a daze of cycling emotions, rage, denial, fear, and a multitude of others.

His food supply dwindled, his dread of being caught defenseless when he went to retrieve more cast a shadow on his already dark feelings.

No one tried to reach him, for comfort or to hurt him. Until he felt his wards crashing down, and he had no magic to save them. He curled into a ball on his bed, wishing that whatever fresh pain that was nearing would be swift.

There was a slight dip at the edge of his bed. He did not turn around to see who it was. A hand touched his shoulder. He flinched involuntarily despite only barely feeling it through his armor.

"You have quite the stench to you," Frigga teased. Yet Loki felt her motherly presence easing his tense muscles and frayed emotions. He sucked in air, his lungs filling desperately as if he'd just been drowning. Loki struggled with his blankets while turning around. He clutched onto her midsection and started sobbing against her. How could he ever have thought she wasn't his mother?

*

His mother visited him daily, reading him stories as if he was a child. It was a great comfort—Except she peppered in comments about how he should be grateful his punishment wasn't worse. She got him to bathe and change out of his armor. He shaved, brushed his teeth, and combed his hair.

But when he tried to drink saltwater Frigga knocked it out of his hands. His ears rang as she shouted at him. He didn't understand. Saltwater quenched his thirst like nothing else ever had. Like a woman possessed she dumped what was left of the supplies he'd gotten from the kitchens on that first night then obliterated the last of his raw fish.

With a twist of his gut he realized he feared her. He feared his own mother.

Loki's ears rang even as her face smoothed out and her words became soft. His bound magic curdled.

She left and Loki crumbled.

*

There was a pounding on his chamber doors. Only one person would be so rude. His protective runes would—but Frigga had removed them. The doors slammed open. Loki was quick to get out of bed and tried to raise a shield, only to remember that his magic was no longer at his beck and call.

All Loki had left was a façade of indifference, and even that was shaky. If Tony had control

“Loki!” Thor shouted while barging into his bedroom. “How sickly you look!” He laughed boisterously. His beard had grown back to its former glory, but he kept his hair in a short mohawk. Loki's silver tongue felt heavy. “I have most joyous news!” There was a glint in Thor's eyes, whether it was malicious or in mirth, Loki couldn't tell. Thor paused, waiting for a response. When none was forthcoming Thor continued. “There is to be a great competition open to all warriors to determine who is the strongest! Father has decreed that we shall prove ourselves!”

Loki took in the news at a sluggish pace. “Without... without my magic?” Loki asked, his voice raspy.

Thor gave him a peculiar look. “Of course! You shall prove your worth without trickery!” Thor leaned in close, as if to share a secret. “Father arranged this competition for *you*. He said so himself!” Thor rambled on and Loki only listened to him with half an ear.

He felt like there was a blade against his throat and Odin was the one holding it.

*

Loki was standing in front of his desk. His papers and books had been shoved to the ground and in their place were his daggers. He stared at the thirteen dark blades. They were thin with just enough heft to be thrown. They weren't suited for long-term battle, chipping against armor and occasionally getting lost. They were meant only to compliment his magic, to keep his opponent off balance.

Not to mention that he usually used his magic to call them back to him.

He was a deft hand with the sword, but didn't own one himself. He excelled at using spears, but... any weapon he could find in the armory would be new to him and without enchantment. Nothing would be able to stand up to Mjolnir, assuming he even got that far in the tournament.

He had so many enemies, Aesir he'd fooled with his mischief, those he had humiliated by proving the superiority of magic. The Warriors Three and Sif were probably still angry with him even though Thor seemed to have forgotten the acid rain incident. They all wanted to crush him, pulverize what little Loki had left without his magic, without Tony—

Loki banished that thought.

He knew he could fight, that he'd defeated Thor's friends many times without the use of magic. But he felt like his dominant hand tied behind his back. That he would be fighting blindfolded.

His insides quivered. What little confidence he had was like the sand on a beach, waves steadily eroding it.

Some part of him felt like his whole life had been leading up to this—That this was always where he was going to end up, humiliated in front of everyone and proven lacking.

Loki hated his defeatist attitude. Now was the time to prepare, to use every tool he had. To let Tony out of the box. He marched over to his nightstand, eyes steadily on the unassuming puzzle box. How he had grinned when he first found it. Thor had tried opening it himself, but by far wasn't clever enough. He'd hit it with Mjolnir, but it had been unaffected. In his frustration he'd kicked it aside—and Loki had whisked it up with his magic to solve once he was alone.

He reached for it, hand shaking, but determination hardening his resolve. Whatever strength Tony was willing to give him, Loki would take.

He touched the box. It pulsed once in his hand. His vision narrowed before the box melted into liquid red and gold. It twisted around his arm, encompassing and holding him in a way no one else ever had.

"Loki," Tony purred, before tensing. *"I see. Of course, I'll help you."* Tony sounded so subdued. Loki wanted to beg them forgiveness for sending them away. They should have talked to each other, but Loki's reaction had been in the extreme and Tony was the one who got the brunt of it.

Before Tony could sink into Loki's skin, he hugged what he could reach of them. "I'm sorry," Loki whispered, clutching them. Tony took on a humanoid form, hugging him back. They ran their fingers through Loki's hair. "I missed you so much! I panicked and—" Loki couldn't finish his sentence, instead he just sobbed in their embrace.

"I'm the one who should be sorry." Tony paused, holding something back. *"You've suffered because of me,"* Tony said instead.

Loki felt Tony in every one of his cells, holding him up where all he felt like doing was falling down. He could breathe again. “I love you,” Loki admitted, tears coming to his eyes. “I didn’t know, but I do now. I love you! You’re the only one that ever listened! That ever cared about me for being me!”

“I love you too,” Tony said aloud. “My lovely Loki.” They peppered Loki’s face and neck with kisses. “So smart.” Another kiss. “How can they not see how wonderful you are?” Loki buried his face against Tony’s chest. He was so relieved and felt as light as a feather. “I’ll protect you—We’ll fight as one and show all of them how amazing you are!”

They sunk into each other, becoming more than they could ever be apart.

*

Loki ate in the kitchens, not wanting to deal with Thor’s excitement or Odin’s disapproval.

He stood out of the way of the bustling servants. Their workload had been quadrupled with the tournament being held in the palace’s parade grounds. The scent of baked bread was heavy, honeyed rolls destined to feed peasant onlookers. The food for the nobility were far grander: Cornish hens, leg of lamb, and the ever-present orange pea-pods that were considered a delicacy.

He drank his saltwater and ate his raw fish secure with Tony’s presence with him. He had been so fearful when he’d been alone and without his magic. But with Tony... Tony made everything better.

“You’re too kind.” Loki felt the warmth of a kiss on his neck. He blushed despite knowing Tony hadn’t shown theirs.

Loki was pleasantly full as music made its way through the thick walls of the palace. Unfortunately, he had to join the rest of the royal family to greet the people and for Odin to make one of his speeches.

Odin was the first one to see him come into the room. His one-eyed stare was uncompromising, not even a hint of warmth. “You finally show yourself,” Odin said gruffly.

Frigga giggled while patting Odin on the arm as if he’d told a joke. She glided over to Loki, smoothing her hands over his shoulders. He could feel her warmth through his armor and cape.

“It’s magic. Don’t let her fool you,” Tony warned. Loki didn’t drop his smile, but concentrated on how unnatural the warmth was. Why she was casting such a placating spell on him, he didn’t know—nor did he want to know.

“Loki!” Thor sounded genuinely excited. And perhaps he was. He lived for fighting. Yet he was blind to how much Loki hated it. “You have chosen the spear to fight with!” Thor moved to grab the spear, the *red* spear. Loki kept it out of his reach.

“You don’t see me playing with Mjolnir, now do you?” Loki gave him a playful grin. Thor laughed bodily. “Pray tell, what is the reward for winning the tournament?”

Thor smiled, all white teeth and unflagging enthusiasm. “It doesn’t matter! I will be the winner! There is no greater honor than showing the might of Asgard!”

“A wager then.” Loki glanced at Odin then back to Thor. “If you win, I’ll go on as many adventures as you want without complaint, but if I win anytime I turn you down for anything you must not complain to me or anyone else.”

Thor’s laughter rumbled in his chest, so much like thunder that it was a wonder the skies did not split with rain. “Remember this moment, Loki! There’s no weaseling out of this like some of your other bargains.” Thor held out his hand.

Loki clasped his wrist. His lips twisted into a grin. There was nothing else he needed to say.

*

As Loki should have predicted. He was on the opposite end of the bracket than Thor. If they were to face each other it would be in the finale. It also meant that Thor would get the most recovery time while Loki got the least.

Loki recognized many of the names there, but some were foreign. Two warriors from each of the other civilized realms were allowed to partake in the tournament. It was a power move on Odin’s part, doubtlessly.

He listlessly read that the reward for winning the tournament was an obscene amount of gold. With his upbringing, money had never been an issue, but it would be wise to start accumulating his own wealth.

Loki returned to the private box that the royal family and other royalty shared. Thor was to be the first to fight and thusly Loki the last.

Frigga was chatting with the Vanir royalty, fulfilling her role as hostess. The light elf king was mouthing the neck of his concubine, blind to his surroundings. Loki, against his better judgement, sat beside Odin.

Odin grunted in acknowledgement, eye steadily on the tournament ground. A light elf was the commentator. She was hyping up the crowd.

“When the tournament is over, will you release my magic?” Loki kept his voice controlled, only loud enough to be heard over the distant crowd.

Odin made a humming that conveyed nothing. Venomous words were on the tip of Loki’s tongue, but Tony held him back. Instead he gave a curt nod and went over to his own seat to watch his future opponents.

Thor soundly trounced his opponent, as was to be expected. One of the two light elves were knocked out, both Vanir failed. The Asgardian warriors varied in strength. Sif had the

onlookers cheering while others shouted remarks about how women shouldn't fight. He'd give Sif one thing, she knew how to prove people wrong.

Volstagg and Frandral fought and unsurprisingly Frandral prevailed. Volstagg was old compared to the other competitors. Somehow it was easy to forget that he'd been Thor's personal guard when he was a lad, before Thor made him his friend.

Loki left his seat to head to the room where the competitors were as the last fight before his own commenced. It was Hogun versus some nobody. Loki didn't need to watch to know how it would turn out.

He heard Frandral's lyrical laughter as he entered the room. All eyes fell on him.

"A spear!" Frandral mocked. "You can't handle your cock! How do you expect to handle a spear?!"

Loki ignored Frandral's insistent jeers. Sif joined in, not realizing she was acting just the same as the ones that had said she shouldn't be fighting.

He found the only other person who had yet to battle, a light elf—Medium build, double swords, light armor. Speed over power.

"And magic," Tony added in. Loki let his feeling of annoyance known to Tony. *"I doubt it was an accident."*

In the background Sif loudly made a bet on Loki losing.

"Prince Loki." The light elf bowed as he stood. "It is an honor."

"Faldun Zanason." They clasped wrists in mutual respect before heading towards the door to the parade grounds. The voices of the spectators were a dull through the thick wooden door. The noise ticked up. A minute later and Hogun entered. Frandral and Sif went to him, congratulations and asking about how his fight went. Loki was deaf to them. He focused on the announcer, his name being called then followed by the name of his opponent.

He breathed in the scent of sweat, dirt, and blood as he stepped into the arena. His grin was bright, contrasting with how he'd felt not two days ago.

"Time to strut our stuff!"

*

A quick battle. Loki's superior speed with Tony playing the part of a spear. His senses reached out through Tony—one mind.

Half the crowd celebrated his victory, the others bade for his blood in the coming matches. Nothing he didn't expect. He took a seat in the stands with the commoners, speaking to Tony as they watched the other fights. Words that no one else could hear, but him. Teases and sarcastic quips. He held his spear and felt Tony holding him in return.

Loki's next battle was just as quick as the first—In his third he faced Frandral and showed him why he was foolish to mock Loki.

Thor joined Loki in the stands between the third and fourth bracket. It was a break as everyone was served food at the late hour. "I have not seen you fight so fiercely in years!" Thor said boisterously, his smile simple and open. "Fighting without magic suits you!"

"Would that I could say the same for you." Loki let the poisonous words slip past the din of noise and into Thor's ears.

"Measure your words, brother. Do not ruin my good cheer." Thor gripped Mjolnir, as easily provoked as ever.

"Do you think Mjolnir flies back to your hand because of your muscles? Or that lightning follows your will because of your fighting prowess? Dear brother, that is magic—The coward's art, as you would put it."

"Mjolnir is a work of art—"

"A work of magic," Loki interrupted. They were drawing the attention of those around them, mouths quieting as ears attempted to pry. "And no honorable warrior fights with magic!" Loki let his voice be heard! "Even I won't blight this competition with the magic I usually would wield. Would you not do the same, brother? Would you not fight with honor for all of Asgard to see?"

"Know your place, Loki," Thor growled out.

"It would be a tale worth telling!" Loki shouted, but did not stand. "The brave Thor fighting without his magic hammer! Fight as the rest of us do! With only muscle and metal! Muscle and metal! Muscle and metal!" The crowd was quick to join in on his chant, their expectations weighing down on Thor.

Thor rose and lifted Mjolnir. The people became quiet and Loki held back a grin. "I am Asgard's Prince," Thor announced, "and I will always do what she bides me to!" Thor set Mjolnir on the bench and hushed his voice. "I pray that you make it to the final so that I can teach you your rightful place as nothing more than the spare." Thor turned his smile back to the crowd. "For Asgard!"

The cheers were deafening.

*

Strangely, one of the worst things about not having magic was that he couldn't wisp away grime and blood from his person.

"My prim Prince. We'll have a bubble bath together after this nonsense is over."

"Your confidence in me is charming," Loki thought sarcastically in response. He'd just won his fourth match. His unconscious opponent was being lifted off the parade grounds and

hurried to the healers. Loki didn't bother to move. The final fight, him against Thor, would start immediately.

"I have confidence in us." Under his armor Loki could feel Tony lavishing him with kisses. Loki gave the equivalent of a pointed look at Tony in his mind. *"Fine. I'll wait to celebrate until we're alone."* Tony wrapped around Loki's essence, a hug that no other could hope to measure up to.

The announcer went into the middle of the parade grounds and hyped up the already foaming at the mouth crowd. Loki could see Thor waiting in the doorway. Sif was at his shoulder, bloody from the fight she lost against him. Whatever she was saying, Thor was ignoring.

As the announcer said his name, Thor came marching out, his eyes steadily on Loki. In return, Loki's lips twisted into a grin and his green eyes blazed.

"Brother, you seem tense," Loki teased. "Would you like to sit down? I can call a servant out for you, if you'd like."

"You shall not be smiling by the end of this," Thor warned.

Loki leaned in. "I'm stepping out of your shadow, Thor. Try not to be blinded."

The announcer got in between them, a petite and fearless woman. "Now now, my Princes, the battle has yet to begin!" Her words carried through the parade ground and to the crowd with magic. "Once more let us all give thanks to the All-father!" Expertly, she led everyone to bow in the direction of the royal box.

Loki stared at Frigga. She had a slight frown on her face that ate away at Loki's heart.

"Concentrate," Tony reminded him. Loki stood and rolled his shoulders to loosen up. Mutually, Thor and Loki put distance between each other.

The announcer stepped away from them, but still held everyone's attention. "Begin!"

Thor rushed forward, raising up his replacement hammer. So predictable. Loki parried him with his spear, matching Thor's strength. A look of surprise flitted across Thor's face. Loki was stronger than ever with Tony.

Thor kept forward and twisted, trying to get under Loki's guard. Tony absorbed the impact through their spear. It didn't even budge.

Loki brandished their spear, nipping Thor in the side.

Anger sparked to life in Thor's eyes and the sky.

"This again?" Loki grinned while thrusting forward, using their superior reach to keep Thor moving. He swept at Thor's legs, but he jumped at the last minute. Thor slammed down his foot on the neck of the spear, trying to break off the blade. Loki jerked it backwards, slicing his foot.

Thor grunted in pain, but didn't miss a beat. His movements became faster. Loki barely dodged a blow to his side. He sent a dagger flying. Thor swatted it down with his hammer.

Rain pattered down, smearing the grime on his armor.

Loki swung around, hitting him with the butt of their spear. Thor lost a step, but quickly recovered.

"Are you defenseless without Mjolnir?!" Loki shouted, his repressed anger coming through. Thor let out a war cry that mingled with thunder. "Can't take a *joke*?" Loki jeered, dancing out of the way of Thor's attacks. "You got a little burned then went crying to daddy!" Loki was starting to breathe faster—Tony took in air and fueled him further. "He cleaved out a piece of me and you just laughed!"

The parade ground became muddy, hindering Thor, but not Loki.

Their spear bit out, gashing Thor's arm.

"What will you do without me there to protect you on your little adventures?"

Thor's anger was making him sloppy. He threw his hammer at Loki, catching him in the ribs. Loki faltered backwards, but Tony had taken the majority of the hit. Loki kicked the hammer into the air then batted it with their spear, sending it flying out of Thor's reach.

"Have you forgotten that hammer isn't magical? Or are you just stupid enough to disarm yourself?" The rain grew heavier, the air charged.

Thor roared with the echo of thunder. He threw punches, but couldn't get close enough to land one. Loki used the butt of their spear, bashing Thor every time he moved in range. Blood gushed as Loki broke Thor's nose.

The crowd began cheering for Loki.

"*Throw me into the sky!*" Loki didn't hesitate. A snap of lightning hit their spear. "*I'm fine!*" Tony's voice was pained, jolting Loki's heart. "*Eyes on Thor.*"

But it was too late. Thor tackled Loki to the ground. He yanked off Loki's helmet and landed two quick punches. Loki caught the third. Thor's vicious grin melted away as Loki pushed back his fist. Loki wrestled Thor off him then rolled to his feet, grabbing their spear.

"Not so mighty anymore," Loki said between heavy breaths.

Thor wiped away blood from his face. "You're cheating!" he shouted.

"They're shouting my name, Thor. Can't you hear it?" Thor glanced around and tensed. "I never needed my magic to defeat you," Loki lied smoothly. "I just let you think I did."

A pulse of magic rammed into Loki's back. "*Not on my watch!*" Tony bucked it off. Waves of it crashed down on him, each stronger than the last. Tony fought it. "*I won't let them touch you again!*"

Loki felt choked up at the love in Tony's voice, but didn't let his attention falter.

Thor ran at him, but feinted to the left, grabbing Loki's discarded helmet.

"Now you're using your brain."

They moved against each other. Thor hooked their spear with the horns of the helmet, trying to disarm Loki. He made a semi-circle, dislodging the helmet then thrust forward. The blade met the tender spot under Thor's shoulder. He let out a pained noise and jumped backwards. He grasped his bleeding armpit.

Loki didn't let up. He hooked his helmet by the horns and yanked it from Thor's hand. He jabbed Thor in the throat with the pummel, sending him to his knees. Loki flourished his spear before bringing the sharpened edge to Thor's throat.

"Do you yield?" Thor's fists tightened. "Don't," Loki said, reading him. "If you call Mjolnir you'll be called a coward for as long as you live."

Thor sneered. "I yield," he said through his teeth.

"Prince Loki is the winner!" the announcer shouted while walking back onto the mud caked parade grounds.

Loki's shoulders relaxed and the exhaustion from the battle hit him. He offered Thor his hand. "Take it," Loki whispered. "Prove to Asgard that you are as honorable in defeat as you are in victory."

Thor took his hand, gripping it with all his might. Loki hid a flinch. Just as quickly Thor pulled away.

The rain blurred Loki's vision, but he could still see people on their feet in the stands. They were chanting his name, yet Loki didn't care. He did this for himself and Tony. Their adulation meant nothing since it could turn against him with even the slightest rumor of dishonor.

Loki looked towards the royal box. Odin wasn't even trying to hide his scowl. Frigga's smile was manufactured and brittle.

He would never be good enough for them. The realization didn't pain him the way he expected it to. Instead, he felt sorrowful—A sort of fatigue as he looked back to all the things he'd done to try to measure up to Thor.

"It's their loss," Tony whispered to him. *"We have each other now."* And those soft words tasted better than his victory against Thor, than proving wrong all expectations.

*

They didn't get to have their bubble bath. They didn't want to be caught alone by Frigga or Odin.

The celebration had only just begun when he entered the feasting hall. Frigga and Odin were putting on airs while Thor and his friends were nowhere in sight. Loki mingled with those that had once hated him. The only thing that made it bearable was Tony's idle comments and sarcasm. It was probably the first time he'd enjoyed one of these feasts since he was a naive child.

They ate with the people rather than suffer whatever Odin and Frigga had to say. He didn't drink much, knowing he'd need all his wits to deal with whatever fresh wrath they planned on unleashing on him.

As the night progressed and people either left or passed out, they bolstered their defenses. They agreed that Tony would hide behind Odin's own magic since he would doubtlessly try to figure out why Frigga's attacks didn't work. He steadied himself as he watched them go.

"Now or never," Loki thought ruefully as he went after them.

Without words Tony assured him that no matter what they'd be there for him.

Loki found them in Odin's study.

"Are you proud, mother? Father?" Loki smiled with joy and hope in his eyes. When they didn't respond he dropped the act. "Of course not. Did you not think I'd recognize your magic, mother?"

"Watch your tone," Odin growled out. "You humiliated your brother with your trickery." Odin stood tall, but no longer intimidated Loki.

He scoffed. "You seem to be under the impression that Thor can't make a fool of himself all on his own."

Odin's face turned red, but Frigga stepped in. "Darling, I was just making sure you weren't using magic. I knew you were fighting fair, but your brother wouldn't believe it unless I was certain." Her voice was lyrical, a taste of the soft words she used to comfort him with.

"You didn't trust the All-Father's ability to keep my magic chained?" he asked blandly. "How unsupportive of you."

"Do not be impertinent." It looked like Odin was barely holding it together, showing where Thor got his temper from.

Loki let Odin's probing magic saturate him. A moment later, Odin wrenched it back when he found that his magic was still in place and nothing was amiss. His nose flared, and teeth clenched.

"Is it so hard for you all to believe I beat Thor honorably? That I could stand up to him?"

"We had your room and the armory searched. No one could find the spear you used," Frigga said, ignoring his comment. "Where is it?"

"Have you two ever cared for me, or was it always just a game?"

Frigga's eyes became wide and glassy. She was who Loki learned his deception from. "We love you, my son, just as much as we love your brother."

He was so tired of their lies.

"Oh? Is that why you always so quick to blame me whatever disaster befell Asgard? Or blame me when Thor got himself hurt? Or why you never told me I was adopted?"

Frigga tilted her head in confusion.

"Enough!" Odin shouted before Frigga could let out another lie. "You ungrateful wretch! I saved you from the cold of Jotunheim! I took you into my home! Gave you things others could only dream about! Yet you act like a spoiled child! Your destiny is to serve and support Thor! You will do this with a smile on your face or else I will keep your magic locked away!"

Loki couldn't help it. He laughed and laughed and laughed. His stomach ached from not being able to catch his breath, eyes bright with mirthful tears.

He straightened abruptly. "You think your paltry magic can hold mine?" Inside of him Tony undid the memorized knots, toppled the walls, and broke the locks. "No, Odin. I am done playing your games." Loki's magic unfurled, making him stand taller. "Tell Thor whatever comforting lies he needs to hear. I am leaving and if any of you try to stop me I will topple Asgard beneath my feet and show the strength I kept hidden away to save Thor's ego."

Loki gave them one more look before teleporting to his room. He grabbed his winnings and the few belongings that actually meant something to him.

They slipped between worlds on to Yggdrasil.

"You're perfect and so strong. You did it, my love," Tony said, encompassing him in warmth and love.

Loki smiled, feeling light as a feather. "I couldn't have done it without you." Tony manifested and they exchanged a tender kiss. Loki rested his forehead against Tony's.

They were free.

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