


Don't Look Down

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/16654747) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/16654747>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	The Avengers (Marvel Movies) , Marvel Cinematic Universe
Relationship:	Loki/Tony Stark
Characters:	Tony Stark , Loki (Marvel) , James "Bucky" Barnes , James "Rhodey" Rhodes , Bruce Banner , Pepper Potts , Steve Rogers , Thor (Marvel) , Jarvis (Iron Man movies)
Additional Tags:	Enemies to Friends to Lovers , Not Iron Man 3 Compliant , Slow Burn , Secret Identity , Kidnapping , Trust Issues , Torture , Betrayal , Tony Stark Has Issues , Nightmares , Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD , Aquaphobia , Tony Stark Needs a Hug , Protective Loki (Marvel) , BAMF Loki (Marvel) , Protective Tony Stark , BAMF Tony Stark , Dark Tony Stark , Dubious Morality , Dependency , Unhealthy Coping Mechanisms , Pining , Domestic Fluff , Cuddling , Jotunn Loki (Marvel) , Love Confessions , Eventual Smut , Sex , Romantic Fluff , Angst with a Happy Ending , Separation Anxiety , Bananas , Families of Choice , Mental Link , Healing , Fluffy Ending
Language:	English
Collections:	Rix's Favourite Marvel Collection , FrostIron , FrostIron* , Wile Away The Time , A Dragon's Hoard of the Best Fics , Lady Bibliophile's Collection of Incredible Fanfiction , Marvelous Marvel , lia's best of tony stark fics , Mark's Top Fanfic Recs , Loki partners with Tony after he leaves the Avengers , To_read_main_rom , MyHeartAdores , Stories Worth Losing Sleep For , MCU faves to come back to , BMF , The fics that never leave my brain , Favorite Loki Fics , Things that I want to read once I have time , Completed Fics  , favourite fics of all time: a medley , Well Loved , why I only sleep an hour a night , Finished golden ones , loki and tony sitting in a tree K I S S I N G , Fics That Belong In Olympus , Gammily's Bookshelf , MCU Greatest Angst , Loki Tony , The best of Frostiron , Team Ironman fics , for eternity i share my life with you (i share mine with you) , Best , Numerous OTPS Infinite Fandoms , Avengers , A Pleasure To Read , Tony Stark , AUs worth the cognitive dissonance , ProjectEve Best Marvel Fics , I love you so
Stats:	Published: 2018-11-17 Completed: 2019-10-06 Words: 256,298 Chapters: 47/47

Don't Look Down

by [NamelesslyNightlock](#)

Summary

When forced to decide between the lives of Tony Stark and Iron Man, Steve Rogers chose *wrong*.

Tony is left to deal with the consequences, but it's not like he's helpless, and he certainly isn't alone.

Notes

So I promised that I wouldn't start posting this until I had written at least a few chapters and a plan, but it turns out I'm bad at keeping promises. Well, I've got half a plan, which is surely better than nothing at all.

...maybe it's more like 12% of a plan.

But I really like this idea, and I guess I'll just see where it takes me. I am planning on trying to challenge myself with this, so it should (hopefully) end up a bit darker than my last series. Fair warning.

KfateArma has translated this into Russian, you can find it [here](#).

- Translation into Polski available: [Nie Patrz w Dół \(Don't Look Down\)](#) by [Ramzi](#)

Waltzing into a den of wolves

Steve could hardly believe what was happening, like he was stuck in the middle of a haze, swathed in shadows where every turn reaped only darkness. It didn't seem real— it couldn't, it *shouldn't* have been real, a scene torn from horrors that belonged only in the confines of a tortured mind.

It wasn't that he was naïve. He'd seen war, he knew the atrocities people were capable of committing— but everything had been going so well, until, of course, suddenly it wasn't. And for something to be torn from the depths of his own terror and presented to him as if it were a gift was just... well. His mind was near blank, caught in a surge of memories that caused his ability to formulate a decision to splutter out of his grasp. The scene swam before Steve's blurred vision, Clint's panicked questions sounding distant as he remained unable to focus on anything but his own horror.

It was any leader's worst nightmare, to be made to choose between two members of his team.

It was any *person's* worst nightmare, to be forced to choose between two of his friends.

Steve squeezed his eyes shut.

Tony Stark wasn't even supposed to have *been* there.

“Cap!”

Steve tried to shake the thoughts from his mind, tried to push away the memory of choosing to leave Bucky alone in the train carriage while he moved forward to try and capture Zola.

(Peggy said that it had been *Bucky's* choice. Steve didn't think he believed her.)

The scenes were not all that similar, not really, but Steve's mind was twisting into knots, and he was terrified that this would turn out the same.

Iron Man, the person Steve would probably label his best friend in this century, was stretched out across the ground, his shining red armour caked in dust but still managing to gleam under the bright desert sun. He lay face down, a heavy boot pressing his helmet against the ground as the barrel of a gun was held to the join in the armour's neck. He had been entirely unresponsive ever since the brutes had thrown him down, and it was impossible to tell how much damage had been done.

It wasn't a thought that he allowed to linger.

To make things even worse, Tony Stark was hanging limply from the grasp of another big man in beige protective gear, clearly unconscious although there was no visible injury other than his too-red skin and a single drop of blood on the left side of his face. Steve noticed that his chest was rising and falling with ragged breaths, wrapped in a torn and grubby suit jacket Steve remembered seeing him wear that morning as he headed out to a meeting.

Two people in danger. An Avenger who had moved too far ahead of the group and a civilian engineer who was supposed to still be back in New York.

Both had guns to their heads, and Steve was being asked to choose.

The guy holding Tony snarled something indecipherable, forcing Steve back to reality, his veins surging with adrenaline.

“You’d best pick soon, Captain,” said a grubby man standing behind the others, his voice quiet and unsteady. A translator. “They don’t want to be kept waiting.”

No.

No.

There had to be another way out. There *had* to be.

Steve couldn’t lose another friend.

He cast his gaze about wildly, assessing a situation that he had already assessed a thousand times, desperately searching for an answer that he knew he wouldn’t find. A quick glance to Clint, standing only a few yards from Steve himself, proved that the archer’s quiver was completely empty with no hope of a refill. Steve could see his shield— it was about twenty yards away, under the wheel of a jeep. Even if he could get to it, he couldn’t get *at* it, at least not quickly enough to make a difference. And with the number of guns these guys were waving about - not to mention the Enhanced who seemed to have some kind of affinity for fire - there was no hope of winning a fight without weapons.

“Cap,” Clint muttered out of the corner of his mouth, his voice still sounding strange to Steve, like it was being carried across on the desert breeze rather than being spoken into his ear from the comm. “Cap, I don’t want to seem like I’m telling you what to do, but do we really *have* a choice here?”

Steve didn’t want to believe it, but he was forced to accept that there wasn’t another way out. This was the *only* way, and part of being a leader meant that you *had* to make the tough decisions. Sure, Steve could decide not to give an answer at all, but that in itself was still a decision— and one that would no doubt damn them all.

There was a chance, of course, that they were lying, that Steve could give an answer and the men would kill them all, anyway. Steve didn’t think so, though. Maybe the hit to the head he’d taken during the fight had affected him more than he’d initially believed, but he thought that the men were probably being sincere. There seemed to be something they wanted, and it didn’t take a genius to work out what.

Time was running out, the man with his gun to Iron Man’s neck was twitching impatiently, and Steve knew he had to move quickly.

He swallowed hard, feeling sick, because...

Well. Because maybe Clint had a point.

Mind reeling, he grasped onto the smallest piece of sanity he could find, clutching Clint's argument to his chest like a safety net.

The ultimatum was horrific, yes, but was it truly a choice between teammates? Iron Man had been on the team since the beginning, but he'd seen Natasha's initial assessment— Stark himself had been recommended for nothing more than limited association, a business deal more than anything else. Stark had never been, and would never be an Avenger. He wasn't on the team, he merely lurked in the Tower — fair enough, really, since he owned the place — offering up resources when needed but otherwise staying out of the way.

And... was it really a choice between friends? Steve had only really talked to Stark a couple of times, their conversation limited to new gear or things in the Tower that needed to be fixed— or, on the odd occasion, Iron Man. Iron Man himself was witty and charming, friendly and kind, always willing to listen when Steve needed a someone to lean on. He was truly one of the best people Steve knew, nothing like the brash inventor who employed him.

Plus, as awful as it sounded... they needed Iron Man. He'd saved the world hundreds of times, and they needed the hero more than they needed an engineer. They'd all got by just fine before Tony had started making them all special gadgets, and they would be able to cope without them in the future.

He might have hated it with every fibre of his being, but still Steve knew exactly what he was going to have to do.

"Iron Man," he whispered, the name slipping from his lips like a prayer— though to Steve it felt more like a curse, for it would condemn Stark to captivity at best, and at worst...

The big man said something, and the translator shuddered before glancing back to Steve.

"He says he can't hear you, he wants you to speak up," said the grubby man, sounding terrified. Steve supposed he must have been just as much a captive as they were.

"I choose Iron Man," said Steve, hating himself despite knowing that it was the right thing to do. "Give us Iron Man, and you can... you can take... just let Iron Man go."

All of a sudden, every single one of the dozen men before him gave a feral grin, and Steve felt like he was waltzing into a den of wolves. Unable to shake the feeling, Steve glanced across to Clint, but the archer's gaze was only angry, not suspicious.

The burly man was talking again.

"They say they are men of their word, and that they have no grudge against the Avengers," stuttered the translator. "If you let them go quietly, and if you do not try to get retribution, they will leave you alone from now on."

Clint's expression was burning with unbridled fury, giving off the impression that if it were possible, he would be shooting flames from his eyeballs.

“We won’t chase you,” Steve replied thickly. “We’re in no state to do so. Just... leave us Iron Man. Let us take him home.”

After this had been relayed to him, the man holding Stark nodded to the others, then pulled the engineer over his shoulder and began to walk away. Steve watched, at first, as his prone benefactor was carted off in one of the dust-covered jeeps, but the glint of sun on metal caused his gaze to drift. In moments he was hovering over Iron Man, shaking the man’s shoulders, calling for his teammate, begging for his friend to wake up.

But there was no response.

“Come on, Cap,” called Clint, running forward and grasping one of the metal arms. “We’ve gotta get him back. We can’t stay here.”

Steve knew Clint was right, and jerked his head in a shaky nod before going to collect his shield. It was a long trek back to the quinjet, but they couldn’t stay in the open, and Iron Man still wasn’t moving.

For all Steve knew, his friend could be dead inside the metal tomb.

They had to go.

Managing the weight between them, the two Avengers dragged the heavy suit over the rocky ground, heading for safety without a single backward glance.

A generous amount of lemon juice

Tony's left ear hurt like a son of a *bitch*. Oh sure, his head was pounding like he'd gone a few too many rounds with good old Jack Daniels, his skin felt like it was on fire and there was definitely something going on with both of his kneecaps, but those were things that were just par for the course after spending so many years piloting Iron Man. But his left ear?

Shit, it felt like the thing had been shorn off with a rusty hacksaw and then doused with a generous amount of lemon juice.

A groan passed his lips before he opened his eyes, the lids almost sticking together with the evidence of a long bout of sleep. He didn't feel well rested, though, stuck with that awful heaviness that betrayed involuntary unconsciousness. And, you know, the pain gave that away a little too, as did the restraints he felt at his wrists when he tried to wipe his eyes. A quick wiggle confirmed the horrifying truth— he was strapped down tight and proper to a hard slab, with even his head held firmly in place.

Tony breathed in deeply through his nose as his eyes flew wide, telling himself to remain calm, to stay alert and not get caught in the throes of a panic attack. He forced himself to list his injuries, taking catalogue of every tiny thing in an attempt to focus his thoughts on something other than the overwhelming wave of memory.

Left ear, stinging like a bitch. It also felt a bit wet and sticky, and he tried not to imagine that it really *had* been torn off. *Move on, Tony*. Left kneecap probably bruised. Right kneecap, same. Most likely the result of being thrown to the ground. Headache, tolerable, no more than he had grown accustomed to during early morning classes at MIT. His right bicep and shoulder were a bit sore, like he had been grabbed and dragged, perhaps, but that— yes, that seemed to be all of it, though he also felt a bit like he had the worst case of sunburn he'd had in years. He shuddered, wishing he could forget how *that* had happened.

Left ear. Left knee, right knee. Head. Bicep. Shoulder. Skin.

He was all right. He was going to be fine.

Left ear. Left knee, right knee. Head. Bicep. Shoulder. Skin.

The arc reactor was still in place, he could feel it, and while the room was too white and left the sharp stench of bleach lingering in his nose, it was at least more sterile than where Yinsen had been forced to perform his emergency lifesaving operation. Better lit, too, though he was willing to bet that would become a curse in the long run.

Okay, so he was restrained, clearly a captive. That was something he could deal with. Ideally, he would have liked to have realised that earlier, since while he was calming down, his kidnappers seemed to have noticed that he had woken up. He didn't have time to take full stock of the room, only seeing a small, square space and blinding white walls before the knobless door slammed open and men began streaming through, all wielding guns and wearing clothes that looked all too familiar.

He had known before heading into the desert with Steve and Clint that they were dealing with the Ten Rings, but didn't make seeing them in person any easier.

Tony tried not to think about Steve and Clint. He didn't know whether they got away, whether they had been hurt or caught as well, or worse. But he needed to focus on one problem at a time, and he was never going to be able to help them if he couldn't work out how to help himself first. The Ten Rings needed to be his main focus.

He half recognised one of them, though it took him a moment to place the burly man as the one who had knocked him over the head with a swipe of his hand, which was adorned with far too many rings of varying sizes to be practical. Well, at least that explained the stinging and stickiness of his left ear— it was probably bleeding, and the dust of the desert he had no doubt been hauled across probably hadn't helped matters.

There was another person in the room, someone who looked almost as terrified as Tony felt. The man was far too skinny and covered in more grime than any of the others, and when he repeated the leader's words in English, Tony felt a stab of ice at the reminder of the last person he had been held captive with.

"They want you to build for them," the translator said, and had he not been restrained Tony might have thrown back his head because *of fucking course* they did.

"I won't do it," he said straight off the bat, not caring for what he knew would come from his brashness. After all, he'd dealt with these guys before. He knew what was headed his way, and while he was in no way *keen* for it, he knew that delay wasn't going to make the pain any less. It would just slow everything down.

But to his surprise, the leader merely grinned, yellow teeth bared like dirty razors below his beard. "You will, Stark," he said, his voice heavily accented but easy enough to understand. The translator was probably some kind of psychological tactic, then. "You will build weapon, or you will regret."

Tony bared his own teeth and simply refused again, but the man merely laughed with harsh amusement and headed out of the room. The other goons followed after him, matching their superior's expression with garishly excited smiles that betrayed their pleasure at the near certainty of a chance to be able to engage in torture.

It was disgusting, and it was terrifying.

Still, Tony managed to muster enough saliva in his dry mouth to spit in their direction before the door slammed shut, leaving him alone in the empty cell.



The thing about captivity is that it gives you a lot of time to think, to just ponder on everything you could have done better, on everything that went so horribly wrong.

Tony *tried* to keep his mind on the good things, on the way that Pepper's smile would always glint in her eyes when she was feeling particularly playful, or the way that Steve's bear hugs

managed to make Tony feel like he was choking, even though they were only ever administered when he was wearing his suit. He thought about the last time he had spoken to Rhodey, a simple stupid phone call to complain about how the Air Force had posted him in a time zone that was fourteen hours out *again*, and how was Tony supposed to call and complain to Rhodey in the middle of the night if Rhodey was actually going to be awake and therefore incapable of handing out his amazing 2am advice? He even contemplated how Happy had praised him after Tony had nearly broken his driver's nose during their last training session.

No matter how hard he tried though, his thoughts inevitably turned to the events that had led to his capture, to every mistake he had made.

It had started in early November, when Natasha had been watching the news about a gas explosion in the Midwest. It had just been something routine, normal, until JARVIS had found that an alarming *six* incidents of similar characteristics - too similar to be a coincidence - had all occurred within the past couple months. Then it happened again a week later, bearing all the hallmarks of a terrorist attack. Steve had wondered if maybe they should be doing something, but Natasha and Clint were firm on the fact that such incidents were the responsibility of the alphabet agencies and the military. Overstepping would not do the Avengers any favours. But then Tony had seen the so-called Mandarin on the TV, and he had recognised the horrifyingly familiar logo of ten interlocked circles surrounding a pair of crossed swords. After that, it was personal.

All bets were off.

Explaining the situation as Iron Man rather than as himself had helped, as Steve had believed his friend almost instantly— but SHIELD and the other Avengers needed more convincing, so he, Steve, and Clint had taken a quinjet to the location JARVIS had tagged as the source of the video.

The desert itself brought back haunting memories, but Tony had shoved them aside.

He should have known better.

Within moments of landing they were met with two-dozen armed soldiers, the antenna planted in the sand a clear decoy.

Ambush.

Of course, two-dozen soldiers would normally have little chance against three Avengers, but the soldiers were not all... normal. Two of them could actually breathe *fire*, and while that was not the strangest thing Tony had seen over the past couple of years, it had certainly come close. They had taken the Avengers entirely by surprise, especially when, after losing an arm to one of Clint's explosive arrows, the fiery woman had simply grown the limb back. In the end Tony's unibeam had taken one of them out, and the other had retreated, moving far too fast away from the others. Tony had ignored Steve's protests and given chase, not wanting to allow the person who he was starting to believe was possibly the cause of the 'gas leaks' to get away.

Needless to say, it hadn't ended well. He'd run into another ten of the soldiers and an additional two of the fire people, and had been forced to admit that maybe Steve had been right to tell him to wait. But worse than being caught off guard, worse than being ambushed and attacked, was the fact that they seemed to know who he was. It wasn't surprising that they recognised the suit, of course, everyone knows Iron Man— but these people called him by *name*.

You see, after the incident with Obie in LA, Agent Coulson had suggested that Tony keep his identity a secret, that he claim Iron Man was an employee, a bodyguard even. At the time it had seemed like a good idea, especially considering Pepper had just almost died— and if he planned on continuing his fight, then there was a high chance of her getting hurt again. More recently, especially after he'd seen Agent Romanoff's separate reports on his two personas (and wow but *that* had been a stressful couple of days), Tony had begun to wonder if SHIELD hadn't been hoping to *properly* separate Tony and Iron Man, putting someone more 'suitable' in the suit. There was no way Tony would let that happen of course, but he wouldn't put it past them to try. Still, even with a whole host of Avengers now to protect the people Tony cared about, he knew it remained for the best. Pepper and Rhodey knew, and Happy, as well as Fury. But beyond that, it was supposed to be under tight wraps. Not even the Avengers knew the truth, and while it hurt, Tony knew he couldn't tell them. People loved Iron Man, looked up to him, trusted him— *listened* to him. But if they found out that the man in the can was the same person they loved to cackle at in the tabloids, then the hero would lose all credibility. The difference in the way Steve treated him in and out of the suit was proof of that.

But these terrorists had *known*, and that meant that Tony had a much bigger problem than he had initially realised. Someone somewhere had discovered his secret and had handed it out to his worst enemy.

In the moment of discovery, though, he was given little time to contemplate matters, because they immediately began to pry him from his protective cocoon. First, one of the fire people had tried to burn him out of his suit by pressing impossibly hot hands to his stomach, but Tony overrode his safety protocols, refusing to give in even as he felt his skin begin to burn. Thankfully, it seemed that they wanted him alive, and stopped before he cooked inside his own suit.

So then, they threatened hostages. A group of at least twenty kids, all terrified and crying out in a language Tony didn't understand, but their meaning was clear. They had all recognised him, were all begging him for help, for Iron Man to save them. Outnumbered and alone, the only thing Tony *could* do was give the Ten Rings what they wanted.

They had pulled him away from the empty suit the moment it had opened, grabbing his arm and yanking with enough force that he thought for a moment it might dislocate. Thankfully, he'd had the sense to put the suit on the highest lockdown protocols he could before he was ejected, and it closed up and shut down before the Ten Rings had a chance to even lay a finger on it.

Unfortunately, that meant that when the children all flickered out of existence as if they had never been there in the first place - like they were some kind of *hologram*, which should have

been impossible in the middle of a desert - JARVIS could not pilot the suit and come to his rescue. But still, silver lining. With the lockdown in place, even if they managed to break the suit apart the Ten Rings wouldn't be able to use it to get to JARVIS or into any of his other systems. Worst come to worst, they might be able to reverse engineer it. Which still, you know.

Fuck.

Once again, he forced himself to focus. It wasn't like it was his first kidnapping after all, probably closer to his tenth. He'd been in worse places, and he'd always managed to get out.

Right.

First thing was always to find out what the fuckers wanted, so that he could manipulate their desires into something he could use. That's what he'd done last time, and it had worked a treat.

Well. Mostly.

This time, it seemed similar, though not entirely the same. They wanted him to 'build', but they hadn't given him anything specific, and it would seem that they weren't going to let him do it in this cell since it was empty and too small to really build anything anyway, even if he did have the tools and materials.

Didn't matter. Tony knew exactly how this was going to go, and he just wanted to get it over with.

—•—

The torture started on day three.

Well, the actual overt torture did. They had not fed him in all that time, and the only human contact he had was the man who brought him his small cup of water twice a day—just enough to keep him going, but not enough to quench his thirst. That probably still counted as torture, right? But on day three - and Tony knew it was day three only because he had calculated that the water came once every twelve hours, and he had received six cups since first waking strapped to the slab - they began to move things up a notch.

They kicked off with sleep deprivation tactics, and the moment they started to play Queen's *Bohemian Rhapsody* at deafening levels, Tony began to laugh. In his already feverish mind, churning with pain and hunger and withdrawal, it was amusing that they would use a tactic that was so cliché and had been popularised by movies and TV shows. But there was a reason why the method had become cliché in the first place, and that was the simple fact of its sheer effectiveness. The chosen music was loud, the changing rhythm slamming against the inside of his skull, the song too long and not repetitive enough to be able to drown out. They had either picked it for that reason or because of the lyrics themselves— either way, it certainly seemed like a perfect choice. During that night, if his eyes drifted closed, the volume would increase further, jerking him back awake and remaining at that level until his eyes drifted shut again and the volume went up yet another notch.

With his mouth so dry that his tongue felt heavy and large, and his stomach aching with hunger, he had already not so much been sleeping but passing out. He had been breaking out in sweats since day two, his fingers shaking against the restraints as they reached for a glass that wasn't there. The room was warm, far too warm, and without the tepid water he had been provided he was sure he would have perished long before. He doubted, at first, that his mind would have room for anything else. And to be honest, the familiar tune was at first a comfort, a relief from the usual *nothing* that he had been left with.

Logically, it *should* have worked, but every time the volume raised, Tony simply looked to the obvious camera above the door and continued to laugh and *laugh*.

Loud music helped him focus, and he had long since trained himself to withstand it. He wasn't sleeping, but he wasn't entirely discomfited by it either. Compared to his workshop, the volume they were playing with was *tame*.

Maybe he disconcerted them, or maybe they simply realised that it wasn't so easy to break Tony Stark. But after that first night, they shut the music off entirely, leaving him in total silence save for the rasps of his own breathing.

And they also, apparently, shut off the ventilation system.

It took him a while to notice. The room Tony was locked in was blinding white and brightly lit. That had never changed, and Tony had already started to try and entertain himself within his mind to keep from going mad with it. Eyes closed, he ran through numbers and blueprints, fingers twitching despite the restraints as he began inventing and building in the safe confines of his own imagination. It was a tactic he had used way back in elementary school before he'd been accelerated, and he still used it sometimes in meetings or in Steve's debriefs. It gave him something to focus on that wasn't the awful *nothing* he was greeted with when he opened his eyes.

Then, slowly, it began to get harder and harder to focus.

Tony had never been good at breathing, not since his lungs had been pushed to the edges of his chest cavity to make way for the arc reactor. But when his breaths turned to gasps and his mind began to grow fuzzy, he knew it must have been something more than just that.

He'd nearly drowned enough times to know what asphyxiation felt like.

How though? The door wasn't sealed. No oxygen coming in through the tiny vents near the ceiling but. It could come in through the edges of the door. Mostly. Enough to live, probably, not so little as to kill him.

Tony frowned, trying to reach out and grab at the thought. That wasn't how oxygen worked, was it? He probably should have had enough not to feel this way, he—

Maybe they had something else. Maybe they hadn't stopped the vent at all, just turned it into something that wasn't oxygen. Nitrogen, maybe? Tony frowned. Nitrogen wasn't nice at all.

At least he was on the slab. That was nice of them to do that, to pick him up off the ground. Oxygen floats high up, high in the air, that's how he was still able to think this well. Well. Was he thinking well?

He knew that the door never opened. That would have let him breathe. But no open door meant no water, was well.

That would be a good thing though. Water. To drink, that is, not, not bad water. Drinking water and oxygen together, that was what he needed, that would let him think. Probably.

Why did he need to think?

Tony struggled to remember why it was important to keep going, to remind himself that he had a plan. Through it all there was one thought he managed to hold on to, because he knew that he wouldn't be abandoned. He knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that Pepper and Rhodey and Steve and the *Avengers* were all out looking for him, that it was only a matter of time. They didn't know that Tony Stark had been kidnapped, but they would still come for Iron Man. People *like* Iron Man. Iron Man's team would be coming to get him. They were on their way, he could do this, he only had to hold on long enough for Captain America to come charging through the door. Steve was good at that, he seemed to like breaking doors with his foot.

He still hoped that the others hadn't been caught as well.

Tony didn't know how long it had been when the door did finally open, letting in a billow of sweet, sweet air. Maybe it had been just one more night. Maybe it had been a year. Either way, he strained against the restraints on his head, trying to see, so sure in his addled state that Steve had come to get him—

But it wasn't Steve, and Tony was too weakened to fight as they dragged his stinking, aching body off the slab-like bed and shoved him into the room next door.

"You will build." It seemed to be the only English phrase that his torturers knew.

And even though Tony's throat felt raw, and his hands and feet felt strange, like maybe they weren't connected properly, and his voice was hoarse and scratchy from more than just disuse, he still made sure that his response was heard.

"Nah, don't fancy it, actually."

When he saw the barrel of clear liquid, Tony was immediately awake, his feverish mind already caught in the sensation of water choking his lungs and coughing up through his throat. In that moment, he really did want to give in, to rescind his earlier decision and end it before it could really begin and just move on— but he knew he couldn't. He wasn't going to make anything for them, he *wasn't*, and if he gave in when all they had inflicted was some measly oxygen deprivation then they would no doubt grow suspicious, would not put down their guard as much as he needed. As his thoughts began to fall back into place, Tony was sure of that more than anything else.

So he pressed his lips tightly together, not making a sound when they shoved him to the ground, his not yet healed knees burning with pain. And when they poured the water over his head and began to scrub hard at his still sore skin with rough cloth under the guise of removing the grime and mess that came from lying in a bed for days without moving, a small tremor across the aching stretch of his muscles was all that gave away his discomfort.

He just had to hold on. Captain America was coming. Steve would come to help.

They gave him rags to wear and strapped him down again that night, and in the morning, his torturer came back with a jug of water and a damp cloth that was placed over his mouth and nose.

“You will *build*.”

Tony was too busy choking to drink any of the precious liquid, too busy trying to breathe and surface from the water that was gushing across his face and making him remember the terror of drowning to even *think* about quenching his thirst.

He didn't *want* to drink. He was too scared for that.

Water was certainly not his friend, and in that moment it terrified him more than anything else could have – but *fear* is an incredible motivator.

When they lifted the cloth away, Tony flashed his teeth in a twisted parody of a grin, and again he *laughed*, the manic giggles cracking through broken lips and scratching against the sick enjoyment the torturers had felt. Now, they looked disturbed, and Tony found that it was something else he could hold on to in order to keep going.

They didn't waterboard him again, but they did bring him back to the barrel, their eyes shining with undisguised maliciousness as they used it just as Tony had been *waiting* for it to be used.

They must have known what had happened to him last time. They never cut his skin, and they never broke his bones. But they knew, oh they knew that the water hurt him the most.

“You *will* build.”

Steve was going to come, he always did. Tony knew that he hadn't been abandoned.

In the meantime, Tony would have to work to save himself. *Just like before*.

But he felt so terribly, utterly alone.

Still, he might have been unable to stop himself from fighting, moaning ‘*no*’ and begging to be released, but he never allowed acquiescence to their demands to slip past his lips. He would not build them weapons.

How ironic, Tony. Trying to rid the world of weapons, you gave it its best one ever.

And now, I'm going to kill you with it.

He would *not*.

Tony could not say how long it had been. He measured the passing moments only through hunger, tiny glasses of water to drink, and the barrel they dunked him into.

Still, he held on.

“You want some food?” one asked, waving a metal plate of stew under his nose. It looked moist and filling, with pieces of vegetables and chunks of meat large enough to be recognised as lamb, or maybe goat.

It was testament to just how hungry he was that Tony actually reached out, almost falling from his bed in his attempt to grab it.

“Will you build?”

The word felt bitter as it left his throat— broken and hoarse but still sure, infused with too much determined fury to be mistaken as nothing more than pride.

“No.”

The food was taken away, and a day later he was given a crust of bread.

Steve would come. He had to.

The sound of the arc reactor clanging against the metal rim of the barrel every time his head was shoved underneath the malevolent surface was so familiar he had to forcibly remind himself that there was no car battery, the reactor was waterproof, they couldn't damage it or make it painfully and life threateningly spark like they had *last time*—

Somehow, last time was starting to feel like a dream. This was all there was, now.

And it was beginning to seem like maybe Steve...

No.

Steve would come.



The moments in between were the hardest.

He didn't think that there would be anything worse than the water— but worse, definitely, was the waiting. Sometimes they left him alone for what must have been a whole night. Sometimes, it was hardly any time at all. The lack of routine had him always on his guard, never able to relax because he never knew when next they'd come. His tiny cell remained silent. They didn't need music to rip away his sleep, for it was restless regardless, wracked with dreams where they never pulled him out of the water.

A never ending nightmare that with every passing hour had Tony feeling like less and less, and he began to wonder.

Maybe the Avengers were only a fantasy, a story conjured by his imagination to keep himself sane like one of his mental inventions.

Maybe he never left Afghanistan.

Maybe Iron Man was the dream.

—•—

They stopped tying him to the bed. Perhaps they thought he didn't have the strength to try and escape.

(They'd be right.)

—•—

Tony didn't actually remember breaking. He could only recall the pain in his throat as his torturers tore his screams away one by one— not through any method that was methodical or precise, but with vicious enjoyment and pure determination. They had held him under for so long that day that their fingers began to wrinkle as dark spots danced behind Tony's eyelids, and his gasps when they finally pulled him up were so raw, so desperate—

But he was pushed back down half way through only his second gulp of precious air, and the water gushed between his lips like it was a thousand blades of ice, cutting at his insides and burning in a way that tepid water surely never should. He gasped and choked and battled until he awakened in his cell, and when next they came to retrieve him, they took him to a workshop.

They said that he broke, and Tony believed them.

Yet still, in the too-warm room filled with scraps of metal and far too many sharp objects for comfort but at least without a barrel of water, Tony looked them in the eye and denied them once again.

It was the first time since they'd caught him that they broke his skin, and this time, when Tony spat at them, he did so with blood.

If a rescue was coming then it seemed like it was a ways off yet, but Tony was sure he was going to survive the ordeal. He just had to— well, not earn their trust, exactly, but set their expectations.

(He'd heard that the longer it takes to break, the harder you fall. He didn't believe it, but he hoped that his torturers did.)

His head was ringing as they threw him back into his cell, the metallic taste of blood bubbling hot against his tongue. He thought about getting up, but the white floor, at least, was cooler than the air, and Tony kept his cheek pressed against it for a while. It was no less

uncomfortable than the bed, really, and further away from the bucket that was emptied only half as often as it should be.

It was nice, almost. His mind was fuzzy from the hit, and his confusion made the room appear larger, like someone had taken his vision and stretched it on Photoshop. The ceiling was the same though, and the blinding whiteness. But— had they removed the bed? It didn't seem to be in its usual spot in the middle of the room.

A movement in the corner had Tony's head snapping up, and he realised belatedly that for the first time, there was someone else inside his cell.

Tony tried to move too fast, and hit his chin against the floor as his hand slipped while he tried to pull himself upright. His new companion frowned, a heavy crease forming between his brows, stretching his waxy skin across bones that seemed far more pronounced than Tony's memory told him they should be.

When he finally and painfully worked his way semi-upright, Tony merely sat and stared, blinking rapidly and once again wondering if the last hit had been one too far. Maybe it was the lack of food, maybe it was the uncomfortable, ever present warmth, which seemed to be even worse in that moment than it had been before. Tony didn't know, his mind wouldn't stay in one place long enough to muddle it through, but it had to be *something*— because Tony may have been a little confused, but he was *sure* that the last time he'd seen Thor, the guy had promised that his brother was locked up tight in Asgard.

And yet, impossibly, there he was, curled in a ball on the floor against the wall, staring at Tony with bright eyes that gleamed amongst the sunken remains of a once handsome face.

Tony must really have been going mad after all, because there couldn't be any other explanation for why he was seeing Loki of Asgard in his cell.

To be cut and plated

Okay, so there was a slight chance that Tony was hallucinating.

Slight.

He had no idea why his brain might conjure up the image of *Loki* of all people, but hey. Who was he to question his internal coping mechanisms? They'd managed to get him this far.

If he thought about it though, there were a few more things that countered the hallucination theory. The fact that *Loki* looked just as solidly hazy as everything else in the room, for example, was big one, since Tony's past experiences with hallucinations usually had them either way too solid, like an actor against a green screen, or way too blurred, like a meme that had been recopied on the internet far too many times. But no, *Loki* was blending in perfectly with everything else— insofar as a Norse god was capable of blending in with a starkly white wall, anyway.

He also looked quite different from the last time Tony had seen him. Sure, when *Loki* had invaded New York he'd hardly been a picture of health; his hair had been a mess but not necessarily from lack of effort, and his eyes had been wild but overlaid with a sheen of blankness, like they were constantly focused on something no one else could see. Now, though, his eyes seemed the most alive part of his body, shining green and the only bright thing about him while his hair was grubby and unkempt, even more so than before. He wore the same rags as Tony, and they hung from his frame far too loosely. His skin was too pale, and the little Tony could see of his cheeks was enough to know that they were hollowed. Most of his face was covered by the silver-grey muzzle Thor had angrily strapped on him in annoyance, months and months ago when the Avengers had caught him in Tony's Tower.

Had it even been taken off at all?

How was *Loki* eating?

As Tony passed his gaze over *Loki*'s emaciated frame once more, he was struck by a single, horrible thought.

What if he *wasn't*?

What does it matter? Tony asked himself. *How many people did he kill that day?*

But he couldn't even convince himself to think that *Loki* deserved it. Tony had lived this, and he knew that no one, not even a monster like *Loki*, deserved to be in such a place.

Still, even if his fate wasn't deserved, Tony found it difficult to muster up any sympathy.

Loki had thrown him from that window, after all, and if JARVIS hadn't piloted the suit and caught him, carrying him bridal style to be 'hidden somewhere safe' so that Iron Man could

join the fight, then Tony would be nothing more than a splatter on the sidewalk. No, he couldn't feel sympathy for Loki after that, and certainly not after the wormhole.

Not after he'd seen the names of the dead on the memorial in Central Park.

But, yeah. Tony knew it was unlikely that he would have hallucinated anything quite like the sight before him. So maybe Loki actually *was* there, but of course, that begged the next obvious question.

Why?

As much as Tony's mind immediately jumped to the idea that maybe Loki was working with the terrorists, the thought was quickly dismissed. Even if it was possible that the god's horrifying state was an illusion, something to prey on Tony's more heroic sensibilities (ha), Tony doubted that it was the truth. After all, Tony hadn't known him for long, but it had certainly been long enough to know that while he was an utter bastard, he thought far too highly of himself and too lowly of humans to want to align with vermin like the Ten Rings. Even an insane god with terrible fashion sense had to have some level of class.

By now, Loki was frowning again, and although he otherwise hadn't moved at all, Tony was getting seriously hostile vibes.

Maybe the Ten Rings had thrown them together in the hopes that he and Loki would torture each other, do their job for them. Actually, yeah, that seemed like the most probable reason. (Score one for Tony, working it out despite a likely concussion. Still a genius.) But if that was the case, then it still didn't explain why Loki wasn't locked up in a cell on Asgard.

Well, he supposed that there was one way he could find out.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Tony asked oh so eloquently, his voice hoarse but no less demanding as it cracked through the silence of the room. It was the first thing other than 'no' that he had said in days.

Slowly, Loki raised his hands from where they had been hidden behind his knees, the rune-etched manacles at his wrists jangling with the movement. His meaning was as clear as his glare.

"Yeah, I worked out that you're a—" Tony paused as a cough forced its way up. Loki watched, bored, as Tony wiped away the blood with his sleeve. "That you're a prisoner," Tony finished, forcing the words from his damaged throat. "I meant, why are you *here*?" He swallowed, trying in vain to wet his heavy tongue. "Thor said you were in Asgard."

This time, Loki tilted up his chin, the muzzle glinting in the bright lights of the cell— the cell which Tony had by now realised was not his own at all. Loki's cell was larger than Tony's by several yards but was completely bare, with not even a pot in the corner. Everything else remained the same- not that it would be difficult to replicate a pure white cell. Who knew how long Loki had been here, wasting away under perpetual fluorescent light, before they had thrown Tony in with him?

Refocusing, Tony realised that Loki's gesture had not been meant to direct Tony's attention to the muzzle as an indication of why he could not answer, but instead had been meant as condescension, his eyes now narrowed suspiciously.

Oh.

Yeah, Tony guessed he wasn't the only one holding a grudge. The last time Loki saw him, Tony was threatening him in his penthouse. And then Tony's 'employee' was one of the people who helped put him in here in the first place.

Surely New York must be linked to Loki's current predicament. Tony just needed to find out how.

"In case it isn't obvious, I'm just as much a prisoner as you are," Tony told him as he moved to occupy a space against the opposite wall. In the back of his mind, he almost wished that he could throw himself down on the ground with a dramatic huff, but the surface was hard and his body was sore. He needed to keep himself intact as much as possible if he was going to have any hope of working around the cameras and the goons to find his suit and make his own way out of the place when the Ten Rings finally lowered their guard.

Or, *maybe* Steve would come first. But Tony wasn't going to hold his breath.

He didn't care, though, that his movement put his back to the god. What could Loki do in that moment that would be worse than what he was already suffering?

"I would never work with them," Tony said as he settled. "Guess we're just going to be roommates for a while."

Loki didn't seem convinced.

Whatever. Tony didn't trust him either.



When their jailors came a few hours later, they placed a bucket in the corner - which, admittedly, was a rather welcome sight - and threw measly plate of food on the floor before Tony. The paper plate landed with a thump against the cold white floor, and a single piece of dried apple slipped off the edge. Tony snatched it up immediately, shoving it into his mouth before it could be taken away.

As he chewed, Tony noticed that the two brutes eyed Loki warily, and he wondered what the god had done to them in the past. He imagined it must have been rather good. Shame he'd missed it, really.

Loki, though, hardly took any notice of them. His eyes were locked on Tony's plate, staring with the desperation of- well, Tony supposed, Loki probably *was* starving. Despite his own hunger, Tony waited, and didn't touch anything else until the men were out of the room.

"Is there any way you could eat some of this?" he asked after the door swung shut, reluctantly offering his flimsy plate.

Loki immediately jerked his gaze away, staring instead at the wall to Tony's right, clearly not willing to accept any form of olive branch no matter how innocently meant.

Well, all right then.

Tony tried to eat the rest of the food slowly, careful of both his split lip and his tender stomach. He noticed that not only had they given him the dried piece of apple – probably to stop him from getting scurvy or something – they'd also given him about twice as much bread than normal, and hidden underneath was a dry and cracked piece of cheese. It was awful, really, but after so long of hardly anything it felt like a feast. Even so, and despite his care, it was gone far too quickly.

Feeling strangely bloated even from the tiny fare, Tony frisbeed the plate toward the door, and threw his head back against the wall, closing his eyes. The brightness remained burned against the inside of his eyelids, but he was somewhat used to it, and fell asleep quickly.

—•—

Tony was in the Ten Rings' workshop again, and he was building a Jericho. He'd given in but he hadn't given up. The Avengers would come for him.

Just as he had the thought, the door to the workshop slammed open and Steve ran in, resplendent in his pristine Captain America uniform, the shield gleaming bright red and white in the ever-present fluorescents.

“Come on Iron Man, we have to go!”

But Tony couldn't, he was strapped down to the hard bed. The restraints dug into his wrists as he struggled, trying to make it to his teammate. Steve was running, getting further and further away, still shouting for Tony to hurry—

And then there were hands grasping at Steve's arms, his head, his hair, shoving that kind face under the water again and again and—

'Cease this screaming, Stark!'

Was *that* Steve? No, Steve wouldn't call him Stark, Steve didn't *know*, Steve would never—

“Why would we rescue you, Tony?” asked Natasha, her voice sharp and piercing. “You're not even an Avenger.”

No, Tony wanted to say, but the words were stuck in his throat. *No, I am, you don't know, I am, I'm on the team!*

“How could you be?” Clint asked, his hair dripping wet, his skin pale and waxy. “This is your fault, Tony. You're the reason we're all here. You're the reason we all got caught!”

No!

'Norns, Stark, wake up!'

A sharp sting to his cheek had Tony's eyes snapping open, and his wild gaze came to rest on Loki. The god was leaning over him, his dark hair framing wide eyes, their faces far too close together. One freezing hand was resting on Tony's shoulder, slipping past the loose rags and pressing against the bare skin near the base of his neck.

He must have poor circulation, Tony thought, his mind wheeling as he tried to focus. His breaths came in heavy pants, shallow and deep and rasping all at the same time.

'You are fine, Stark,' Loki said, his eyes bright and worried above his muzzle, no doubt a carefully sculpted expression rather than anything based upon true concern.

"Fine," Tony laughed bitterly, maybe a little hysterically. "Yeah," he gasped. "Guess it could be worse."

Loki didn't laugh. *'Breathe, Stark. Follow me.'*

He felt like a little kid, but he did as he was told. He matched his breaths to Loki's, in and out, in and out. As his breathing slowed, he gained enough brainpower to remember his usual go to. So, with Loki right in front of him, he began to make a list, streamlining his focus into something more solid.

No shoes, same as Tony. Probably to stop them from running. Thin cotton pants, grey. Far too short. Raggedy shirt, black. Way too big, or maybe it would have fit him, before. Muzzle, grey.

'That's it,' Loki murmured. He said something else as well, honeyed falsehoods masquerading as comfort, but Tony was hardly listening, his gaze still caught on Loki's muzzle. The god's lips were held together, his mouth could not move. So how on Earth was he...

Then Tony nearly jerked a full foot into the air as he realised that Loki's voice was not being spoken aloud at all, but was actually echoing through his mind.

"Jesus!" Tony exclaimed, jerking away and shoving Loki's hand off his shoulder, still a little hysterical— not that realising Loki was in his head was going to have helped that any. "What did you— *no*, don't touch me!" He flinched away as Loki reached out once more.

The pale, too-thin hand paused in the air, trembling slightly. Loki's eyes were suddenly blank, and then he seemed to fold in on himself, curling up into his usual ball and leaning back against the wall right by Tony's left side. Tony stared, wondering why Loki hadn't got the hint, why he hadn't gone back over to his own side of the room. Loki hadn't moved from that one, single spot in the whole time since Tony had joined him. It only took a moment of watching the slow breathing, the tremors that seemed to have nothing to do with his emotions, and the dark bruises below his eyes to work out the truth.

Loki was simply exhausted.

Frowning, Tony realised that Loki must have crawled across the room, using energy that he did not have to help pull Tony from his nightmare. That was...

Well. Tony wasn't entirely sure what that was.

Loki's gaze snapped back to Tony, his brows furrowing in an expression that might as well have been a snarled *what?*

"Sorry," Tony muttered, the word falling from his lips before he had the chance to stop it. "I get that you were only trying to help."

Slowly, almost gingerly, Loki reached out with his hand, pausing just shy of Tony with a question written all over his face.

And Tony... still wasn't *sure*. He didn't trust Loki, not by a long stretch, but they were stuck together for the foreseeable future, and, well. Having someone to talk to surely couldn't hurt.

If Loki got inside his mind and turned him mad, then it would only be a fast track toward what would probably have happened in complete isolation, anyway.

Taking a deep breath, Tony reached out and touched only the very tips his fingers to Loki's.

'I am not reading your mind, nor trying to control you, Stark,' Loki said. Despite the exasperated tone, it almost came across as some kind of twisted apology. Probably the closest he'd get from Loki, anyway. *'Please do not pull away again. If I am to squander energy communicating with you, then I would not have my efforts wasted upon your whining.'*

It was easier, this time, to distinguish where it was coming from. Loki was right, it didn't feel like an intrusion—more like the words were pressing against the inside of his skull, a whisper more than an echo, like the connection was weak. The voice didn't sound exactly like Loki's, but it was very, very close. Just slightly deeper, maybe, a little more scratchy than Tony remembered, lacking that undertone that just begged to be listened to. Somehow, it sounded more honest.

That, of course, just put Tony more on edge.

"I thought those handcuffs stopped you from—"

'It is not magic,' Loki snapped, cutting Tony off. *'Not by the definition these cuffs would recognise, anyway. It is mere thought projection. Anyone is capable of mastering it with enough training. And do be careful about what you say, I do not wish for those meatheads to return in suspicion.'*

Tony arched a wry eyebrow, half curious, half disbelieving. "Anyone?"

'Yes, Stark, even a useless mortal such as yourself.'

"Hey, watch it."

'For now, though, I would be able to hear your own words without fear of eavesdroppers if you would permit me to—'

"Yeah, no, I don't think I like where that's going."

‘Suit yourself.’

There was a pause where Tony considered pulling his hand away, but then Loki spoke again.

‘Why are you here, Stark? Did they take you from your Tower?’

Tony shook his head, knowing he really shouldn’t answer that. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

‘Why not? You will not find a better candidate for conversation in here.’

“All right then, so tell me why *you’re* here,” Tony snapped, going on the offensive. “You didn’t answer me before, either. Why aren’t you in Asgard?”

It was Loki who removed his hand at that, curling up once more and leaning back against the wall. For a moment, Tony considered moving himself, going to what had been Loki’s wall before the nightmare and putting the expanse of the room between them once more. But he decided against it. Despite the company, he was somewhat settled, and didn’t fancy moving.

Side by side, they fell asleep— neither were comfortable there, but neither were they particularly restless. At least no more so than they would have been otherwise.



Tony was woken some time later by the door again, the sound of it not too different from that of his own cell that it still provoked his flight or fight response.

It was only because the instinctive fear made him hyperaware that he realised the paper plate had disappeared from the floor.

Only one man entered. It wasn’t one of Tony’s usual torturers— it was one of the men from all the way back at the beginning, the one who knew more English than the others, the one who seemed to be the leader. He was staring down at Tony like he was something to be eaten, a meal that had been slaved over for hours and was just now beginning to cool enough to be cut and plated.

He clearly believed Tony had broken, despite his small act of defiance in the workshop.

Unlike any of the others, this man didn’t even look in Loki’s direction. And, well, Loki hadn’t moved— Tony might have thought he was still asleep, if not for the beady green eyes following every shift in the room. Still, the man didn’t spare him a glance, keeping his focus entirely on Tony as his fingers shifted against the sides of the large bucket in his hands, causing the water to slop over the edges.

Tony shirked away even as he licked his lips, his body simultaneously aching for the required H₂O and cowering from the associations of pain.

Loki’s eyes flickered to Tony for a moment before coming to rest back on the man with a glare, and Tony tried to force down some of the fear as he remembered what Loki had called them.

The meathead smiled viciously at Tony's discomfort.

"Two options," he said, his grin so wide that Tony probably could have been able to guess what he'd eaten for lunch from the flecks in his yellow teeth if he had cared enough to look. "You build for us, you get wet. Choose."

Despite the tremors running down his spine, Tony tilted up his chin and stared in defiance. "I've been wet before."

"Wrong choice."

Tony knew it was coming, but he was not prepared as the warm water crashed over his head and gushed down over his body. His muscles convulsed as he pressed back against the wall, trying to escape the water that saturated his clothes and dripped down through his hair.

'Stark.'

In his struggles it seemed he had moved closer to Loki, or maybe Loki had managed to move closer to him. Tony's arms had wrapped tightly around his middle seemingly of their own volition, his hands gripping his shirt tightly at his sides, and Loki had been able to reach over without stretching to place his hand on Tony's wrist. Tony stared at him, not quite comprehending.

'The water is gone. Breathe.' As he spoke, Loki tightened his grip— weaker than he should have been capable of, but tightly and suddenly enough that it startled Tony into taking a breath.

It seemed that he had been holding it instinctively.

Focus, Tony.

No shoes. Grey pants. Black shirt. Grey Muzzle.

Oh, that muzzle, evidence of how Tony played a part in bringing another person into this, it was his fault, it was—

'Come on. In and out. Slow.'

Loki's breathing was slower than it had been before, like maybe he was doing it on purpose.

One. Two. Three. Four. In.

One. Two. Three. Four. Out.

No shoes. Grey pants. Black shirt. Green eyes.

'There we go. Okay Stark, you must focus now. He is still here.'

Meathead's gaze was resting on Loki's hand, a line drawing tight between his brows. But as soon as Tony noticed it the expression cleared, and he barked an order at the camera. Two

more men immediately came into the room— one with a gun, and the other was the skinny translator. The leader spoke in quick words, the language rolling from his tongue too fast for Tony to try and recognise it. The translator nodded quickly.

“He wishes you to know that your friends made the wrong choice, too,” said the translator, his eyes landing on Tony only for a moment before skating away. “He wants to show you. He thinks that it will make you break.”

Tony’s heart froze in his chest.

It was just too much, all at once. He’d just calmed down and now—

Were Steve and Clint captives too, maybe waiting for Iron Man just as he was waiting for them? Were they being tortured, forced into submission? Tony felt his guilt rear up, tossing back and forth and making him feel *sick*. He’d forgotten about them, about how they could be just down the corridor. He’d had a reason, a purpose that he still needed to stick to. But it didn’t make him feel any better.

Tony wanted to ask, to demand to know what they meant.

Instead, he focused on Loki’s slow breathing and he said, “It won’t.”

Meathead laughed and replied, his answer echoed by the translator. “You’ll see.”

Tony tightened his fists against his sides as Meathead pulled out a tablet, holding it so that Tony could see the screen. The video started immediately and Tony didn’t want to watch, but found he couldn’t help it.

The scene was familiar, though Tony didn’t remember the exact moment. It must have been after he was knocked out, after they had tricked him with holographic hostages. It was some kind of fixed camera, probably placed on the fucking antenna which had dragged them out to the desert in the middle of Afghanistan in the first place. There was no sound on the video, but it was of high enough quality that Tony could see their lips moving, could see himself and his amour held at gunpoint, and he could guess at the nature of the conversation.

He nearly held his breath again, easily recognising what was going on and already knowing the result. It was only the hand still gripping his wrist that grounded him, kept him steady and present in the now.

On the video, the panic on Steve’s face was clear as he glanced between Tony and his suit. He looked to Clint for a moment, panicked, but when he turned back to the group of terrorists, he looked *sure*.

Then, Meathead clicked a button on the side of the tablet, and Steve’s voice rang through the cell.

“I choose Iron Man.”

Tony felt *sick*.

Oh, he tried to stay positive. After that, the video showed Steve and Clint leaving, getting on the quinjet, flying away. That meant that they were not here after all, that they were still alive. They weren't captive, they weren't being tortured. They were probably back in New York.

Safe.

Tony was surprised by how bitter that word sounded.

It also meant that the Mark XLI was back home, too. He would have to come up with another plan.

"They left you, Stark," said the translator, still speaking Meathead's words with far less bite than the man himself. "They chose the hero over the man. Why continue to fight to keep them safe? They do not care for you, Stark. Your only hope of getting out of this is cooperation."

The grip on his wrist tightened.

'They may have chosen their teammate, but it is understandable why they did,' Loki told him, almost sounding desperate. *'With another member of the team, they will be stronger. They will come for you, still.'*

I know, Tony thought, for his own benefit rather than out of any misguided hope that Loki might hear it. Despite the fact that Loki's logic was founded on a lie, he needed to convince himself that they would still come. Surely they were trying to find him. Even if Steve had chosen the empty suit over him, even if Steve thought he'd saved his friend, surely he would still come back?

He couldn't hold their decision against them. Could he? Steve and Clint didn't know the truth, and they thought they were choosing between a friend and the person who paid their bills. Really, there was no choice.

But still, it hurt, *because* they hadn't known that Tony and Iron Man were one and the same. Steve chose to save what he believed to be a hardened warrior, a person who signed up to fight, over a civilian? Really? The Steve Tony knew wouldn't do that, and that just meant that he disliked Tony himself so much that he was willing to subvert his own honourable beliefs to take home the other person, the person who had volunteered for the job but *was not Tony*.

From the grin on their faces, it was clear that his captors expected this to break him. He tried to focus on the silver lining in that, but he thought it might be a bit close to the truth. Because it hurt, oh shit it hurt. How could Steve choose Iron Man over him?

The rational part of Tony's mind reminded him that it was his own fault, that if he'd told them all the truth none of this would have happened, that they would have known leaving Iron Man was the better option. He could have ordered the self-destruct sequence from afar, blown up the empty suit and left the terrorists with nothing. Instead, the Avengers had a fancy bit of tech with no pilot inside, and Tony was stuck in a living hell.

Stuck in a living hell, and entirely done with being rational. Steve had chosen the symbol over the man who had forged it from his own blood, sweat, and tears– and Tony was *fucking done*.

He lowered his head, not wanting to try and hold their gaze as he said his piece.

“All right,” he sighed, his voice low, barely more than a whisper. “Okay. I’ll do it. I’ll build you your weapon.”

Despite everything, Tony still felt ill as a vicious smile spread across Meathead’s lips.

Practically a walk in the park

They didn't drag him this time. Rather than the usual violence, Meathead merely made a gesture toward the door and let Tony move under his own steam. Tony stumbled and nearly lost his footing in the first few steps, but he was glad that he wasn't being pushed and shoved.

Another perk of cooperation, he supposed.

Just before he left, he caught sight of his erstwhile companion. Loki's eyes were vicious acid, burning with fire and rage, a fury that made it clear just exactly why the Vikings saw him as someone to be feared.

Tony shuddered.

Maybe they'd put him back in the other cell now that he'd given in. He didn't really want to have to deal with the fallout from *that* later on.

During the short walk, he thought about the implications of all that had happened in the past few hours. Loki being held captive was a difficulty he hadn't foreseen, but at the same time it was starting to look like Loki wasn't actually going to be too much of a problem. He probably wouldn't get in the way, at least, as long as Tony could somehow explain that he hadn't actually given in.

He also now knew for sure that the others weren't captive, and that the suit was not in the building, so he couldn't rely on finding it for his escape. That was okay, he hadn't had the suit the last time. He'd be able to manage. He had to.

The workshop was just as it had been the day before, with heavy metal benches and light plastic seats. And the walls, of course, were white. Honestly, they must have bought the local hardware store out of white paint the day they decorated this place.

Well, at least it wasn't beige. Ugh.

The numerous benches were strewn with old Stark weapons – a sight that made Tony's blood boil, but at least there was nothing newer than what he had decommissioned – and a variety of what looked like it might be HammerTech. Joy. There were tools, enough of a variety that they should cover most jobs, though there wasn't anything fancy. All in all, Tony was being presented with everything he would need to build a bomb big enough to escape, but Tony had a feeling that wasn't what they would have in mind.

They probably wanted something like—

“Iron Man,” said the leader, his dark eyes shining with greed. “You build Iron Man.”

Okay. So this was simultaneously better and worse than Tony thought it was going to be. He was hoping for another Jericho maybe, or something else explosive that he could work to his

advantage. But then, he'd assumed that they had the Mark XLI, that they would be able to copy that and ask something else of him.

He supposed he should have known better than that.

They'd played their games with Steve to ensure that they had a backup plan to break Tony's spirit, and now that they had him, they wanted to use him to make Iron Man suits of their own. They didn't need the Mark XLI when they were able to get their hands on the man who had created it.

If only Steve had realised the same thing.

"How long do I have?" Tony asked, drooping his shoulders and ensuring that he looked disheartened. Which, you know, wasn't exactly hard.

"It must be done in three weeks, or sooner," the translator answered.

That meant they wanted to see fast progress, which would be difficult if he was trying to keep something else under wraps.

"I don't have the right materials here," Tony tried, hoping to gain a bit more time.

The translator turned to Meathead and presumably repeated Tony's statement. When Meathead replied, the translator paled, and they went back and forth a couple more times before he turned back with his answer.

"He knows you made the first Iron Man prototype in a worse place than this," the translator said with an apologetic twist to his lips.

"There is no place worse than this," Tony muttered under his breath, and the translator winced in shared sympathy.

Meathead frowned, and spoke again.

"He says that you will make do with what you have, and that they will only get you more materials once you have made them a suit with what is here to prove yourself."

Right, of course. They knew he couldn't create something equal to Iron Man with scraps, not when the suit had been made with top of the line technology and the best material that money, influence, and a reputation like Tony's could procure. But he would have to prove himself and give them *something* in order for them to trust him enough with more advanced parts.

He was going to have to play the long game.

"All right," he sighed. "Come on, then. Let's get started."

Meathead and his goons stayed and watched for a while, but quickly became bored when all Tony did was begin to take catalogue of everything he had at his disposal, and left him with only the translator for company. Again, the situation was far too familiar for comfort, but there was nothing to do but toughen up and bear it. At least this one was younger, late twenties, maybe, and looked nothing like Yinsen with his short blonde hair and hazel eyes. Tony couldn't quite pick the exact accent in his spoken English, though it sounded Eastern European.

"So I'm guessing you're here to keep an eye on me?" Tony asked as he worked, taking note of the number of missiles spread across the table. It was a nice amount of explosive material—not quite as much as he would have liked, but certainly *enough*. Most of the metal they'd left for him was low-grade, not something he'd choose to use in a suit. But the stuff from the missiles themselves, while hardly gold titanium alloy, would do for what he needed.

"I'm to report back on your progress," the translator agreed.

"But you don't seem like one of them."

The smile that flickered across the translator's face was fleeting and quick, but Tony thought it might have been pleased.

"No," he agreed. "I am not."

"So why are you here, then?" Tony asked, almost absentmindedly. His mind was already whirring, fitting pieces together like a jigsaw, puzzling out what else he'd need and how he could work around what he didn't have.

"I'm a journalist," the translator replied. "I got a bit too close for their liking. Thankfully, they found me useful, and decided to keep me alive. They speak a lot of different languages here, but I can manage more than half of them."

"Then you'll be able to be my extra pair of hands." Tony's thoughts, already focused on solving the problem of getting out, jumped on the opportunity. "I think we'll get along well." Pausing from his catalogue for a moment, he reached across the bench he had been pawing through and offered his hand. "You can call me Tony."

The translator smiled, and accepted Tony's handshake. "Ivan."



When Tony was taken back to the cell after several hours' work, Loki was still exactly where he had been before. Tony paused in the entrance even as the door closed behind him, contemplating. Did he move to the side of the room he had occupied the entire night and sit next to Loki, or did he put the space between them and sit on the other side of the cell?

The cold and hostile expression Loki was sporting made the latter option seem more attractive, but he didn't particularly fancy sitting all by himself either, not after being alone for who knows how long.

But before he could decide Loki's hand flicked out, and Tony wasn't able to catch the object flung into his direction before it had smacked against the side of his head. He blinked, just shocked rather than hurt, and glanced down in confusion to see what it was.

It was Tony's paper plate from the night before.

"What the hell?" Tony said, glaring. He kicked the plate as he passed, decision made.

Except... Loki was only acting this way because he thought Tony had given in, was going to do the Ten Rings' bidding. If they were going to be stuck together, then it was probably best that they didn't let any misunderstandings fester. So, deciding for once to be *mature* about these things, he paused in the middle of the cell and turned back to Loki.

"Look," said Tony, but he stopped before saying anything else. He couldn't explain his plans to Loki, because the camera above the door would no doubt hear every word. So, while it probably wasn't the smartest move he'd made in his life, he still sat down on the other man's right and held out his hand.

A peace offering.

Loki turned away, and although the angle of his gaze only slightly changed, the action was so purposefully dismissive that Tony almost rolled his eyes.

Fine, if Loki didn't want to talk, then Tony didn't see the point of making the effort.

Maybe Tony had just grown complacent from Loki's show of helpfulness the night before, which probably hadn't been done out of kindness, anyway. Maybe Loki had just been frustrated with Tony's screaming and had wanted a more peaceful rest. Maybe he had only been looking for some entertainment, a break from the monotony of the blinding white cell.

Loki, after all, didn't get taken out of his cell at unpredictable intervals to be drowned several times a day. Loki wasn't being forced to build things against his will.

Compared to what Tony was being forced to endure, Loki's stay here was practically a walk in the park.

Whatever. If Loki didn't want to talk, then fine. Tony needed the sleep, anyway.

—•—

When food next came, it was very similar fare to the plate he had received the night before, complete with a glass of water. Once the paper plate was placed in front of Tony, the torturer turned to Loki, his expression blank. The man didn't say anything, and he didn't give any indication of what he wanted— but he was clearly after *something*.

Loki merely stared directly at the white wall on the other side of the cell, his expression blank.

The torturer shrugged, turned, and left the cell, closing the door behind him with a sharp bang. The sound echoed between the walls for a few seconds after, and it was only when it

had dissipated entirely that Tony steeled himself to speak.

“I could probably get that off, if you want,” he said, his voice sounding loud in the remaining silence. Loki glanced at him from the corner of his eye, clearly still annoyed but curious – or maybe bored – enough to want to know what he was talking about. “The muzzle,” Tony clarified. “I could get it off. You could eat something. *Drink* something.”

It seemed that was enough to satiate Loki’s interest. He turned back to the wall.

“I mean it,” Tony tried again, shifting closer. “It wouldn’t hurt, I don’t think. And you look like you’re wasting away.”

He shouldn’t have done it, but Tony couldn’t resist reaching out to lightly touch Loki’s shoulder. Maybe it was just that it had been so long since someone had tried to touch him without the intention of inflicting pain, or maybe it was just a surprise. Besides, Loki wasn’t exactly *happy* with Tony, so it was understandable that he would flinch from his hand– but that he actually scurried backward, his back grating against the wall, his arms struggling to hold his weight... well, that indicated something that went a lot deeper than mere surprise.

And then Tony noticed that when Loki had jerked away, he didn’t just look angry. He looked *scared*.

What on Earth had the bastards managed to do that was capable of making a god look like that?

Tony raised his hands in the universal sign of surrender.

“Okay, okay,” he said, keeping his voice calm. “It’s okay. I won’t take it off.”

Loki didn’t relax entirely, but he did settle back down against the wall, eyeing Tony warily.

“I’m sorry,” Tony said. “I didn’t mean to make you jump or anything. I just... thought I could help.”

There wasn’t a response, but just as that meant Loki wasn’t telling him to keep going, Tony wasn’t being told to stop, either. So, on he went.

“You don’t like me,” Tony continued. “I get that. I get that I’m probably part of the reason why you’re in here, and after what you did I’m not going to apologise for that. But there’s not a whole lot in this place to hold on to, and maybe I’m being optimistic, but I don’t think we should be fighting each other when the most we can do right now is just try to survive. We don’t have to be alone in here, if we don’t want to be. Not anymore. So... what do you say?”

This time, when Tony held out his hand, Loki allowed him to place it atop his own. Tony thought that Loki had probably appreciated the honesty just as much as the sentiment in Tony’s words.

‘I cannot remove the muzzle, and I cannot allow you to do so either,’ Loki said immediately, though not harshly. *‘No matter how much I wish it gone.’*

“Why not?” Tony asked. Loki didn’t push Tony’s hand away, but he seemed to close off a little, so Tony changed tactics. “I meant what I said, I won’t try to take it off if you don’t want me to. But... Surely there’s something I can do, though?”

‘If you wish to help me, Stark,’ Loki said, his tone dry like he was expecting Tony to want to do anything but, *‘then you’ll distract my mind. I feel like I am going mad, stuck in here with nothing to do.’* The corners of his eyes crinkled, and Tony thought that if it weren’t for the muzzle, he would be smirking. *‘Even more so than before, I mean.’*

“All right.” Tony shrugged. “What do you want to talk about?”

‘You did not tell me why you were here,’ Loki tried.

“Neither did you, and you know I still want to ask.” Tony rolled his eyes. “For once, stop trying to make things difficult, will you? Let’s just talk.”

Loki frowned. *‘About what?’*

“Normal stuff I guess.” Tony shifted a bit on the concrete, so that he didn’t have to stretch so far to keep skin contact. Loki’s gaze followed his movement but he didn’t really seem to be seeing it – his frown deepened as he considered what Tony thought was a pretty simple proposal. Then again, Loki probably hadn’t just talked to anyone in a really long time. “I mean, I know hardly anything about you,” Tony said, trying to bring it back to something simple. His lips quirked as he had a thought. “Hey, let’s play a game. I ask you a question, then you ask me one. We’ll take turns, be honest.”

‘What sort of questions?’ Loki asked, clearly still not convinced.

“Well...” Tony smiled. “What’s your favourite colour?”

Loki stared at him for a moment. *‘What?’*

“You said you wanted to talk. Now, come on. Favourite colour.” Tony nudged Loki’s shoulder lightly with his own, sitting close enough now that it didn’t take much effort to do so. “Wait, don’t tell me. Green.”

There was another moment where Tony thought he wasn’t going to get an answer at all, but then—

‘Blue,’ Loki said. *‘I’ve always... yes, my favourite colour is blue.’*

“Really?” Tony asked, surprised. “Well, my favourite is red.”

‘I could have predicted that,’ Loki replied.

“I’m not gonna lie. I thought green was going to be winner there.”

‘Green is my colour,’ Loki explained. *‘It is mine, just as Thor and you have red.’*

“Oh, like a symbol, or an emblem?”

‘Yes.’

“Okay,” Tony said, eyes narrowing, mind whirring. “So who wears blue?”

Loki shook his head, though rather than closing off, his brow crinkled with amusement. *‘I believe it is my turn to ask the question.’*

Oh, that sneaky bastard.

“Fine. Go on then,” he said. But the spark that entered Loki’s eye was enough to put Tony on edge, and he added, “But stay away from the hard questions, okay? Keep it light.”

‘All right,’ Loki said, the spark that entered his eye just enough to put Tony on edge. *‘Then tell me, Stark. Why did you invite the Avengers to stay in your home after the battle?’*

“What did I *just* say about hard questions?” Tony complained. “Ask me how I take my coffee or something.”

‘Such trivial matters are hardly conducive to getting to know you,’ said Loki. *‘And I thought that was the purpose of all this?’*

“You’re an asshole.”

‘Yes,’ Loki agreed. *‘The game must be working. So, your answer?’*

Tony sighed. The answer itself wasn’t anything that wasn’t already public knowledge. Everyone knew that Tony helped to fund the Avengers just so that he could keep up SI’s good public image, and that he allowed the Avengers to live with him because it made things easier for Iron Man to work his two jobs.

But of course, all of that blatantly untrue, and while Tony was perfectly happy lying to the media, he didn’t think that lying to the god of lies, to whom Tony had only *just* promised honesty, was a good idea by any stretch. He didn’t know exactly what Loki’s title encompassed, whether it was just because Loki was good at lying himself or whether the god had a gift for picking them out. So—

“They’re my friends,” Tony said instead. “At least... I thought they were.”

‘I do not believe they have abandoned you, Stark,’ Loki replied, sounding oddly comforting. *‘They likely just cannot find you.’*

Tony frowned, catching on to something more in the words than what lay on the surface. “You know something.”

‘So do you,’ Loki replied. *‘You just have yet to notice what it means.’*

“Okay, look,” said Tony. “I’m happy to chat but if you’re just going to be dishing out cryptic shit—“

'Stark,' Loki interrupted. *'It is your turn to ask a question. You may be as cryptic as you wish.'*

"Ha, yeah, right. Okay." Tony was tempted to ask why Loki had helped him with his nightmare, but decided to stick to his own rules, and go with something a bit easier and less likely to shut Loki down again. "What did you like to do with your spare time, up on Asgard? Before all this mess."

'You want to know... what I did for fun?'

"Yeah, exactly. I don't know, did you practice fighting, or go out drinking, or what?"

'But... do you not wish to know of Asgard itself?' Loki's brow furrowed. *'I can tell you of the city if you wish, of its golden spires and shining skies—'*

"That's not what I asked," Tony said, matching Loki's frown. "I told you, I want to know more about *you*. But if you want to talk about your home, then sure, go ahead."

'Asgard is hardly my home.' The words should have been sad, but Loki looked like he was too shocked for sadness. He tilted his head. *'Well, I... I liked to study.'*

"You what?" It wasn't exactly what Tony had been expecting. From what he'd gathered from Thor, Asgardian pastimes mostly involved drinking, hunting beasts that were way too big to exist outside of nightmares, and hitting each other with either sharp or very heavy instruments of warfare.

'The library was one of the quieter places I could retreat to,' Loki said, his voice taking on a touch of reminiscence, now. *'It was nice to be able to get away from the responsibilities for a while, from the noise of the palace. I liked to spend time there to learn, or to just read for enjoyment. It was as useful an escape as it was to hone my skill. My mother also has a secluded garden than often remains free from outside visitors. She and I used to go there to practice working our seiðr.'*

"So your mother taught you magic?" Tony asked curiously.

'Yes,' Loki said. *'Initially, anyway. She is very talented, and even since I surpassed her in power and technique she remains my first call if ever I need advice.'*

"She sounds pretty amazing."

'She is,' Loki agreed wistfully. But then his expression cleared, and he gave Tony a wry look. *'If you wish to hear more about her, however, you shall have to wait. I believe it is certainly my turn.'*

"Fine," Tony sighed. "Go for it."

'There is something that I have been wondering,' Loki said. *'When we first met, you approached me with nothing to protect yourself, your bodyguard a long way off. You, a mere human, approached the god attacking your city and proceeded to threaten him.'*

“And?” Tony asked, frowning in confusion. “What does this have to do with—“

‘I took you for a strong man, Tony Stark,’ Loki interrupted. *‘I took you for someone who would hold their ground and stand for what he believed in, regardless of the consequences. A man who would fight for what is right and for the safety of others above his own. And yet, here you are. You must know what Iron Man could do in the hands of these people, and the man who spoke to me atop Stark Tower is not the man who would allow such a thing to pass. Not when the only thing he would be saving by doing so is his own skin and bone.’*

Tony swallowed. “You’ve got a lot of words, Loki, but I’m not hearing a question.”

‘Why did you agree to their terms?’ Loki finally asked. *‘Why did you allow that video to break you when even torture could not?’*

“That’s not...” Tony paused, thinking hard. As much as he wanted to announce that he damn well hadn’t *broken*, at least not entirely, he was acutely aware of the camera hovering over the door, watching their every move. God knows what the watchers thought of their one-sided conversation, but they hadn’t done anything to stop it so far. Tony doubted they’d be as tolerant if he straight up said he was trying to subvert them by playing the long game. “Not everything is as it seems.”

Loki stared at him for a moment, understanding flashing across his expression immediately. *‘You still haven’t given up,’* he said, sounding relieved and— was that a touch of awe?

“Yeah, no shit,” Tony said, though internally he felt like everything else was being swept away by a wave of relief. It was a strange feeling, being seen.

He shook his head, trying to clear it. Why did it even matter so much? It was only *Loki*.

‘Your turn again,’ Loki said, seeming either oblivious or willing to ignore the mess happening in Tony’s mind. Maybe he was just as equally averse to the deep and meaningful discussions as Tony was.

“Fine,” Tony said, already with a question in mind. “Thor mentioned something briefly once that I think I need more information about.”

Loki groaned, an actual, out loud sound that rumbled from his throat. *‘Get on with it then,’* he sighed. *‘But if this about me being—’*

Cutting him off before Loki could use the ‘a’ word Tony suspected was going to come next, he said, “Nothing like that. I just want to hear the *whole* story behind Thor being oddly suspicious of snakes.”

The sudden spark in Loki’s eyes suggested that he would actually be grinning if he could, and Tony knew that they were on the right track to becoming... well. Allies, at the least. Tony still wouldn’t trust him as far as he could throw him, but that didn’t mean that they wouldn’t be able to work together.

After all, it's a bit difficult to think of someone as a monster once you've seen how much they miss their mom.

A simple loophole

Chapter Notes

First, I'd like to apologise- apparently I managed to confuse a few people by accidentally giving the translator the same first name as Ivan Vanko. I promise that's a coincidence, I didn't make the connection myself, ha. But oh well, if Marvel can have two Peters and two Jameses, surely I'm allowed to insert another Ivan.

Slowly, as the days began to pass enough that Tony no longer knew how long it had been since he had moved cells, he began to regain strength. And as the time progressed, things began to become a bit more routine, evening out and allowing Tony a little more respite.

He was brought food and water twice a day, always on a paper plate and always bland and horrible, but it was still welcome compared to the nothing that Loki received. And Loki always eyed the plate, but he refused every one of Tony's offers to try and take off the muzzle. It was confusing and a little concerning, because Tony knew that the muzzle was only connected by a clasp at the back. Loki was wearing manacles that held his hands together and would have made it impossible to reach behind his neck, but Tony could have done it easily. And even if Tony hadn't seen Loki's terror when he'd first offered to remove it, Tony knew it was unlikely Loki would refuse the help merely out of pride or spite.

That meant that Loki knew what the consequence of taking it off would be, and it was bad enough that even he was afraid to face it.

Yeah. It was more than only a little concerning, and even with everything else that Tony was trying to keep track of – surprisingly quite a lot, considering he was a prisoner – it was something that stayed in the back of his mind, festering away and reminding him that maybe, just maybe, there might be something worse.

But then came the day when Tony finally woke up *excited*- the day that he was finally ready to take his first step.

Loki seemed to notice that something was up, his eyes skating over Tony's every move. But since Tony had been woken by the men coming in to get him, there was no time to attempt an explanation. So instead, just before he clambered to his feet, he let his fingers brush across Loki's fettered wrist.

The response he got should have been expected.

'Don't do anything stupid.'

“As if I would ever.”

The trip to the workshop was the same as it always was— short and uneventful. As he always did, Tony wondered about the size of their prison- he had seen nothing but this hallway, the workshop, the room with the barrel, and the two cells, but there must be more to it. He'd need to know, if he was going to have a chance at escape.

“Good morning, Ivan,” Tony greeted as he dusted himself off, his usual routine after being thrown unceremoniously into the workshop. “What’s today’s damage?”

“They say you need to show some kind of weapon by the end of the week,” Ivan said by way of greeting, his usual worry etched permanently across his expression.

“Some kind, huh?” Tony asked. “So I could just wave one of the hammers under their nose and call it a day? Seems to work for Thor.”

Ivan’s face twitched, and Tony found that he couldn’t tell whether it had been in fear or a repression of a smile at the joke. Then he simply shook his head, eyes worried. “They’re getting impatient.”

“That’s okay,” Tony sighed, moving to the bench he had been working at the day before. “I’m not far off.”

Not far off *something*, anyway.

The piece he and Ivan were currently working on was easily recognisable as a boot, and he’d already added in a certain amount of firepower for a very particular purpose.

The door on the workshop was similar to those on the cells— no visible handle or knob, fitting almost seamlessly with the wall and seemingly impossible to open from the inside. To make matters worse, Tony had heard the heavy click of the lock enough times to know that getting through was going to be no simple matter. Realistically, the only way through the door was going to be to explode it. That just meant he’d needed to devise a way to muster enough power to take down the door without arousing suspicion.

Hence, the boot.

Not nearly as pretty as Iron Man’s gold-titanium platforms, it was nonetheless close enough in shape that it hadn’t been questioned. And it wasn’t decked out with repulsor technology, of course it wasn’t, Tony didn’t have the tools for that even if he wanted to put one his most treasured inventions in the hands of these absolute assholes. Instead, it was fitted with something more along the lines of what Stane had used to fly, ugly and clunky and terribly bad for the environment, but workable nonetheless.

It wasn’t going to be enough to break down the door, Tony was rather sure of that. But it *was* going to make one hell of a bang- and that, at least, was a *start*.

“Hey Ivan?” Tony called, crossing two wires that really never should be crossed and making sure that a spark would occur exactly when Tony wanted it to. He finished the final connection right when Ivan appeared at his shoulder, curious. “I think this is ready for testing. What do you think?”

Ivan's expression brightened immediately, a far cry from his usual fearful winces. "It's ready?"

"Yeah," Tony replied, his lips curling into the beginnings of a determined smile. "I think so."

They had to be sneaky about this. Ivan, thankfully, was actually fairly intelligent, and was able to pick up on Tony's subtle cues well enough to work out the plan. They had already set up a 'testing area' just to the left of the door, with a large grid marked out with chalk. Since the largest open space in the room was between the door and the first set of benches, it made *sense* to put it there, and it had yet to arouse suspicion. Nor was there an alarm when Tony set the boot in the grid, ready to be tested.

He wasn't planning on getting out today. No, he didn't have the intel for that yet- didn't know the way out, or how big the place was, or how many goons there were. Well. In his time there, Tony had seen a total of five guys, including Meathead. Now that he'd had some decent (ish) sleep and some food, he thought he could take five guys, especially if he managed to make some kind of blaster, and *especially* when it was so very clear that they didn't want to kill him. Hell, they hadn't even properly harmed him during his torture- not physically, anyway.

They wanted Iron Man far too badly for that.

But surely there were more than five. They had captured Tony Stark, for fuck's sake, they had to be preparing for an incursion by the Avengers at the most- and even at the very least, an enthusiastic and devastating attack by War Machine, who despite having once been tainted with HammerTech was still very badass when he wanted to be. The Ten Rings might not be the smartest bunch, but they still weren't going to leave the place defended by just five dudes.

No, Tony wasn't ready to escape at all. But he *was* ready to test the defences.

Once the boot was set, Tony moved clear, his hand on the device's remote.

Ivan took several skittering steps back, ducking behind one of the heavy workbenches. And while Tony could understand that reaction, it was unnecessary. He was good at this, he knew exactly what he was doing.

Right on cue, the boot exploded. It was a beautiful thing, the jets on the sole channelling the blast directly at the door. Tony looked on calmly, his smile still in place as he watched the beginnings of a job well done. But then, rather than burning and denting as Tony expected it would, the door began to shimmer with orange light, catching the explosion from the boot and *absorbing* it.

"Oh," Tony said, a horrible feeling of realisation washing over him. "*Crap.*"

With a loud and bursting *whoosh*, all that energy exploded back outward. Tony went flying, crashing across the top of the bench behind him, smashing through deconstructed missiles and plates of badly wrought metal before hitting the ground behind it. His head cracked against the concrete, something hurling against the inside of his skull and sending an electric

crackle across his field of vision. His ears were ringing and there was a familiar taste on his tongue, sharp and metallic. It was comforting. He didn't know why.

The first indication he got of there being someone else in the room was the hands that grabbed at his arms and shoulders, pulling him out from under the bits of metal and tools that had fallen with him in the explosion.

Absently, he remembered Ivan.

Maybe the hands belonged to Ivan?

But as he was pulled upright he saw a wiry black beard and those yellow teeth that smelt even worse than they looked, and he realised that he must not have heard the door opening in the midst of all the *ringing*. There were too many hands on him to just be Ivan, and – yes, there Ivan was, standing scared and hunched over just behind Meathead.

Upright and mind slowly starting to clear, Tony did a quick inventory of his injuries. He seemed mostly all right- battered, bruised, probable concussion (fucking *again*) and the whole front side of his body felt a bit singed, but nowhere near as bad as it would have been had he faced the blast from the boot directly. It was like the exact same energy had been deflected, the concussive force remaining strong but the heat diminishing.

“Stark,” Meathead snarled, standing before Tony with his arms stiff by his sides, his hands clenched in fists. “What you try to do?”

“Just testing,” Tony said, though he could barely hear himself. If his words were slurred from whatever injury had been done on the inside of his mouth, there was no way of telling. “Needed... to see if it was working. Didn't expect the explosion.”

Meathead narrowed his eyes, and Tony shrugged- then promptly winced as the movement tugged at his abused back.

Right. Add grazed skin to the list.

“I have to test things to know they work,” Tony tried to explain. “I need to know if something needs adjustment. Otherwise, I can't build anything.”

“He's lying.”

Tony's gaze focused behind Meathead and on Ivan, his eyes widening as he took in the harrowing sight. The translator didn't look like was scared anymore, didn't look like he was speaking under duress. He didn't look like he was ashamed or even held any regret for his actions- hell, he didn't even look like he was only throwing Tony under the bus to save his own skin.

No.

Ivan was standing amongst the other goons in the room like he belonged there, like he was fucking one of them and *had been all along*—

“He’s planning on escaping,” Ivan continued, and Tony felt himself fall deeper into the dark shadow threatening to engulf him. How hadn’t he seen this? “I suggest you keep him under a heavier watch from now on.”

He said something else in another language, speaking fast and direct while Meathead listened intently. Because of course- Meathead didn’t speak English all that well, and he might not have entirely understood what Ivan had said the first time. But then... Had Ivan said the first bit just for Tony’s benefit? Just to ensure that Tony would know he had been betrayed?

Fucking *bastard*.

Tony clenched his teeth as Ivan finished talking, forcing back the pain. He hadn’t known Ivan for long, he shouldn’t have trusted him in the first place. He should have been more vigilant.

Well. That was a lesson well learned.

“You will not get out,” Meathead said slowly, his eyes glinting as he raised his fist toward Tony. “You should not try.”

Tony forced a smile onto his face, one of those garish and deranged grins that screamed with the madness of his determination.

“Watch me.”

And even as Meathead’s fist came down, his rings shining as they reflected the light of the bright fluorescents, Tony kept holding his head high.

—•—

When Tony came to, he did so slowly. The inside of his mouth felt gross, like something had died a very brutal death between his teeth, and his head ached even worse than when he had first been brought to the horrible place.

If he hadn’t experienced the real thing far too many times, Tony might have said he felt like he was underwater. The sensation was both better and worse than the water, though- far more peaceful, but at the same time missing the fear and adrenaline he was so used to relying upon now. He felt trapped, like he couldn’t move, couldn’t even struggle against the iron holding his limbs to the ground.

He could feel the hard floor against his back, pressing into his spine and his aching shoulder blades.

He could feel something soft brush against his cheek—

A cool hand on his arm—

‘*Stark*,’ a familiar voice said, calming and invigorating and shooting sparks across the edges of every nerve. Although he still felt heavy, he reached out as best he could, trying to grasp onto that one island of comfort in the sea of empty black. It was enough for him to drag

himself from the darkness, and he was finally able to open his eyes to see green eyes shining worriedly above a dark grey muzzle.

‘*Loki*,’ thought Tony, closing his eyes again, no longer feeling the need to fight. It was strange, but he felt like he’d be all right, with Loki there.

There was a pause before Loki spoke.

‘*What happened?*’ he asked— well, no, that tone of voice could never be labelled as anything other than a *demand*. Even without being spoken aloud, it just seeped with authority. With a voice like that, Loki could have made a Burger King order sound as official as a royal decree.

It probably had something to do with being raised a prince.

‘*Stark? Are you all right?*’

“Yeah,” Tony managed to croak, knowing that Loki meant his question to be relative. Everything was relative these days. “Yeah, I think I will be, I just—“

He groaned, having made the mistake of trying to move. Loki grasped Tony’s arm, using what little strength he had to help prop Tony up against the wall in his usual spot. It was still a bit of a chore and the hard wall was painful against Tony’s still sore back, so they ended up sort of leaning against each other, Tony’s left hand resting on top of both of Loki’s as they usually did when they were talking.

“Thanks,” Tony sighed, relaxing against Loki’s side. It was easier on his injuries, that way.

‘*Tell me what happened*,’ Loki said again, and when Tony’s eyes flicked to the camera, he added, ‘*At least as best you can*.’ The words were tense, like he wanted to add something else. But Tony didn’t think he could cope with that just now, not when his head was pounding.

“I was testing one of the boots, for the suit they want me to build.” Tony refused to call it Iron Man. It was not, would *never be* Iron Man. “It... exploded. They weren’t particularly happy.”

Thankfully, Loki could read between the lines. ‘*I thought I told you not to do anything stupid*.’

“Yeah, well. You know me.” Tony flashed the best smirk he could manage. “I like to keep things interesting.”

‘*You should be more cautious*,’ Loki suggested. ‘*If you anger them, things will only become worse*.’

“I had no choice, I needed to test it,” Tony insisted. It was the same argument he’d already used with the Ten Rings, it should give nothing away. “I needed to know if it would work.”

‘*You should have known that it wouldn’t*,’ Loki snapped. ‘*If you had but talked to me about your plan then I could have told you that it had no chance of working. Have you been blind?*’

Have you not noticed anything during your time here?’

Loki’s shoulders jerked in irritation as he spoke, and the movement jarred Tony’s back. He groaned, squeezing his eyes tightly shut, trying to block it out. He’d survived worse. His groan caused Loki to freeze, however, and the god remained still for several moments before speaking once again.

‘Are you sure you’re all right?’ he asked.

Tony sighed, but nodded.

“Yeah,” he said. “It hurts like a bitch, but I’ll be fine. I was far worse when I first arrived, let me tell you.”

That didn’t seem to soothe Loki at all- Tony could almost hear his frown, and he felt it as Loki shifted, gently this time, and not enough to dislodge Tony from his spot against Loki’s side. Just enough so that Loki was facing him properly.

‘I am sorry, Stark,’ Loki said, sounding sincere. The apology itself was enough to shock Tony into opening his eyes, and he was surprised to see just how close Loki was. *‘I did not mean to snap at you.’*

“Yeah, just,” Tony sighed. “Maybe don’t do it again, yeah? At least wait until I’m feeling a little better.” However long that would take.

Slowly, as though he were aiming not to startle, Loki pulled his hands from beneath Tony’s and raised them as if he were going to touch Tony’s neck. Strangely, Tony felt all right about that. The last time Loki had touched him there, it had been to throw him out of a window, yet Tony felt hardly any apprehension. Still, Loki’s hands hovered before making contact, the question clear across his expression.

Tony nodded.

‘I wish to try something,’ Loki said. *‘If it does not work, it will not harm you, and if it does I believe it will help. I promise, I will not be looking into your mind.’*

Tony was only half surprised to find that he wasn’t worried.

“Okay,” he replied.

Surprise of his own flickered through Loki’s eyes for a moment, but it was soon gone. His brows furrowed, his expression set in fierce concentration. His eyes, already a bright green, almost seemed to glow with effort, and his fingers tingled where they rested at the base of Tony’s throat, bypassing his overgrown beard to brush against the soft skin just above his collarbone.

Then slowly, ever so slowly, Tony started to feel *better*, like all his aches and pains were being drained away.

“Holy shit,” Tony whispered, overcome with shock. “*Holy—*“

‘*Shh,*’ Loki hissed, the sound ringing just as loudly through Tony’s mind as it would have done in the cell. ‘*You must not let them know.*’

Tony reigned in his reaction, limiting his expression to simply watching Loki at work. Loki didn’t entirely heal any of Tony’s injuries, and didn’t touch those that were overly visible, as far as Tony could tell. That was probably smart, since that was no doubt something that the Ten Rings would take note of. But Tony could feel the pain in his back beginning to recede, the ache in his head ebbing to a low throb.

It was... well. Glancing down to see the rune-etched manacles that circled Loki’s wrists, Tony was sure that it should have been impossible.

When it was done, Loki sagged against Tony, exhausted beyond measure. Tony wrapped an arm around his shoulders and brought them into a position similar to how they were sitting before, though this time they were each using the other for support, their arms not just touching for communication now but entwined in an effort to remain upright. Tony was sure Loki would feel just as vulnerable on the ground as Tony knew he would himself.

“I have two questions,” Tony said once they were settled. “First of all- how?”

‘*These cuffs prevent my seiðr from leaving my body,*’ Loki began. ‘*They cannot suppress it nor lock it away entirely, for that would kill me, just as surely as being removed from your soul would kill you. So I can manipulate my body just as well as I have always been able to. To use my seiðr to affect you... merely requires a little creative thinking.*’

“So... what, exactly—“

‘*Magic is energy, Stark,*’ Loki said. ‘*You know that energy can be changed. I merely used my magic to give my hands the ability to take your pain, and then used the ability to do so. It was a simple loophole.*’

“Okay,” said Tony. He thought he understood that. “Then that brings me to my next question. *Why?*”

‘*You believe you can get out,*’ Loki replied simply. ‘*I believe that you can, too, and I would see you have your best chance.*’

Tony glanced across to see Loki’s expression. He wasn’t looking at Tony- his gaze was on the wall, as it so often was when he was trying to hide his thoughts, or when he was thinking particularly hard.

“Is that why you helped me the other night?” Tony asked curiously, unable to resist the question.

Loki tilted his head, now looking at Tony from the corner of his eye. ‘*What do you mean?*’

“When you woke me up, from that nightmare. Why’d you do it?”

‘*Ah.*’ Loki relaxed again, his head tilting until it almost rested on Tony’s shoulder. ‘*No. I have grown rather accustomed to silence these past months. Your screams were irritating.*’

The words were probably an attempt to lighten the mood, but Tony found he couldn't fall into simple banter. Not when—

“You've been here for *months*?” Tony asked, horrified.

'I believe so. Logic tells me that it cannot have been overly long, but on occasion, it feels like a lifetime.'

“Yeah,” Tony muttered. “Tell me about it.”

Once again, the question of what Loki was doing there in the first place floated through Tony's mind, but he knew better than to ask. Loki would just get cagey.

Loki was properly leaning against Tony's shoulder by that point, his eyes falling closed. The sharp edges of the muzzle were digging into bone but Tony couldn't find it in himself to complain, glad that Loki was able to get some rest, at least. He was content to rest his own head atop Loki's, his own eyes beginning to fall shut despite his lengthy span on unconsciousness earlier. It had been a long day.

'You are rather comfortable, Stark,' Loki's voice whispered, and Tony half wondered if he wasn't supposed to have heard it.

“Thanks, Reindeer Games,” Tony murmured back. “No funny business though, all right? You're going to have to buy me a drink before I'll let you make any moves.”

Rather than responding in kind, Loki suddenly jerked back upright, nearly smashing their skulls together as he turned to stare at Tony in shocked realisation.

Tony froze immediately, catching on to his mistake just a moment too late. While he'd spoken to Loki in his penthouse the day of the invasion as Tony Stark, he'd done so in Stuttgart as Iron Man. By using similar mannerisms, by referencing the conversation, by using the *same fucking nickname*—

'Reindeer Games?' Loki asked, his voice an accusing whisper. *'Only one person has ever called me that before.'*

Well, shit.

If the situation hadn't been so serious, he might have blamed it on the stress. But he didn't have time for excuses. He could have tried to play it off, to mention that he and his body guard liked the same movies, haha what a coincidence, and so on. But Tony was so fucking sick of the lies, and he didn't want to alienate the only person who currently seemed to be on his side. Not after what Loki had just done for him.

“Yeah, all right,” Tony sighed. “You've got me. What will you do with it? Tell the Avengers? Begin a smear campaign?”

'Yes, that's exactly what I'm going to do,' Loki said immediately, the shock still present in his gaze as he fell back on his usual snark. *'I know exactly how to reach them from in here.'*

“You won’t be in here forever and you know it,” Tony snapped. “What will you do, Loki?” he asked, his voice turning harsh. “Are you going to tell the world, destroy what little is left of Iron Man and turn anyone who’s left against me?”

‘I would hardly trouble myself with something so petty.’ Loki’s green eyes had begun to glitter with mirth during Tony’s accusations, and it was bloody irritating. *‘This, I believe, can be used to our advantage.’*

“Not really,” Tony muttered, deflating a little. “The Ten Rings already know, somehow.” He swallowed, and his words sounded very small as he asked his next question. “Are you... are you really not going to tell anyone?”

Loki’s expression softened. *‘I do not know why you are hiding it, Stark, but I assume you must have a reason. It is not my secret to tell.’*

“And... you’re not mad that I lied?” This was perhaps the point that Tony was most worried about. After all, Loki was right – it wouldn’t matter that Loki knew if they never got out. And surely, Loki knowing the truth – Loki, who might very well be Tony’s only remaining ally – could not be worse than the Ten Rings knowing, and that had happened already.

No, he wasn’t too concerned now that Loki knew, not any more- but if Loki was upset, then that was a whole other kettle of fish.

Loki seemed to consider his answer carefully, and it was a few moments before he spoke again. *‘I have been lied to my whole life,’* he said, and Tony immediately flinched. *‘You’re right to think that it would bother me, but I am not so self-centred as to believe that it was directed at me. You merely did not trust me, and rightly so.’*

“No,” Tony agreed. “I didn’t.” He didn’t think it prudent to add that just maybe, that might have changed. “You’re right though, I didn’t mean... well. It was on purpose, but I—“

‘I know,’ Loki said again. *‘I did not trust you either.’* He shrugged, his shoulder bumping Tony’s lightly. *‘I was curious when you first came here, Stark, and disappointed to find that you were already so badly damaged. But now I see that you are not so damaged as you would like everyone to think.’*

Tony snorted. “No,” he said wryly. “I think you’ve got that all backwards. Iron Man is far stronger than Tony Stark could ever be, and if the world links them together then they’ll never trust the hero the same way. I *am* damaged.”

‘Perhaps, but you are also strong. Watching that video, I knew that your teammates had made a mistake in choosing the fighter over the man with the mind, but to know that you are one and the same... they cannot know what they have done.’

Tony groaned. “Well, I guess they probably do by now.”

‘That would depend on your suit, I imagine,’ Loki replied. *‘I would not know.’*

Considering the problem, Tony realised that he did not know the answer either. With the full lockdown initiated and no pilot inside to trigger the emergency life support and ejection protocols... there was a chance that the Avengers *hadn't* been able to get it open. Bruce might have been able to, but... really, it all depended on JARVIS, and on Pepper. They were the ones with the overrides.

Regardless, it was useless to contemplate on such matters. What the Avengers were doing was irrelevant- Tony needed to focus on staying alive and getting out.

“For what it’s worth,” Tony said, “I’m sorry for lying.”

‘Even if the lie itself was necessary?’ Loki asked with a touch of amusement. As he did so, he leaned back against the wall again, and the way their arms were still tucked together meant that their sides were pressed close. Tony didn’t mind- he even found himself shifting down the wall a smidge, so that he and Loki were propped against each other in a way which meant they were both comfortable. Save for when they were talking, it had been so long since Tony had felt some friendly physical contact. It felt... nice.

“I guess,” Tony allowed, answering the probably rhetorical question. “You know now, though.”

‘Yes,’ Loki said, almost absently. *‘I suppose I do.’*

They fell quiet after that, their breathing evening out as they began to relax – at least as much as they could manage in such a terrible place. But there was one thing scratching at Tony’s mind, and he knew he wouldn’t properly rest until it was resolved.

“Hey Loki?”

‘What now?’

“Thank you. For everything.”

There was a pause, long enough that Tony wondered if the god had managed to fall asleep. In fact, Tony had almost drifted off himself when Loki’s soft voice floated through his mind like the beginnings of a dream.

‘You are welcome, Anthony.’

Still using each other for support, curled together against the wall with their hands still clasped, they both fell into restless sleep.

When life gives you grapefruit

Chapter Notes

Okay, heads up. I am driving halfway across the country starting Thursday and will be pretty busy when I get to the other end, so there's a chance I won't get next week's chapter up on time. I write these as I go, and I'd rather be late than give you guys something subpar. I'll still aim for Sunday, but just thought I'd let you know just in case.

For the first time in a while, Tony woke up slowly.

It was odd to feel the pull of consciousness, so accustomed as he was to being torn from sleep by the click of a lock, or heaving from a nightmare as Loki's voice helped to chase away the darkness. His eyes felt heavy, his limbs weighted, but not in the same way as the day before. There was a freshness to the spring in his muscles, and he knew immediately that he had his companion to thank for that. Without Loki's magic, he likely would have felt far sorer.

The thought was enough to rouse Tony the rest of the way, and he blinked the sleep from his eyes and glanced down to where the god was still slumped against his side. At some point during the night, Tony's left arm had wrapped around Loki's shoulders while his right remained snug between Loki's chained wrists, and it seemed that had been enough to keep them in the same place as the night (or, at least what Tony was choosing to think of as night) before.

As his gaze dragged across that still sleeping face, Tony couldn't help but think that Loki looked rather small like this, the chain so heavy and thick across his wrists, the rags hanging from his bony frame far too loosely. It was hard to think that this was the same person who had terrorised the planet, who had stood tall above every human and declared himself a god. But... it *was*, and Tony could appreciate the power he knew still lay beneath the exhausted exterior.

The power, the rage... and the *understanding*.

Loki knew who Tony was, and he hadn't passed judgement. He hadn't tried to argue any of Tony's decisions, he hadn't suggested other things Tony could have done or belittled the struggle that came with his choice, reminding him how it could have been so much harder. Tony had suffered that from every other person who knew in one way or another, had even suffered it from those who didn't but wished to be informed of Iron Man's identity.

He had been dreading that Loki would find out since they'd been thrown in the same cell, but now that the moment had been and gone it was touching in a manner that Tony hadn't really anticipated. He wasn't only relieved. He felt *grateful*, and- god. Thinking back on the way

that Loki had not only accepted the truth with a shrug but had understood, had even been *pleased* to know, Tony felt like he was soaring.

Loki moved a little, his hair lightly tickling Tony's skin as he shifted into a more comfortable position, and Tony's shoulder ached as the hard lines of the muzzle pressed into a new spot.

"Hey," Tony whispered, nudging Loki lightly with the arm still wrapped around the god's shoulders. "Awake?"

Tony felt more than heard Loki hum, a low rumble that was only *this close* to a purr. He felt the cool brush of a nose against his neck as Loki settled, curling in at Tony's side, his knees bending slightly and brushing against Tony's outstretched legs.

"I'm going to take that as a yes."

'Rest, Stark,' Loki complained, his voice sluggish. It was almost endearing. *'You need it.'*

"Not so much, to be honest." Tony paused, realising that actually- Loki looked far more tired than Tony felt. "I should probably thank you for that."

'I thought you already did.'

Even though Loki wouldn't be able to see it, Tony smiled.

"Yeah, I guess so." And there was something else too, now that Tony thought about it- "Hey, did you call me Anthony last night?"

A small puff of air whispered over the skin of Tony's throat, and he couldn't help but wonder if Loki had actually been laughing.

'Did it bother you?'

Tony considered it for a moment. "Not really," he said. "Better than 'Stark', I guess. But most people call me Tony, you know."

'I am not most people.'

"Yeah. Getting that."

'Are you done bothering me now? Or may I return to sleep?'

Well, actually...

Tony leaned down, his lips almost touching Loki's hair in an attempt to hide their movement from the cameras.

"There is something that I wanted to talk to you about," he whispered. "Something that happened yesterday."

Loki groaned, his eyes finally opening as he glared up at Tony. *'Am I correct in assuming that this is not the sort of conversation you wish to be overheard?'*

There was no need to respond- Loki knew that he was right, and Tony had already thought of the solution. Thankfully, Loki seemed to get what Tony was trying to do pretty much immediately, and moved to help accommodate the shift. Tony did most of the work though, sliding down the wall and turning sideways, bending his knees and shoving Loki's straight so that his own were almost resting in the god's lap. The new position was near on a mirror image to how they were sitting before, as Tony was the one with his head on Loki's shoulder, his beard probably tickling Loki's ear. It was enough that he could be quiet, could simply breathe out his words and hope that they would not be heard by the camera. And with his lips almost pressed to Loki's skin, their movements were unlikely to be visible.

Leaning on each other with limbs entwined and eyes closed, it would hopefully just look like they had fallen asleep once more.

It should have felt strange, being this close to his former enemy.

It didn't.

'What is it that you wish to ask?' Loki prompted as they were finally settled.

"When I set the explosion, it hit the door just like I planned," Tony whispered, seeing no reason to beat around the bush. "I knew it wouldn't be enough to take it down, I meant it when I said I was just testing it- but it didn't scorch the door like I expected. The door wasn't damaged at all."

Tony paused, waiting. But Loki remained quiet, relaxed- unsurprised. So Tony continued.

"It just... absorbed the energy from the explosion, and then threw it back out at me. I've never seen anything like it."

'That is because it is not mere technology,' Loki answered. *'I have told you that you haven't been paying as much attention as you should.'*

Tony scrunched up his nose, figuring that Loki would probably at least feel it even if he couldn't see the annoyed expression.

"Yeah yeah, gloat later, explain now."

'You're very demanding.'

"Always, sugarplum." Tony sighed. "But come on. You sound like you're talking about magic, or whatever that stuff is that you have, anyway."

'It is not the same as the power I possess, but it is similar, in its own way.' Loki paused. *'Excuse me? Sugarplum?'*

"No, wait," Tony said, ignoring Loki's half-irritated curiosity. As it was, he could barely manage to remain still and keep up the pretence of sleep, too horrified by the implications of

what Loki was telling him. “The Ten Rings don’t have magic, they *can’t*—“

“Not of their own, but they have artefacts that allow them to control a power more ancient than they can comprehend, and while they may not understand it, they know enough to create sufficient wards. Your explosion did not stand a chance.” Loki’s fingers pressed lightly against where they were resting on Tony’s thigh, and Tony thought the gesture might have been meant as a comfort. *‘I should have warned you. I apologise.’*

Well, that was stupid.

“It’s hardly your fault,” Tony muttered. “You...” Again, he refrained from shaking his head. He forced his muscles to relax back against Loki, to go back to appearing innocent and asleep and not at all like they were plotting.

If what they were doing could even be called plotting. To be honest, it just felt like a whole load of roadblocks, more things to get in Tony’s way. More things to be worried about and *afraid of*.

Your explosion did not stand a chance.

“Hang on. You’re not telling me that I don’t have any hope? Because that’s not going to—“

‘I never said that,’ Loki interrupted quickly. *‘Their wards are strong, but they are not complicated. Any beginner mage could tear them down in a heartbeat.’*

It wasn’t difficult to understand what Loki was saying.

“You could do it. If it weren’t for those cuffs.”

‘Yes. At full strength, I could remove them with but a flick of my finger. Less, if I felt like it.’

“If you felt like showing off,” Tony added.

Amusement flooded Loki’s tone. *‘Quite.’*

“At full strength...” Tony couldn’t help the shudder. “You’re a long way from that. Basically what you’re telling me is that I need to find a way to get them to bring you something to eat. But I guess they won’t, right? They’re too afraid that if they take the muzzle off, you’ll be able to cut them down in an instant.”

Without warning, Loki froze, his muscles going tense under Tony’s, his shoulder curling up as if Loki were trying to flinch away from something, causing Tony to press even closer or risk stretching his neck past its limits.

Ah, crap.

“Loki?” Tony prompted warily. He should have just kept his mouth shut. He *knew* this was a sore topic, but he still had to just go and—

'They will allow me to eat, Stark,' Loki said bitterly, cutting straight through Tony's thoughts. *'I only have to ask for it.'*

But that didn't make any *sense*, and he told Loki so.

'They know that I am weakened. As I have told you before, the cuffs prevent my seiðr from leaving my body but all the muzzle does is rob me of my words. Words can be powerful, but these men are not the sort to fall into such a trap. The motivation to remain loyal is far too high.'

"If that's the case, then they don't respect their leaders," Tony pointed out carefully, wondering how it related. "They fear them. That's different."

'Yes, and no. They fear what will happen to them should they stray, but they would not anyway. These people are fanatics. They believe they are doing what is right for the world, and for themselves. Like I said, their motivation is strong, and they know they have little to fear from even my skills as a wordsmith. They would be able to remove this muzzle with very few consequences for themselves.'

"They want something from you," Tony realised. "You're not just here as a prisoner, are you?"

'Your thoughts are correct,' Loki answered. *'If I give in to their demands, they have promised to feed me.'* His muscles tensed again, and Tony could easily picture the burning fire that would be raging in his eyes. *'But I will not give them what they want.'*

"Loki?" Tony asked, his voice quieter than it had ever been yet. He knew he had to be careful here- knew that if he had misjudged this new closeness between them, then his question was very likely to blow up in his face.

But... he had to try.

"What is it that you're so afraid of?"

To Tony's surprise, Loki didn't push him away, or close up. His fingers curled into the loose fabric of Tony's ragged trousers, and he let out a breathy sigh through his nose. Tony couldn't see Loki's expression, but he could feel the way that the tension bled from his muscles, his body turning soft and pliant.

'They wish to—'

Loki's voice was cut off as the door to the cell slammed open, and Tony's head jerked away from Loki's shoulder.

Meathead sauntered in first with open arms, those painfully hard rings catching the light in a frustratingly obnoxious way. It was probably a stupid move, but Tony ignored him in favour of the second man to enter.

"Hello, Judas," Tony said in a sing-song voice, shooting the translator a nasty grin. "Man, am I glad to see you again."

Just as Tony hoped he would, Ivan looked slightly disturbed. He should. Because Tony knew he would get out eventually, and when he did...

Ivan would *suffer*.

Really though, now that Tony thought about it, that whole debacle had turned to his advantage. After all, it had been a swift kick up the ass reminder to not trust anyone new, which honestly was a lesson he'd sorely needed. He was just glad that the Ten Rings were stupid enough to have given away the ploy so early in the game. And if Loki was right about the magic – which, honestly? Tony thought that he probably was – then any future attempts on the door would have been just as catastrophic, if not even worse.

By setting Tony up for betrayal, they'd only done him a favour.

Life, lemons, all that jazz.

You know, Tony had never actually understood that saying. Lemons can be quite delicious, especially when perched on the side of a stiff drink. The saying wasn't really fair on them, to be honest.

Now, *grapefruit*, on the other hand—

'I thought his name was Ivan?' Loki asked, pulling Tony back into the now. Tony didn't answer, though, because as he turned, his gaze caught once again on the leader of the motley crew.

Meathead had yet to speak, his eyes raking over the way Tony and Loki had entwined their limbs with something akin to glee. It was disconcerting, and—

Tony was struck with horrible, horrible thought, and the desire to shove Loki as far away as he could.

But it wouldn't help, would it? Meathead had already seen.

It was everything bad in Tony's life all over again. It was Yinsen shot full of holes in a cave, it was Pepper being threatened by Obadiah Stane, it was Rhodey nearly being killed by Hammer Drones. It was everyone Tony had ever cared about being hurt by his inability to stop sticking his nose where it didn't belong.

Almost shaking, Tony was sharply reminded of his thoughts back when he'd first been thrown in with Loki- that maybe the Ten Rings had expected that they'd drive each other mad, maybe bite and scratch and fight to whatever extent their already battered bodies could manage. But they hadn't, and Tony had thought that they had got one over the bad guys, because surely working together was a win, right?

Turns out the Ten Rings won either way, because now Meathead thought he had something precious that he could threaten.

And the scary thing was... Tony didn't think that he was wrong.

Tony had lived through torture twice now, he could deal with his head being shoved into that barrel. He hated it, he was *terrified* of the very thought, but he could deal with it. He could keep going, could suffer through it and end up on top in the end- battered, bruised, *victorious*. Sure, he'd break eventually if it was sustained. He'd read enough into it and sat through enough therapy sessions to know that *everyone* broke eventually. But he was clever, he could manipulate and control the scenario to his own advantage. He'd played the Ten Rings before, had played this game so many times. He knew his own limits and he could exploit them, and he wasn't afraid for himself anymore. Not really.

Of course, he also knew Loki could look after himself, that as an Asgardian he was far stronger than Tony could ever hope to be. Loki was in an even better position to withstand the struggle than Tony was.

And yet, the thought of them marring Loki's skin still *hurt*, still scared Tony right down to the bone.

Loki was stronger than he was, but Tony would still rather take the hit before he saw Loki put into the line of fire.

He couldn't see another friend suffer on the coattails of his own mistakes.

Almost desperately, Tony clutched on to the single piece of reassurance he had- because Loki said they wanted something from him as well. They wouldn't kill him then, if they thought they could still get it, whatever it was. They would both be safe from that.

Meathead's smile was darker, hungrier. He issued a quick order, and then a couple of the terrorists charged forward and—

Two blokes, pulling and tugging and *tearing* Loki from Tony's arms. He didn't dare fight, knowing that would only make it worse, but Tony met Loki's gaze, those green eyes shining with dread and determination and *direction*. Even now, Loki was still trying to boss him around.

Typical.

Forced under their heel, another weakness found and exploited- but not defeated, not ever. Because Tony knew him well enough now that Loki's message was clear.

We can still win this.

Well. When life gives you grapefruit...

Ugh, no, nothing good could come from that poor excuse for a citrus. Poor metaphor. But point is that Tony knew how to make something bad turn into an advantage, he was a seasoned professional at beating down an impossible situation and coming out on top.

So when one of the terrorists threw Loki to the ground with enough force to make the god groan, Tony bowed his head in apparent defeat.

The workshop had not changed, not really. He didn't know why he expected that it would have, but the tools were in the same place, and the ground was still littered with debris from when the explosion had thrown Tony back. He supposed he was expected to clean it up himself.

Of course, more cameras had been installed, cutting out *almost* all of the blind spots. Tony was thrown inside with no more ceremony than he ever had been, two of the gun-wielding goons following him in, with Ivan on their heels. They flanked the door like sentinels while Ivan followed Tony further between the benches. Ivan wasn't holding a weapon of his own— a move that may appear dull at first, but Tony knew it was to stop him from trying to get his hands on it— something that honestly, he wasn't stupid enough to try, anyway. The translator just followed Tony around, watching him like a hawk and just generally being annoying.

Ivan, it seemed, was to remain Tony's shadow.

That wasn't too bad. In the beginning, he was no different than the cameras really, and if he tried, Tony could almost pretend that the presence at his back was merely DUM-E or U.

Almost.

At least until the bastard opened his goddamn mouth.

“You thought me on your side, and I betrayed you.” Ivan seemed to be preening, like a highschool jock who'd stolen his rival's girlfriend, and Tony barely managed to hold back an eye-roll. “How does it feel, to know that no one here would willingly work with you?”

Maybe that would have hurt, but... to his own amazement, Tony found he was able to believe that wasn't true. He didn't want help from people like Ivan, but there was someone else worth talking to who might, just maybe, be open to a certain discussion.

“Brilliant, actually,” Tony said dryly, his focus on the metal before him. They'd left him his old work, probably because Ivan told them it was legit— and it was. Mostly. “Honestly, it's nice to be rid of you. I feel like I've shed ten pounds.”

There was the tell-tale sound of teeth clacking together, and Tony basked in the smugness.

“You were a terrible assistant,” he continued. “Worst I've ever had, actually—“

“Get back to work,” Ivan snapped.

“Aw, did I hurt your feelings?”

“Get back to *work*,” Ivan snapped again. “You know, I never liked you. Not ever.”

“Feeling's mutual,” Tony replied, only half listening, and only in the hope that he could glean something. “I don't like you either.”

This time, rather than irritated, Ivan just looked amused. Pleased, even.

“You have no friends here, Stark.” He was smirking, enjoying the taunt– but there was still something stilted to the words, like he was reading from a script.

Ah.

The Ten Rings hadn’t given up on their ploy because they were being stupid. After all, they still had someone in the room watching him, still had their cameras– and yeah, Tony wasn’t going to come out and give them his new plan now but, they hadn’t put Ivan in there to listen. His goal was to break any sense of trust Tony had left.

Tony had long since come to the conclusion that they knew what had happened to him during his first brush with the Ten Rings, and surely it would have been just as simple to find out about Yinsen as it would have been the water. They’d set it up perfectly, and Tony was so *angry* that he’d fallen for it. They could have kept it up, but why would they, when shattering Tony so seemingly thoroughly would result in such a reward?

The more Tony thought about it, the more obvious it became– they were trying to push him closer to Loki, to make Meathead’s ploy of threatening one to hurt the other that much more effective.

Make Loki the one person Tony could rely on, and then tear him away.

Clever.

And Tony had fallen straight into the trap.

Again.

Tony picked up a hammer and slammed it against the sheet of metal he’d been considering with more force than necessary, leaving a dent rather than a smooth curve. Whatever. If all went to plan, the Ten Rings would never be wearing the suit he’d make.

Ah, wait.

Plan?

Did he still have a plan?

All his previous plotting could be thrown out of the window, that was for sure.

But he *was* back in his workshop, which meant that he could make something. Of course, then there was the magic to consider, but while Tony couldn’t open the door, Loki *could*. Or, well. He would be able too, if not for the manacles.

After all, Tony imagined that taking a ward off a door would require more than Loki’s ‘loophole’. He’d need his power back probably to manage that, and anyway– if they did get through the door, then they’d have to fight the rest of the way out, and that would be made far easier if Loki actually had a scrap of energy to spare. Healing Tony had knocked him flat for several hours, and Tony doubted that taking a ward down would be much easier.

Okay. It was going to have to be a team effort, then.

Tony would have to work out a way to get the manacles off *and* fight their way out once Loki had taken down the door. He could make something, of course, but Loki never left the cell. It would be almost impossible to get something that he'd scrapped together into the same room as Loki without the Ten Rings noticing.

Except... There was one thing, from way back when Tony had first started building in this place. It had been tiny at the time, just a small thing— a missing paper plate that appeared the next day, thrown at Tony's head with no warning or indication that Loki had taken it in the first place.

Loki never repeated the feat – at least, not as far as Tony knew – but still the incident stuck in Tony's mind. It was clear why Loki had picked it up- you spend enough time with nothing, and everything begins to look like a tool with which you could work your own escape. A paper plate was little more than trash in the outside world, but in here, it was better than *nothing*.

Still essentially useless, though.

But.

Loki had hidden that somewhere on him, probably inside his too large clothes. And yes, while the Ten Rings were unlikely to care that Loki had stolen a piece of waxed cardboard that didn't even have any corners, Loki had managed to hide it in such a way that Tony hadn't noticed, either. If he could hide something else, something smaller, even, but something more *dangerous*...

Well.

Maybe they had a chance, after all.

Ivan thought that Tony didn't have any friends.

No. Tony felt a smile curl the edges of his lips. *I have one, and together, we're busting out of this joint.*

First, though... they just needed a better method of communication. It just wasn't practical to *cuddle* every time they needed to have a private conversation, they needed something that would allow them to talk silently while still keeping their own space— and hey, hadn't Loki mentioned something like that a while back?

The necessity was almost a shame. He'd never admit it out loud, but... It had been a long time since Tony had been so content with a hug.

More than they ever thought

Chapter Notes

Well it's only *just* not Sunday in this timezone so I'm calling this a success. Big thanks to [whimsicalwombat](#), because without her help this probably wouldn't have been finished until next week.

Also, it's really long, and I nearly chopped it in half. Again. But I got impatient, and figured no one would complain. Probably.

Usually, Tony is a pretty determined person. He's always prided himself on his ability to push through, to keep on going when any reasonable or sane person would have given up. He had always been able to find a way out, and he had saved his own life on nothing but pure stubbornness more times than he could count. After all, Jarvis didn't raise a quitter.

But honestly, this mind-talking thing was *seriously* testing his limits.

'There is an easier way,' Loki said as attempt number fifty-seven (give or take twelve or so) resulted in yet another failure. *'But I would have to—'*

"Then do it," Tony interrupted with a groan. "Look, I trust you, okay? If it's going to be quicker for you to go deeper into my mind then just—"

'I will not, not when there is no need for it,' Loki insisted. *'Not when there's a better way.'*

"Yeah, well, maybe you're wrong," Tony snapped, lifting his head from where it had once again been resting on Loki's shoulder, so that the god could suffer the full force of his glare. "Maybe there isn't a better way, since I *can't* do this."

'You can. I know it.'

"Yeah? How? I can't imagine that Mr High And Mighty has taught magic to a human before —"

'I know,' Loki snapped, *'because you have already done it.'*

Tony paused, and he gaped for a moment before saying, "Wait, what? *When?*"

'When you woke up after they beat you, the day that you tried to blow up the door.' Loki's fingers flexed for a moment. *'I wasn't sure if you realised what you had done, though I know now that you didn't. But... just as you opened your eyes the first time, you said my name.'*

Tony blinked, surprised. He certainly remembered Loki being the first thing he saw, and he remembered that they had been touching, because Loki had been speaking to him to try and wake him up. But with nightmares a frequent occurrence these days it wasn't something Tony had really noted. They were touching almost constantly, taking comfort from the only place they could, talking not only to scheme but to chase away everything else. It was a simple thing to recall what it felt like to wake up with Loki in his head. But if he thought hard, going back to that day...

Actually, he could almost pinpoint just exactly what had been different.

“Okay,” he said firmly. “I’m ready to try again.”

He closed his eyes, pressed his forehead to the crook of Loki’s neck once more – bare due to the neckline of the too-big shirt slipping to the side – and focused. The brush of Loki’s mind against his own was familiar, and he relaxed into it.

Loki. Loki. Loki. He repeated the god’s name over and over just as he had been for the several hours they had been at this, but instead of trying to shove the thoughts toward the comforting sensation, he instead reached for it himself. It was an odd thought, *reaching* with his *mind*, but it was the only word he had for it, searching for that tendril that normally reached out to him.

This feels stupid, Tony thought to himself, still trying to find something that felt like Loki. Ridiculous, really. Your mind can't do anything more than think, and yeah okay so there're electrical currents– there's a chance they could send a signal, maybe, but actual words? Maybe it's like Morse code. It must be possible though, Loki does it... well. Magic. There has to be some kind of solid explanation though, and god, the '...mechanics of how it works must be insane. If a mind can connect with another, does that mean there's value to the arguments of people being more than a body? Would it be possible to entirely project your—'

‘*Stark!*’ Loki interrupted, and Tony’s eyes snapped open, lifting his head to frown at Loki in annoyance. He almost felt like he was on to something, there.

“What?”

‘*I heard you.*’

“You...” Tony’s eyes widened. “You heard me?”

Loki nodded, a slow smile starting to creep across his lips.

Tony swallowed, and took Loki’s hand in his own, entwining their fingers so he could keep his gaze locked on those green eyes. He tried to do exactly what he had the last time, and found it easy to reach out and find the familiar touch of the god’s mind. It felt just like it did when Loki spoke to him, and he smiled even before he managed to test it.

‘*Loki?*’

‘*Yes, Stark?*’

'Holy crap,' Tony thought, mirroring Loki's grin. *'This actually works.'*

'I said that it would, did I not?'

'Yeah, yeah, you're a genius. Whatever.' Tony was hit with a sudden thought, and tilted his head. *'This means we don't have to hug anymore, huh?'*

'We will still need contact,' Loki replied. *'Even with practice, we will not be able to communicate this way without touching.'*

Somehow, Tony didn't mind that so much.

Except—

'Wait,' Tony asked worriedly. *'What do you mean, practice?'*

Thankfully, it seemed that Loki's idea of practicing simply meant sitting next to each other, holding hands and just talking. Tony worried that they might run out of things to say— after all, it wasn't like they could talk about their day or whatever when they spent every day beside each other. But then Loki suggested a return to the game they had played at the beginning— and then running out of things to say was never going to be a problem, since they both still had so much they didn't know.

They started on the easy stuff. Tony learned that Loki's favourite time of the day was the evenings, that his bedroom in Asgard was mostly full of books (shocker) with a desk that he used to conduct magical experiments (shocker) and a perfect view over the edge of the planet (and honestly, the fact that the planet had an *edge* was an actual *proper* shock that also needed explaining. Preferably with diagrams, when they finally got out of the damn prison). Tony found himself talking about JARVIS, about the bots, about the type of music he listened to while working. That got them started on hobbies, and Tony learned that as well as reading Loki enjoyed horse riding, and that it was one of the few 'acceptable' areas where he outshone Thor. Of course, that then turned into a discussion about how magic was not considered honourable on Asgard save for healing (which honestly gave Tony a far greater insight into how Loki and Thor's relationship went sour than he ever thought he was going get) and then that, of course, kick started them straight back into the more emotional stuff.

Whatever. For the first time the conversation was really, truly only between them, and there was no chance of being overheard. Tony didn't mind getting into a deep and meaningful with Loki.

Even when he started to ask the really hard questions.

'Why do you keep your identity a secret from your team?' Loki asked. *'I understand why keeping it from the masses would be beneficial, but why hide it from the people you fight with?'*

'They wouldn't see me the same way,' Tony said simply. *'They don't respect me, they never have. Steve thinks that I'm just an arrogant billionaire loaning out my bodyguard for good'*

press and the others... well. Fury investigated me you know, when he thought I was going off the rails. And to be fair, I was dying at the time—

'You were what?' Loki asked bluntly.

'Oh don't worry, I fixed it,' Tony assured him. *'But I think that should justify a little recklessness. Anyway. He sent Natasha in to investigate me, and while I only just managed to keep her from finding out the truth, mostly thanks to JARVIS piloting the suit I'll admit, her final report indicated that Iron Man would be an asset to the team only if they could somehow separate him from me.'*

'Then they are trying to steal from you?'

Tony shook his head. *'Not quite. Fury knows the truth after all, he knows that even if they got the specs there would be no Iron Man unless I came along as well. But that doesn't mean he isn't intent on controlling me.'*

Loki looked about to explode, so Tony thought it was probably about the right time to start changing the subject.

'But anyway, I guess I haven't actually answered your question. They all think Iron Man is a trained bodyguard, ex military or something probably. They trust him in a fight, trust his judgement and his ability to do what needs to be done. I don't think they'll manage to do that if they know it's actually me in there.'

'I hope that one day they see the truth, and that they realise how wrong they were to make you feel that way,' Loki said. *'You are better than all of them.'*

'Thanks, Lokes.'

Loki nodded. *'Now, ask your question.'*

To be honest, it was tempting to take a step back, to ask Loki about his favourite thing to eat or whether or not he'd had the chance to try coffee. But, well, there was one thing Tony had wondered for a while, and for the first time Tony thought it actually likely that he would get an answer.

'The day of the invasion, when we were talking in the penthouse,' he started, glad to see that Loki's expression did not change at the topic. *'I know we were on opposite sides, but... you weren't entirely hostile. And I just wondered... What would it have taken, for you to accept that drink?'*

'It would have taken the Hulk charging through the walls and smashing me against the floor a lot earlier than he did,' Loki answered wryly, and it was so different from anything Tony had expected that he was actually shocked. So he waited for an explanation, but none was forthcoming.

'I think you're going to need to add more detail to that one,' Tony said firmly.

'Come on, Anthony,' Loki said, not quite meeting Tony's gaze. *'Agent Romanoff has told you how she knocked my influence from Barton's mind, surely.'*

Tony connected the dots immediately, the horror causing his stomach to drop to his feet. He wasn't sure which was worse— his previous concern that he had begun to befriend the person who had done so much damage to New York, or...

'Loki,' Tony started, half dreading the answer. *'Are you... were you...'*

'I was not controlled by the sceptre as Barton and the other humans were,' Loki cut in. *'But he was able to watch me, and the Other was able to... reach me. To speak, and to...'*

'To hurt?' Tony asked, rage bubbling up through his chest. So he had been right – the invasion had not been entirely Loki at all. Loki had been forced into it, and whether he had disagreed with it on principle or not hardly seemed relevant, because someone had *forced Loki to do something* and that just wasn't right, it wasn't okay. To be denied of agency had to be the worst kind of torture, and in that situation, Loki was well within his rights to do whatever it took to get free.

After all, Tony knew all too well what it was to survive in a terrible situation, and the sort of things one would be willing to do in order to get away, to regain control.

And if it had gone further than that, if whoever it was had used that connection to torture Loki even further...

'He made sure I kept to the plan,' Loki allowed, and although he didn't outright agree, Tony could see it in his eyes. Loki had been through hell and back, and no one had even *noticed*. God, what must that have been like? To have your own brother spit in your face at your attempt to survive, and be able to do nothing to explain your own actions?

Tony wanted to wrap his arms around Loki once again— not just to hear his words, but to comfort. Loki deserved so much more than a hug, but that was all Tony had to offer.

But then Loki was talking again, and Tony made sure he was listening.

'The Hulk knocked the connection free, and I was going to use that to try and escape. My original plan did involve capture, but once I realised what you had done, there would have been no need.' A touch of appreciation and awe teased the edge of Loki's expression. *'Your Midgardian bomb destroyed everything on the other side. You... you did more that day than you could possibly know.'*

'Good,' Tony said viciously. *'Although, a nuke is far too quick a death for anyone who did that to you.'*

Loki didn't smile, but he did appear grateful. And then, Tony realised something else.

'Is that why you helped me at first? Because you felt like you owed me?'

'Not... exactly. After all, I did not know that you and the Avenger were one and the same. But Barton had informed me that you had created Iron Man, and I gathered from your words that

you had done more behind the scenes than you were letting on to anyone else. I was well aware that if not for you, the invasion may well have been successful.’ Loki swallowed, and didn’t add any more. Honestly, though, Tony didn’t think he needed to. *‘Regardless. After that, you know all of what happened, and... well. Then I ended up here.’*

‘Loki,’ said Tony. *‘You don’t have to tell me if you don’t—’*

‘No,’ said Loki. *‘I think I do.’*

Despite his determination, it was clearly difficult for Loki to talk about. He was as tense as a bowstring, his hands gripping Tony’s tight enough to leave a bruise. His gaze was on the far wall, a reminder of how things had been in the beginning when Loki didn’t want to acknowledge Tony at all, and when he did begin to speak, his words were quick and fast like he was trying to throw them out into the open before they disappeared.

‘You know that Thor was sent to Midgard by the Allfather,’ Loki started. *‘It would have taken great pains to get him here, considering the Bifröst was destroyed and Thor is no skywalker like myself. There would have been no room for failure. He was given orders to bring both the Tesseract and myself back to Asgard, but your human organisation refused to hand over both.’*

‘Wait.’ Tony shook his head. There was a lot to unpack there, but— *‘You’re not about to tell me that SHIELD put you here—’*

‘All I know is that your SHIELD offered only one prize, and Odin believed it more important that he keep the Tesseract out of mortal hands. No doubt he thought that I had a lesson to learn, as well. Midgard, after all, did wonders for Thor.’

‘Your father left you here?’ Tony asked, horrified. *‘Even considering what you did, he didn’t give you a trial, or—’*

‘He is not my father,’ Loki spat. *‘And on Asgard, Odin’s word is law. Even if Thor succeeded in taking me back, there would have been no trial, only a sentencing. Odin could have forced the humans to let go of both the Tesseract and myself, of course, but why bother when the result would be essentially the same?’*

‘That is... messed up,’ Tony said. *‘How could Odin send his own—’*

‘He is not my father,’ Loki said again, harsher this time. *‘And I am not his son. I know Thor told you that I was adopted—’*

‘No, hey, sorry, that’s not what I meant,’ Tony said, squeezing Loki’s hand as best he could with his fingers still held in a vice. *‘I just... he’s known you all your life, adopted or not, right? And he just... threw you to the wolves. Does he even know what’s happening to you? How could he just not care, or— how can he not even give you a chance to explain yourself?’*

‘He is Odin,’ Loki said with a shrug. *‘And he is the Allfather. He has lied to me all my life, and then when I discovered the truth and tried to prove I was not a monster, he responded only with disgust.’*

God, what could he say to that?

Well.

Really, there was only one thing to say.

'I'm sorry,' Tony said. *'You deserve better.'*

'You know what?' Loki asked, his eyes sad. *'I believe you are the first person to say that to me, and you have not done anything wrong.'*

Okay. So that was just horrific.

'But there we are,' Loki said, shrugging dismissively before Tony had the chance to say any more, signalling the end of the topic. *'Now you know.'*

Yeah. Now he knew whose ass needed to be kicked, more like.

Except...

'That just explains why you're not on Asgard,' Tony realised. *'How did the Ten Rings get you away from SHIELD?'*

Loki shook his head. *'I do not know. I would not have known that these mortals were not the same as those you worked with, save that they speak another language and wear no uniform.'*

'Yeah, no,' Tony muttered. *'SHIELD may have bases and employees all over the world with loads of different languages, but they don't treat their prisoners like this.'* He paused for a moment. *'At least... I don't think they do. I sure as hell hope they don't.'*

'Everyone is hiding something,' Loki said, and Tony couldn't find it in himself to disagree. Everyone had their dark sides, their lies, their secrets.

And some secrets are more harmful than others.

Loki had been lied to his entire life, and while Tony didn't know the details of how he'd discovered the truth, it clearly had not been pleasant. Tony knew only too well how it felt to discover that someone close had been going behind your back the whole time. Obadiah had left a scar that would never truly heal, that would leave Tony always paranoid about people's motives just as surely as Loki would always question people's truths. They'd both been wronged, but now they had each other— and together, Tony knew they'd be an unstoppable force.

'We're getting the hell out of here, Loki,' Tony said. *'Me and you. We're getting out, and then we're going to prove to everyone who ever put us down that we're more than they ever thought we were.'*

And finally, Loki was smiling again. *'I like the sound of that.'*

'Yeah?' Tony asked. *'So do I.'*

Once upon a time, Tony might have been concerned. Certainly the Tony of before the kidnapping would surely have been chomping at the bit, cursing and spitting and demanding retribution for all Loki had done. But with the way things stood in that moment, the only drawback Tony could see was the inevitable chaos that would occur upon letting Loki loose on the world, and that... well, under the circumstances, it hardly seemed like a drawback at all.

Loki deserved a little chaos.

'Let's give them hell,' Tony said firmly.

'We will need a plan,' Loki replied.

'Ah, yes,' Tony said. *'I may have already started on that. We're just going to have to work out what to do about the cameras.'* He glanced to the one above the door. *'It's going to be difficult with them watching our every move.'*

'The cameras are a blessing in disguise,' Loki countered immediately. *'For if there are cameras, it means someone is watching. And if someone is watching, then we can manipulate them into seeing what we want them to see.'*

'I've seen you use illusions before,' Tony remembered. *'Can you project an image of us, like you did to trick Thor on the helicarrier? Can you do that with...'* He paused, and merely glanced down at Loki's bound wrists.

'That's not what I mean,' Loki replied. *'I thought this was something Midgardians understood—real magic is not required when all one needs is a simple misdirection. Such as pretending to be asleep while actually plotting to escape, for example.'*

'You sound like you've already thought about this,' Tony observed, already absolutely adoring Loki's plan. He was right—they didn't need magic. They were smarter than the Ten Rings, craftier, and far more motivated. They would win this fight.

'You don't truly believe I have done nothing but feel sorry for myself these past months?' Loki asked.

And Tony grinned, because of course Loki hadn't been twiddling his thumbs this whole time. Loki was just like Tony. If the best way to get out was to wait and bide time, well then. If it worked, it was worth it.

'All right,' said Loki. *'Here is what I propose we do...'*



Over the next few days, they kept their heads down. They had pooled their ideas and come up with something that might work, but their best chance was always going to be if they could get the Ten Rings to be somewhat complacent. That was going to be difficult after Tony's test with the explosive, but possible, if they bided their time for long enough.

Not, of course, that they were doing nothing. And Loki was right– the cameras did come in useful.

On one of the first days back in the workshop after their mental planning session, Tony made sure to act suspicious, shifting and moving his things as he really obviously created a blind spot. It didn't take long before one of the men at the door got a message on their comms, and charged forward with his gun at the ready, speaking incessantly.

“You can't have that there,” Ivan explained harshly, gesturing at the apparatus Tony had constructed.

Tony smirked. “Why not?”

It was fun to watch the way that muscles in Ivan's jaw worked, trying to think of an excuse without admitting that was where the cameras couldn't see them. After all, Ivan didn't know that Tony was able to triangulate their line of sight in a matter of moments.

Actually...

“It's the cameras, isn't it?” He asked, pretending to sigh in realisation– and he hid a grin when he saw the annoyance flash across Ivan's face.

“You can't have it there,” Ivan repeated harshly, and Tony really, really had to work not to let that smile show.

Ivan remained adamant, though, with the two door guards – who Tony was staring to not so affectionately nickname in the manner of *Cat In The Hat* – backing him up. Tony, of course, explained that he needed those tools and wires and metal sheets arranged *just so* in order to do something or other, speaking right out of his ass and using as many technical terms as he could manage – more than a few of them entirely made up – as a very serious sounding explanation as to why that barrier needed to stay in place. He also made sure to mention that if they were worried, why didn't they just watch him in person? There were three fucking sets of eyes in that room after all, so what did they need the cameras for?

They grudgingly agreed, and from that moment, whenever Tony was in that particular spot – which he made sure was fairly often – Ivan was hovering right at his shoulder, watching his every move like a hawk.

And that, of course, meant that Ivan was *not* watching as carefully when Tony was in view of the cameras, taking a break and trusting the technology. But thankfully, cameras can't take pictures through steel tables. They didn't see Tony slipping something up his sleeve underneath the bench, and neither did Ivan, who was relaxing after he had watched Tony be entirely innocent behind his barricade for a solid two hours immediately beforehand.

A piece of wire tucked into a torn waistband here, the broken end of a screwdriver shoved into his underpants there– no one never noticed, and Tony was sure to only take something small enough to not be missed, only one piece at a time.

Tony and Loki always slept entwined these days, limbs twisted together and heads on shoulders— a far cry from the simple hand holding that had helped Tony through his nightmares, and a state of affairs that the Ten Rings seemed disinclined to discourage. After all, if they grew more dependent on each other, then they would only suffer more if torn apart.

It was perfect. Tools and materials could be passed unnoticed and concealed under clothes, hands hidden between bodies that were tilted in such a manner that the camera would think they were pressed close together. Because Tony, of course, was checked upon leaving the workshop, but he only ever took things that were so small there was no struggle hiding them. And since Loki was left to rot on the floor of the cell, never touched so long as Tony played by the rules, there no danger of anything he had hidden on his person being uncovered.

Slowly, surely, everything was coming together, and the Ten Rings had yet to suspect a thing.

Of course, it was only right at the very moment Tony began to truly think they were about to succeed that everything went to shit.

—●—

'I've only seen the five guys,' Tony was saying one evening, not long after he'd come from the workshop. He was straddling Loki's lap, his spine curled over and his head resting on Loki's shoulder, hiding the fact that his hands were working on some delicate wiring between their chests. Loki had looped his arms over Tony's head, further blocking the line of sight. *'Meathead, obviously—'*

'Meathead?' Loki asked, amusement practically flowing from him.

'The leader,' Tony said. *'Don't mock, I had to call him something. Then there's Ivan.'*

'The translator,' Loki commented. *'Yes, I know.'*

'Thing 1 and Thing 2—'

'Your nicknames truly lack imagination—'

'Hey, I'm not going to waste good nicknames on them. Anyway. They're the goons that guard the door of the workshop when I'm in there. Both pretty big, pretty stupid, and not very pretty at all. And then there's the guy who did most of my torturing, who asked the questions and ordered Thing 1 and 2 to shove my head in the barrel.'

'Yes,' Loki said, his voice hardening. *'I know which one you speak of.'*

'But that's all.' Tony frowned, his fingers pausing just as he made the final connection with the wiring. It was something he'd already given thought to, but he hadn't gone over it with Loki yet. *'Surely there can't only be five.'*

'There were more,' Loki commented. *'There were a whole pack of them that helped to hold me down in the beginning, before they decided to starve me.'* The casual way in which Loki said that probably should have been concerning, but they both had other matters on their

mind. *'They may have left once they were not needed, or they may just be staying out of sight. We should prepare for the worst.'*

'Are you sure you're going to be all right?' Tony asked worriedly. *'I don't mean to nag, I just... you really have been starved. And I'm about to throw you into a fight.'*

'Do not worry about me, Stark,' Loki replied, his fingers pressing gently against Tony's back. *'If you succeed in removing these cuffs, I will be fine. As you well know.'*

Yeah. They had talked about it, but Tony hardly believed that Loki's idea could possibly be healthy. He also agreed with Loki's point, though— staying would be far worse for their health than anything that could happen during their attempt to get out.

Unless, of course, Loki's idea didn't work and Tony was left with absolutely no shielding from the bullets that would no doubt fly in his direction.

He tried not to think about that part, and focused on finishing the device. Which, actually, after a quick twist and a final sharp *click*—

'Hey, it's done,' Tony said, turning it over in his hands.

There was a bit of a jerk as Loki stopped himself from looking down and bashing their heads together at the last moment. *'Oh?'*

The single syllable was clearly meant to be flippant, but Tony *heard* the excitement. Understandable, really. With this finished, there were only a few things left to do or find out before they could enact their plan.

'Yeah,' he confirmed. *'I don't think we're going to be able to test it, but it should work. And as soon as we've worked out—'*

Once again Tony found himself interrupted as the door slammed open, and he immediately began to shove the only just finished device over his wrist and under his sleeve, not having time to pass it to Loki. The way that Loki's arms were around Tony meant that it was difficult for them to separate, and they had not entirely done so by the time someone grabbed Tony by the arms and pulled him away, causing Loki's manacles to crack painfully against the back of Tony's head. He couldn't see who was holding him, but with both Ivan and Meathead directly in front of him, it wasn't hard to guess.

"Hey," Tony snapped, struggling against the strong hands that held his arms bent behind his back. "Why are you doing this? I've been playing nice, I've been building what you want—"

"Silence, Stark," Tony's primary torturer hissed into his ear. "We are not here for you this time."

"Alien," Meathead spat, his eyes glittering. Then he said something else, his words echoed by Ivan.

"Are you ready to do as we ask?"

Tony frowned in confusion. There was... something here, something that wasn't quite meshing with what he knew. With what he thought he understood.

"You know what will happen if you don't," Ivan continued, and as he spoke the pressure on Tony's arms increased, and he gasped at the pain in his shoulders as his elbows were pulled higher than they were ever supposed to go.

"If you listen, if you agree, I will stop," the man holding Tony said, his voice almost pleasant as he very nearly dislocated Tony's shoulders.

Tony didn't want Loki to give in, and when he looked up, eyes streaming, he was glad to see that Loki was shaking his head. But he didn't seem entirely determined, his expression pinched and his gaze steadfastly on the wall. He wasn't looking at Meathead or Ivan— and he wasn't looking at Tony.

And suddenly, Tony realised he had it all backward.

They hadn't been hoping that Tony and Loki would grow close so they could get Tony to do what they wanted— they had been hoping to use this situation to get at *Loki* the whole time. It must be difficult to hurt an Asgardian, after all, and Loki hadn't been giving in even to starvation. So they'd tried something else, and god, but Tony hoped to hell it wouldn't work.

Tony could almost hear the torturer's smirk. "Then so be it." He made a gesture toward the camera and then Thing 1 and Thing 2 came in, and at first Tony wasn't worried— if this was a beat down like they'd done to Loki to get *him* to build for them then he'd be fine, he'd survived worse—

But then he saw that they were dragging that awful barrel between them, water sloshing over the sides, and his muscles immediately began to seize, tensing and shaking and Tony was fighting, pulling, snarling, trying not to let them grab his wrist, trying to get away, trying to *breathe*—

"You see?" Ivan's voice floated through a haze. "You have the power to stop this, to save him. All you have to do is agree."

He couldn't see what was happening but Loki must not have done what they wanted, because Tony's head was shoved back under again, hardly given a moment to recuperate. It was always hard to tell but he thought that he was held down longer this time, his limbs growing heavy, the burning in his lungs getting worse and worse as it became harder and harder to stop himself from taking a breath—

Then, suddenly, someone screamed— a horrible, bloodcurdling sound that Tony could hear even through the splashing and the darkness creeping in around the edges of his vision. For a moment Tony wondered if it was him, but then he was wrenched from the water and thrown to the ground, and he knew that the gasping and fast, hysterical breaths were his own. He looked around wildly, trying to find the source of the interruption, and when he saw what was going on he wondered if maybe the lack of oxygen had got to his brain, if maybe he was actually seeing things.

Tony's torturer was white as a sheet, the colour drained from his face and replaced only with a waxy sheen of pain. His eyes were wide and his mouth gaping as his voice tore from his throat in that horrible cry, his limbs flailing as he tried to get *away* but couldn't, because—

Loki was on the ground at his feet, gripping the man's ankle with both hands. And maybe that wouldn't have been so weird—Loki may have been weakened, but even so he had enough strength to crack bone. But that wasn't what had Tony doing a double take, blinking water from his eyes and trying to calm his heavy, gasping breaths as he stared at the scene before him.

Because rather than his normally creamy skin tone, Loki's hands were a bright, bright blue.

The man was still screaming, and even as Tony watched shards of ice began to form, spreading from Loki's blue fingers and creeping up the man's leg. To add to the strangeness Loki's eyes were not their usual green—the irises were shining red, flashing scarlet, almost *glowing* with the colour of blood.

The screams cut off almost as suddenly as they had started, turning first to whimpers and then to words. The man began to speak in some language that Tony didn't understand – Russian, maybe? It sounded Russian, though a bit different to the few times Tony had heard Natasha speak the language, so maybe not – but he was clearly speaking under duress, and despite not being able to understand the exact words, the events all suddenly lined up in Tony's mind as he reached one worrying conclusion.

Loki was offering to make a deal.

“No,” Tony said immediately, his voice cracking. “Don't—“

Thing 2 – or maybe Thing 1, Tony wasn't sure and didn't really care – grabbed Tony's hair and jammed his head toward the ground, jarring his neck and effectively shutting him up. But that didn't matter, because Loki would know what he meant—

Except Loki was staring at Tony with wide eyes, his fear evident even despite the alien colour.

“We will release him if you comply,” Ivan said. “And we won't even take away the previous offer.”

Loki's eyes narrowed, and the torturer spoke again. When Meathead nodded, Loki let go of the torturer's leg and immediately slid backward. The man's knee gave out, and whichever of the Things that wasn't holding Tony helped him get to the door, but came back inside afterward, so that there were now only four terrorists in the cell. They were still outnumbered two to one, and both were more or less out for the count. Tony had no hope of fighting his way out of Thing 2's hold when he couldn't even properly catch his breath, and while Loki was still freaking blue, Tony doubted he had much fight left in him.

Meathead, meanwhile, was grinning, his gaze darting between Tony and Loki like he had just won a prize.

“You know what you have to do,” Ivan said. “Ask us to remove that muzzle, alien, and you will be allowed to eat. Do you want that?”

Loki’s eyes narrowed, flinching instinctively back toward the wall in reaction to whatever they wanted him to do. But still he gave them a nod, a final, awful agreement to the horror he had been withstanding for months, and Meathead’s lips curled into that victorious smile Tony had long since come to despise.

It was not gentle. Thing 1 gripped the back of Loki’s head and yanked the clasp, ripping the metal away in a swift and brutal movement. Through it all, Loki didn’t make a single sound, glaring defiantly at their captors with burning hate.

Tony, though, couldn’t hold back a gasp.

Loki’s mouth was torn and shredded, a thousand thousand scars littered across the ruined skin, crossing over each other in a terrible, nightmarish web. His lips were bleeding from wounds either caused or reopened by the muzzle being ripped away, and as Tony watched a trickle of bright scarlet ran down his chin.

When the god finally spoke, his voice was hoarse from disuse and dehydration.

“Allow Stark to remain unharmed,” Loki gasped, “and I shall do as you ask.”

Ivan spoke quickly, and Meathead’s grin widened.

“You shall not fight?” Ivan asked.

“Not if you no longer hurt Stark,” Loki confirmed, and despite the anger that remained in his tone, he managed to infuse it with enough undertones of a plea to give the demand just the proper touch of desperation. “If you do not hurt him... I will do as you ask. I give you my word.” He paused, and swallowed. “Please.”

It didn’t seem right, watching Loki beg.

This time, Meathead spoke for himself, the single word passing through yellow teeth that flashed with triumph. “Deal.”

Loki sagged with relief, and Tony hoped, god did he hope, that at least some of it had been faked. He needed this to have been part of Loki’s plan, because Tony *still* didn’t know what they wanted from him other than that it was horrible enough to scare Loki, and he didn’t want to be the reason that Loki would go through such a thing.

He didn’t want Loki to go through it at all.

His musings were cut off as Thing 2 let him go and shoved him onto the ground with enough force that it would have hurt had he not thrown out his hands to soften the fall, catching himself before his head collided with yet another hard surface—

Just before his hands hit the concrete floor, Tony felt something at his wrist loosen—

The metal device was dislodged from his wrist and it clattered to the ground—

“That’s a weapon!” Ivan exclaimed, pointing and yelling—

And Tony tried to reach for it but Thing 2 was on him again, grabbing him by the throat—

He was dragged away from it, the device left on the ground as thick fingers worked to crush his windpipe.

“No!” Loki snarled, the hoarseness of his voice only making it sound more menacing. “You agreed that he would not be harmed!”

“Weapon,” Meathead growled, jabbing a finger first at Tony and then at Loki. “This is not you, your deal. You follow. This is Stark’s punishment.”

“I said I would only work with you if he was safe,” Loki said, his voice growing desperate. “You *swore*—“

“Oaths mean nothing for you in here,” Ivan translated, his fearful gaze taking the bite from the words that Meathead had *spat* across the room. “You are nothing, Loki Odinson—“

Loki cut them off with an inhuman growl, bearing bloodstained teeth that were tapered to points. “You think I will simply do as you wish?” he spat, his sharp teeth snapping together as his eyes blazed red. Frost began to form on the surface of his Asgardian manacles, creeping across the metal in a pattern far too beautiful to belong on such a horrible device. “You think that you can break me, can continue to cause me pain until you control me?”

More than Loki’s fingers had changed colour now— the skin about his eyes was changing as well, the blue creeping across his face just as ice began to creep across the floor, spreading out from where Loki was still crouched on the ground.

“You agreed,” Ivan said, stepping backward. “You said you would—“

“If Stark remained unharmed,” Loki replied harshly. “And you have harmed him.”

“He built a weapon, he is dangerous—“

“And so am I,” Loki snarled. “Why punish him for this when I had agreed? What have you to gain from *this*?”

“You have proved you can hurt us even with those manacles on,” Ivan said. “If he got away with this without punishment then you would fight—“

“I said that I wouldn’t—“

“You are the god of *lies*!” Ivan exclaimed, clearly panicked, backing almost all the way to the wall now. And wow, but was *that* the wrong thing to say. Even half choking, his fingernails scratching at Thing 2’s hand, Tony knew that Ivan had just made a fucking big mistake.

Buoyed by anger, Loki planted his chained hands on the ground and began to push himself up to his feet, standing taller than any of the others in the cell despite his current state. His arms were shaking, and his legs looked very unsteady, but his eyes were still blazing and it seemed that he was holding himself straight by the power of determination alone.

“You should have kept your hands off him,” Loki snarled. His hands were so cold now that the frost was forming icicles, sharp enough to maim—

Ivan was right. Loki *was* a threat, and they all knew it—

Meathead was backing away, yelling orders—

Loki was so close now, and Thing 2 threw Tony away again, dashing to join Thing 1—

Thing 1 raised large, heavy gun, dark gold with purple embellishments that looked like nothing found on Earth yet horribly familiar all at the same time—

Oh, shit, how the hell had the Ten Rings managed to get their hands on a *Chitauri weapon*—

And when had that come into the cell anyway? Tony sure hadn't noticed it—

The gun was charging, whirring with the power of the purple batteries, the end beginning to glow—

And Tony didn't have a choice.

He threw himself across the floor of the cell, snatching up the scrappily and hastily assembled weapon, snapping it back onto his wrist and pulling the repulsor down over his palm. It took only half a moment to connect the final wire to the arc reactor, and he raised his hand and fired before the Chitauri gun had finished loading its charge.

He hit Thing 1 in the side, sending him to the ground as the alien gun was flung to the other side of the cell. Then he quickly spun and fired again, managing to get Thing 2 in the chest, knocking him against the wall. Loki was moving as well— he grabbed Thing 2 by the neck, the terrorist's skin turning black with frost—

Meathead scooped up Thing 1's gun from the ground and then he and Ivan dashed for the door— Ivan was closest and got there first, and Meathead slammed it shut behind him, leaving the others locked inside.

Thing 2 had stopped moving, his eyes bulging from their sockets. He was quite clearly already dead, the repulsor burn on his chest no longer oozing blood and his breaths long since quieted, his skin mottled purple and black. But it seemed that Loki wasn't quite done.

“This is for hurting Anthony,” Loki snarled, and then he pulled his hands apart and *shoved*, and the chain of his manacles shattered straight through the man's frozen neck like glass.

And Tony... didn't feel a thing. No disgust, no regret. Just a blank acceptance, and maybe a little vicious enjoyment that someone who had caused him pain had been torn from life by a person who *cared*.

It... well, it made him want to get a taste of it himself.

The repulsor was performing well, and was still in perfect working order. Tony flexed his fingers as he approached Thing 1, who had collapsed by the closed door, having given up trying to open it when he was zapped by the magic his own people had cast. His hands were pressed against the wound on his side, and when he saw Tony standing over him, he began to yell and tried to get to his feet with little success.

“This is for...” Tony trailed off, tilting his head in thought. “Well, it’s basically just for everything.”

Then he lined up his repulsor with Thing 1’s terrified expression, and fired.

A hot knife through gelato

Chapter Notes

I had to split this one guys, I was having too much fun with the second half and it got so long that it wasn't ever going to be finished unless I cut it into two. So to everyone who I told that something specific would happen in a certain chapter. Just. Add an extra one in there. I don't know why I think I can say things like 'that will happen in Chapter 9', I should know myself better than that by now.

Also... please take note of the violence tag, for this and the next chapter.

The cloying scent of burnt metal and charred flesh hung in the air, like a heavy weight that wrought a sense of finality. Tony recognised that everything was coming to an end. One way or another, he knew that he would not be returning to the cell.

It was freeing, in a way, to have the decision taken out of their hands, to finally know that *this was it*. Because with two dead bodies and all their cards on the table, they didn't have a choice. They had to act, or risk squandering their chance.

It was now or never.

There was nothing left to lose.

Well, Tony thought, his gaze raking over where Loki was still staring down at the shattered remains of Thing 2, his expression about as far from regretful as it was possible to be. *Almost nothing*.

If they were going to move, then there was no point in pretending any more.

Tony raised his right hand and shot the camera above the door without a thought, leaving it a mess of broken wires and burned metal, little more than a dark smear against the wall.

“This... was not smart,” said Loki, his blank gaze turning to the smoking remains of the camera. “We could have weathered that. I know that I lost my temper, but if you had let them deal with me—“

“Are you kidding me?” Tony asked incredulously. “Didn't you see what they had? They were going to—“

“They would not have killed me,” Loki interrupted. “They still wanted to use me. If I died, my magic would die with me.”

“I don’t care,” Tony snapped, shaking his head. “I wasn’t about to let them hurt you, not when we were ready anyway.” He paused, taking in the way that Loki leant against the wall. “We are ready, right?”

“We shall have to be.”

Looking at Loki, Tony could hardly believe that they had single chance in hell. The god was not so much leaning against the wall any more as using it to support all his weight, his side and shoulder pressed heavily into the white painted concrete and his head lolling. He barely seemed to have the energy to lift his wrists toward Tony but he did so anyway, his hands shaking as he presented them wordlessly.

They’d discussed this at length already, there was no need for words.

Tony had to be careful with his aim– if Loki were human he would be risking losing a hand, but even an Asgardian – or whatever the hell Loki was, since Tony was pretty sure Thor didn’t turn blue – would likely be seriously injured by a point blank blast from the repulsor. Even if it was a repulsor that had been put together with scraps under the worst of conditions, it was powered by Tony’s arc reactor, and Tony had never built anything that, even if it didn’t work as it was meant to, failed to make a hell of a mess. Besides, this one was entirely uncalibrated. There was no telling what kind of damage it might do.

Thankfully, the cuffs circling Loki’s wrists were quite wide, probably to account for the runes etched across them more than for strength. While that meant they would be hard to break, they would also be very difficult to miss. And while the metal was very strong, designed to hold back gods, it had also suffered multiple sheer temperature changes in a matter of minutes.

Tony held his hand directly over Loki’s left wrist, and fired.

The metal shattered but Tony was already moving. He aimed for the other and shattered that as well in quick succession, and the broken manacles fell, the chain clattering to the ground with a sense of finality.

And Loki, despite his exhaustion, began to smile.

It was a horrible expression, pulling at his broken lips and sending another drip of blood dribbling down his chin, but Loki’s eyes were so, so bright that they almost seemed to glow.

“*Oh,*” he gasped, one hand splaying against the wall. “That feels better.”

He raised his other arm, staring giddily as a green spark danced between his fingers. It only lasted a moment though before the spark fizzled out, and Loki slumped back against the wall even heavier than before.

“Lokes,” Tony said, jerking forward as if to help steady him but pausing just short, his fingers hovering over Loki’s shoulders.

The assistance was unneeded anyway. Loki waved his hand through the air and pulled a flask from nothing— not a fancy thermos, but one of those honest to god old timey leather flasks, like it had been stolen from the set of *Game of Thrones* or something. The top came off with a solid *pop*, and Tony was close enough to smell something intensely fruity and maybe a little alcoholic, like really strong schnapps.

“This will sustain me for a time,” Loki said. “It will provide a burst of energy. Artificial and sudden, but strong.”

“Magical Red Bull,” Tony said, nodding his understanding. Loki had given him a more extensive run down a few days before. “Handy.”

“But dangerous,” Loki warned. He paused before the flask touched his lips. “When this wears off, I will likely collapse. I need to know that I can trust you.”

“You can,” Tony swore easily. “I promise.”

And without another word, Loki downed the drink in a few deep gulps.

The effect was instantaneous. Colour flooded Loki’s cheeks, a manic glint entering his eyes, and his smile grew wider even than it had when Tony initially destroyed the manacles. He pushed off the wall and straightened properly, standing tall and radiating a sense of power that Tony recognised from the first time they met, but which had been absent ever since.

And Tony, well. He grinned. All of a sudden, it was looking like the Ten Rings were the ones who didn’t stand a chance.

Without a word, Loki dropped the empty flask and moved to the door. The orange magic flashed as Loki moved to place his hands against the surface, but that green spark returned between his fingers and they slipped past like a hot knife through gelato. His eyes narrowed, the green at his hands pulsed brighter for a moment, and then the orange unravelled with the same shift as a loose thread that had been pulled too hard.

That was Tony’s cue. He didn’t hesitate as he reached out and simply *shoved*, trusting that Loki would have disarmed the destructive magic entirely— and then the door fell open like it had never been locked in the first place.

Then, suddenly, it sounded like a bomb had gone off—

They were immediately met with a spray of bullets, four semi-automatics powering down on them from the moment the door was flung open. Admittedly, Tony flinched when the first volley came flying toward him, but it was stopped in the air by an invisible wall, colliding with nothing and deflected off to the side. There was a bit of force behind it, a shockwave that pushed back from Loki’s shield, but only enough for Tony to know that the bullets had hit.

Feeling Loki’s familiar presence at his back, Tony simply smiled through the barrage, and waited.

It didn't take long.

After all, it couldn't have been a normal sight, two people standing tall through their injuries and tiredness and staring down a thousand bullets that should have torn them to shreds. There was half a second after the silencing of the guns where the three men and one woman simply gaped in confusion—

But Tony didn't give them time to voice their shock. He simply raised his hands and shot them dead, the repulsors on their only setting and slamming each person against the wall behind, searing their skin and snapping their bones and leaving them nothing but crumpled corpses on the ground.

Instinctively, Tony reached behind him with his free hand and curled his fingers against Loki's.

'I guess we were right. I don't recognise these.'

'Neither do I,' Loki replied. *'We shall just have to be ready to face more.'*

Ready. Ha.

They'd been forced to act before they were fully prepared, yes, but Tony had been ready for this for a *long* time.

They went down the hallway swiftly but cautiously, Tony staying ahead with his arm outstretched while Loki stood behind, concentrating on keeping them safe. They might not have managed to learn the layout of the entire place, but there was one room Tony knew he would be able to find his way to. They checked every door they went past on the way, but they were all open and empty. Tony's original cell was one of them, as was the room he had been tortured in with the barrel of water. He went straight past those, not wanting to linger. Loki didn't say anything about the tension as they hurried through, but he may have attributed it to nerves of finally putting their plan into action.

Or maybe he felt exactly the same— not nervous, just anxious to get away, and perhaps even a little excited to see it done.

They came across only one pair of terrorists around the next corner who were dealt with just as easily as the last group, and then Tony stood guard while Loki took down the ward on the door Tony indicated.

While the Ten Rings had probably – *hopefully* – been caught off guard by their sudden assault, surely one of the first things one would think to do with Tony Stark on the loose would be to secure the workshop. But, apparently, they were still regrouping, because the workshop appeared to be untouched.

Loki waited by the door, and Tony grinned as he quickly pieced together the almost-finished repulsor he had left in the lab, having told Ivan that they were pieces of the power source for the suit he was supposedly building the terrorists. It was costly, using up so much time and no doubt eliminating their advantage of surprise, but it would pay. He'd taken down both Thing

1 and Thing 2 in a matter of moments back there— with a weapon for each hand, he stood a much greater chance of making a dent in whatever force was really hiding in this place.

Still, he worked as fast as the need for precision allowed, and had it together in only a couple of minutes.

“Do you want anything?” Tony asked, gesturing to the piles of tools spread through the room. “I know you have your magic, but it might be smart to have something else so you don’t use up that energy burst too quickly.”

In answer, Loki merely flicked a wrist, a dagger appearing fluidly into his palm. He repeated the movement, and the dagger slid away again, though Tony couldn’t see where to. Surely it hadn’t gone into the sleeves of Loki’s rags.

Well. It was probably magic.

Oh, this was going to be *fun*.

When Tony stepped up to the door, Loki held a finger to his lips before reaching for Tony’s wrist.

‘I can hear them,’ Loki warned, his fingers just brushing the skin just above Tony’s new repulsor.

‘Good,’ Tony replied. *‘Then we won’t have to go looking for them.’*

They had been in the workshop for only a few minutes, but it was long enough that it sounded like there was a considerable force amassed outside. The Ten Rings weren’t bothering to be quiet— it was clear they were attempting to be as imposing as possible, threatening with the sound of their numbers and hoping to scare the pair into an early surrender.

Even now, they were underestimating what Tony and Loki were capable of.

This time, they weren’t met with bullets when they pushed the door open, and stepped into the hall unmolested. The sight they walked into wasn’t exactly welcoming, but Tony found a harsh grin curling the corners of his mouth nonetheless.

About fifteen yards to the left of the workshop door were four goons, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with large guns aimed solidly at Tony’s chest. There were two standing behind them, armed with fucking Chitauri guns, and then behind them was an unarmed woman. That was, uh, a little odd, but Tony’s assessing gaze slid past her to the second line of semi-automatics behind. But it wasn’t the guns or the alien weapons or even the number of terrorists that gave Tony pause. It was the shimmer of orange that lay over them like a blanket, a thin layer of magic that hovered over and in front of their lines, a larger echo of the ward that had been placed on the doors.

And right down the back, his smirk finally wiped from his face and replaced with pure rage, was Meathead.

'Game plan?' Tony asked, recognising that he was not equipped to run point on this one.

'I can shield us both and deal with them at the same time,' Loki assured him. *'You focus on thinning them out.'*

'Gotcha,' Tony agreed easily. *'So should I wait, or will there be a signal, or...'*

Rather than answering, Loki shifted his hand so that it was pressed against the edge of the right-hand repulsor. Tony frowned, and was about to ask when he felt a sharp tingle that soon settled down to just a tiny background itch— only it wasn't uncomfortable. It felt electric, and Tony was already smiling with realisation by the time Loki was done.

'I have only enhanced one of your weapons,' Loki said. *'Use the other wisely.'*

Tony knew his grin must be *vicious*. *'Are you saying what I think you're—'*

"Just fight, Stark," Loki said, letting him go. "Trust me."

It was something they had said many times between them recently, and while it still held weight it was feeling less like a leap of faith and more like a simple fact. Loki had already got them through the doors and stopped bullets. Tony was more than willing to trust him on this.

And so with a determined stance and absolutely zero hesitation, Tony raised his right hand, and fired a repulsor beam straight into the Ten Rings' midst. He enjoyed their confident expressions as the beam headed straight for them, and enjoyed it even more when it passed straight through the orange shield and blasted one of the gunmen straight back through their lines, likely breaking every bone in his body.

"Damn, Loki," Tony whistled lowly. "Have I ever told you how awesome you are?"

There was no time for a response— bullets immediately began to pepper at Loki's shield and Tony focused back on the matter at hand. Wishing he had his preferred method of transportation, he began to take slow, sure steps forward. He kept his arm up, bent at the wrist and steadied by his other hand as he kept up an even barrage of blasts. He could feel Loki at his back while the bullets bounced harmlessly off their shield, and they advanced together as the Ten Rings slowly grew more panicked.

They were outnumbered but the Ten Rings were bottlenecked by the narrow hallway, and they were already starting to fall like flies—

Then the first blast from the Chitauri weapons hit the shield, and Tony's world exploded into mess of orange and green. Loki audibly snapped his teeth together as he held on, but then he stepped in front of Tony and threw out his arms—

The terrorists in front of them were pushed back as Loki's shield exploded outward, but there was a roar from down the other end of the hallway, and Tony turned to see another half dozen men running at them from behind with various guns and knives in their hands.

"Loki," he warned—

“I know,” Loki replied tartly. “Deal with it.”

Ha, easy for him to say. He was a god and was holding back half of the army with his magic alone. Tony didn't have that advantage— but like *hell* he was going to let that stop him. No JARVIS, no flight, no armour worth a damn save for Loki's shields, and he knew Loki would soon be distracted. He had none of the stuff he was used to fighting with, none of the high-tech gadgets and sensors he was used to relying upon. But Tony still had his wits, and he damn well knew how to use them.

Tony fired and dodged and fired again, not bothering to duck away from bullets he knew would be stopped by the shields. The terrorists in the melee weren't protected by the orange ward, and Tony pressed forward with both repulsors blazing—

But his usual method of quick sharp attacks and then ducking out and up wouldn't work, because he couldn't fly, and he was getting further and further from Loki with no way out. The first time he noticed the distance between them was when an explosion at his back caused him to turn, and he saw that Loki had his daggers out and was using them to cut a deadly path through the terrorists as he moved toward the orange ward. The bullets and the human bodies were doing nothing to stop him but the Chitauri guns seemed to be causing some problems, and Loki flinched every time a blast from one hit one of his shields.

Tony spun and tried to get back closer to help but the Ten Rings were able to use their sheer numbers to cut him off, blocking the narrow hallway and leaving Tony to simply watch as Loki was battered over and over—

The goons with the Chitauri guns fired again and again—

Tony was distracted by an attack from the side, a luckily a punch rather than a bullet or a knife, since it made its way through the shield Loki had wrapped around him and cracked against Tony's jaw. He turned with murder in his eyes and his repulsors at the ready to find the woman he had noticed earlier. She smirked, her eyes glinting dangerously, almost appearing orange in the glow of the shield.

The reason for her lack of weapons quickly became apparent as she ducked one of Tony's blasts easily and spun closer like a dancer, catching Tony's wrist in a crushing grip that felt sweltering. He got out of it by charging the repulsor and pointing it at her face, but then the woman kicked out and caught Tony by the ankles, trying to send him to the ground. Tony responded with an underhanded blast to her throat before turning to face the heavy-set terrorist to his left, not even bothering to watch her fall to the ground. There was no way she'd survive a hit like that.

He took out the big guy and snatched a gun from another but failed to entirely redirect a knife that was aimed at his side. It got through the shield and nicked his arm, cutting a line of red from his elbow almost to his wrist. He snarled and lashed out, smacking the man over the head with the gun he'd stolen and then finishing him off with a blast to the heart—

Something solid got him in the side, and he turned wildly, desperately, searching for the bastard that managed to get in a hit—

And then, he froze. Because what he saw should have been impossible.

It was the woman again, the one he was sure he had killed. He blinked, checking if it was in fact the same person, because to survive a hit to the neck from one of these uncalibrated repulsors... well, he'd already thought it. *Impossible*. And yet, there she was, upright and alive and with hardly an injury to show for it. The skin on her neck did look charred black and was still smouldering around the edges, but as Tony watched, the blackness began to fade and her skin returned to just how it had been before.

Frowning, Tony aimed at her and fired once, twice, three times, every shot hitting her dead on. But she simply rolled with the hits, not bothering to dodge, her grin growing more and more feral as her skin healed over with an orange glow and a spark of heat.

“What the hell,” Tony demanded, pausing his onslaught for a moment. “What the hell *are* you?”

She bared her teeth in unbridled anger, and Tony was suddenly reminded of the day he had been caught— of the fight in the desert, and the people who could melt metal with their hands and recover from almost any injury. He'd half thought that was a dream, a result of being hit on the head too many times— but here was another of those fiery demons, and she was out for blood.

But, well, the devil was in the details, right? She would be able to survive almost any injury, sure, but almost wasn't *all*, and now Tony knew exactly where to hit her.

He was ready.

Her gaze panned over the cut on Tony's arm, his ragged breaths, his shaking knees. Despite the adrenaline he was near to running on empty, and she knew it. She was noting his every weakness, calculating exactly how to take him down—

And then she turned, and headed in the other direction. The Ten Rings parted like the Red Sea before Moses and closed back up around her immediately, stopping Tony from following. He cursed and tried anyway, hammering away at the men in front of him— but she was passing through the orange shield. They were all starting to pass back into the shield actually, like they were retreating—

Except...

Loki was still over there, right up against the edge of the shimmering orange wall. He was about to get swamped, and Tony couldn't get to him. After all, Tony had been taught to fight but he wasn't on the same level of Steve or Natasha, and he knew that he would have been dead ten times over by now if not for Loki's shield, even without counting the bullets. He could force his way through, but it would take far too long.

He needed something fast and destructive, something that would take out a whole chunk at once and give them the edge they needed to get through this.

He needed something like...

Something like an explosion.

Burning with inspiration, Tony locked eyes with Loki across the hall, saw the understanding flash across his face—

He raised his *left* hand this time, aimed directly at the orange glow, and fired.

The air lit up with bright orange light, the shield Meathead had somehow erected absorbing the energy from Tony's repulsor and firing it right back in an epic shockwave. The repulsor was far more powerful than the measly test boot had been just as this shield was far larger than the ward on the workshop door, and the resulting explosion did more than throw everyone back. Tony could almost see it happening in slow motion, bones cracking, necks snapping, limbs being blown into positions they were never supposed to be capable of and bodies contorting with the fierce concussive force.

It was expanding outward quickly, shattering through every person it came across—

And it was almost upon him.

He had no armour to protect his body, it was just as soft as those of the Ten Rings that Tony had only just seen twisted and broken—

Then Tony felt something heavy hit him from the other side, a different kind of force that had only recently become familiar—

There was a heavy weight over him and he gasped desperately, struggling to breathe. At the sound of his first struggling breath though the weight moved, and Tony was met with the sight of Loki hovering over him, annoyance flashing in his green eyes that again almost seemed to glow against the red blood dripping down his face.

"Thanks for the assist," Tony gasped.

"You could have waited *two more seconds*," Loki hissed. "You didn't need to give me a heart attack—"

"Yeah, yeah," Tony muttered, shoving lightly at Loki's shoulder. "Come on. There are more important things to be doing than chewing me out right now."

Loki almost looked like he disagreed, but settled on a short glare before getting back up in a fluid, graceful movement that was entirely not fair at all, considering how much Tony's very *bones* were aching. To add insult to injury, he didn't offer Tony a hand or anything, and left him to clamber to his feet by himself. By the time Tony had managed to achieve vertical stability, Loki was already stalking toward his next target.

Tony took half a second to orient himself the wake of the explosion. Chunks of the wall had been knocked free, the ceiling was cracked, the plastic covers of the lights were shattered while what was left of their bulbs sparked dangerously, giving only dim light to see by. The floor was a mess of concrete and writhing bodies, while sobs of pain and horrible, low moaning filled the air. Most of the terrorists were broken beyond repair, and Tony did his best

to tune out the noise, searching for any who were still a threat. He found them immediately—only two people, it seemed, had managed to get through the onslaught without being entirely incapacitated.

Meathead was against a wall, having been pushed backward but encased in a shimmering, orange bubble. Clearly he had seen the oncoming threat, and erected one of the wards around himself, uncaring of anyone else in the room.

In contrast, the fire woman had clearly been hit, and hit hard. She was crumpled against a wall a few yards down from Meathead, sharp edges of broken ribs poking out through tears in her bloodied shirt, both arms and legs bent too many times and in too many directions, like some grotesque creature from a horror movie. Perhaps the most disconcerting was her neck, floppy and loose and twisted in the wrong direction. Yet despite the way her head was lolling down below the level of her shoulder, she somehow, impossibly, managed to turn it and catch Tony's eye.

He watched, half sick and half fascinated as a broken arm shoved at her head, pressing it back upright. Her skin burned bright, flaming embers and hot coals and a bright hot glow that Tony could feel from across the room. Bones cracked and blood boiled, and through it all she was smiling that horrible awful smile that chilled even through her flames.

“That’s just not natural,” Tony said, his eyes unable to leave the woman’s charred body despite the fact that his words were directed at Loki.

She wasn’t entirely put back together by the time she stood, but she took a few lumbering steps forward anyway, each one more sure than the next. Tony knew that by the time she managed to get to Loki and himself she would be back to full form, and, well.

Nah, fuck it.

Tony could win this fight with one hand behind his back. (Not. You know. That he was going to try it. He wasn’t an idiot.)

Oh actually, speaking of using two hands—

A noise from the left shifted his focus, and he saw Meathead trying to scuttle away while they were distracted.

Loki snarled, the sound ripping from his throat as he bared his teeth and threw out an arm. Green magic danced around Meathead’s feet and he was suddenly forced to a stop, unable to move his legs to get away.

Well, that was one less thing to deal with. Figuring Loki probably had that handled, Tony turned back to the slowly advancing fire lady who had begun to quicken her step, manually shoving her ribs back into her chest with her bare hands.

Tony didn’t rush, though. He checked his repulsors, then held them together, waiting for her to get close.

Don't cross the streams, he thought sarcastically, half remembering his fight with Rhodey way back when but far more amused by the reference. He was still smiling when he engaged the weapons— and just in time too, if the burning fire in her eyes was anything to go by.

He was pushed back with the force of it, stumbling over his feet in an effort to keep the streams steady. It was lucky he didn't need long— after only a couple seconds the left repulsor sparked and sputtered, and he was forced to let up and fling it from his hand before it injured him. He'd known it was dangerous, that's why he chose to do it after all— he supposed he should be glad it hadn't resulted in *another* explosion.

The moment his hand was in the clear, he examined the results—

And they were pretty fucking satisfying, to be honest.

Her ribs weren't broken any more— they simply didn't exist, a huge, perfectly round through and through burned into her chest, almost spanning the entire width of her torso. She blinked, and stared down at the hole in her body as if surprised.

Then, just in case there was any doubt as to the fatality of that injury, Loki stepped up with one of his knives and sliced her head clean from her shoulders in a single swipe.

"I've never really liked heat," Loki commented, staring at the corpse for half a moment before turning back to Meathead and simply stating— "And you *knew* that."

As Meathead snapped something in another language, Tony remembered thinking that Loki's cell was warmer than his, back when he'd first been thrown into it. Then he remembered the ice that had curled around Loki's hands not too long ago, and he wondered just how much, exactly, the Ten Rings had known. There was something more to unpack there, something that he couldn't help but be curious about, despite knowing unequivocally that Loki wouldn't want to talk about it.

He always seemed to want to know everything, where Loki was concerned.

Meathead was still talking, but neither Loki nor Tony rose to the bait. It was almost pathetic, really. All that rage, all that bravado, and Meathead was already caught and restrained. They simply stood by him, waiting, weapons at the ready. He couldn't run, he couldn't hide. They were just waiting for him to try and fight, to make a mistake that they could exploit. But the leader of this Ten Rings cell, it would seem, had one last trick up his sleeve.

With a vicious growl and a final, desperate bid to win, Meathead raised his hand and curled his fingers into a fist. Orange lightning cracked through the air, and Tony didn't even flinch back at first, trusting Loki to catch it with his magic. But then a tendril of power sparked toward Tony's chest like a moth to a flame and Tony jerked to the side, knowing he couldn't let it come into contact. He knew, he *knew* that if that magic touched his reactor, it would be bad. Best case, it would short out and he would die, since there was hardly a hope of getting a spare in here. Worst— a big fucking explosion.

His breathing was shallow and he fired at it with his only remaining repulsor, but just as it had with the shield before, it sailed right through and did nothing to redirect the orange power

which just kept on crackling through the air from Meathead's hand to Tony's chest—

Loki snarled and moved so fast Tony almost missed seeing the god curl his hand into a fist and smack Meathead right across the jaw, not even bothering to use a weapon. There was enough force behind it to throw him down and Meathead's skull cracked hard against the concrete, but not hard enough to knock him out, and he merely stared up at them, spitting and defiant. He raised his hand again—

“Oh no, you don't,” Tony spat, raising his own as he fought to control his breathing. It was little more than a threat anyway, because Loki was the one to shove his bare foot against Meathead's chest and press down *hard*, causing the man to gasp and choke. Something cracked, and Meathead's mouth fell open in a silent scream, unable to draw the breath he needed to form the sound.

“Interesting,” Loki mused, cocking his head. His gaze wasn't on Meathead's agonised expression, but on the man's hands, eyeing the many rings that adorned his fingers. Tony absolutely hated those rings, hated how he'd always see them glint just before they crashed down against his skull.

Still pressing with his foot, though far more gently than Tony knew he was capable of, Loki leaned down and took Meathead's wrist in his hands. He yanked it closer to inspect the rings, and seemed most curious about a thin gold band on the man's middle finger, adorned with a large orange stone of some kind that was shaped like a flame. It had a symbol on it, Chinese perhaps, but otherwise looked rather innocuous. Loki, though, seemed to sense something about it that was different from the others. But he didn't bother trying to pull the ring free. He merely summoned the same knife Tony had seen in the workshop, and sliced the finger clean off.

Blood began to spurt immediately and Loki released the limb, disinterested. He examined the finger in his hand and flicked it into the same space between spaces where he kept his other belongings.

“You only want the one?” Tony asked curiously, taking half a step closer. He knew it was dangerous, and made sure his focus remained on the surrounding hallways— after all, it was unlikely that Meathead had tried to come at them with *everyone*. There might be more of those fire people around. But if Meathead's rings were magic, then Tony wanted to know everything about it.

“Only that one ring holds power,” Loki said by way of explanation. “The rest are simply jewellery.” He lifted his foot only long enough to give Meathead's broken form a soft nudge— and it really was only a nudge, but that was enough to jostle his ribs and evoke a broken moan that mingled with that of Meathead's dying henchmen.

Huh. Tony had almost forgotten about them, their noises beginning to fade as more began to pass out.

He was drawn from his thoughts by a soft touch to the side of his neck, and he glanced up to meet Loki's gaze.

“Would you like the honour?” Loki asked, offering his blade handle first.

And... that was strange, because Tony still had the one working repulsor, didn't he? He didn't need another weapon, and Loki easily could have offered him the prize without the blade. But looking down at Meathead's heaving body, at the person who was the reason for so much pain, Tony found himself pausing in contemplation. Tony had bled at this man's hand and been forced to go against his morals. He'd been hurt and mistreated and betrayed. This was the man who had starved Loki and locked away the very thing that made the god feel alive, who had treated them both like animals and tried to use their friendship against them.

But that wasn't even the worst of it, because Meathead was a leader in an organisation that had set Tony's current path in motion. He was proof that the Ten Rings had survived Tony's crusade, that the stench of everything Tony had once sworn to wipe out still existed, was still smeared across the world. And when there's rot, sometimes it's not enough just to try and blast it, and then sift through the destruction that's left and hope you managed to get every last bit.

Sometimes, to be sure, a rot that deep and that festered needs to be cut out with a deft hand and careful precision.

So Tony took the knife.

“Oh,” he answered, watching with a strange kind of detached enjoyment as Meathead took what would be his final, wheezing breath. “It would be my pleasure.”

Head of the snake

Tony had never taken joy from pure human suffering, but by god there was something satisfying about the fear that flashed across Meathead's face as he readjusted his grip on the handle of Loki's knife. Tony wasn't graceful about it, nor did he display any of the skill he was sure Loki would have as he knelt and buried the knife in Meathead's chest in a single, harsh movement. But he knew enough about human anatomy these days to plunge that blade through the already broken ribcage and directly into the terrorist's heart. The blood began to well in the wound almost as quickly as the muscle stopped pumping it through Meathead's arteries, and Tony decided that he rather liked the symbolism.

As he watched Meathead's limbs shudder and finally go still, Tony realised that he still didn't even know the man's name.

He also realised that he didn't actually care. You don't need a name to hate.

The knife pulled from the terrorist's chest with a rough squelch, and Tony wiped it against his tatty trousers before handing it back. Loki accepted it easily, but didn't put it away— his gaze was panning slowly across the rest of the hall, taking in the few bodies who were still writhing.

“We cannot leave them,” Loki said, and Tony heard the final word in the sentence without needing it to be said.

We cannot leave them alive.

“I can deal with it,” Loki said firmly at Tony's pause. “There is no need for you to—”

“No,” Tony cut in, shaking his head. He took the necessary step to press into Loki's space, curling one hand around Loki's left wrist and using the other to gently pry the still sticky blade away from Loki's fingers once more. When he spoke, the words also echoed between them through their bond, ringing with honest truth. *“We're in this together.”*

Loki didn't quite smile, probably due to the knowledge of what they were about to partake in— but he twisted their free hands together to give Tony's fingers a soft squeeze in thanks before stepping away and summoning a fresh dagger.

It was grisly work, but it was necessary. Loki was right, they couldn't leave any loose ends— they couldn't afford the chance that one of those people might recover enough to call for backup, or to get back on their feet and catch the pair from behind while they were focused on what lay ahead. The men and women were all terrorists who'd done awful things, and it was in Tony and Loki's best interests to see them breathe their last.

It needed to be done, and Tony was only too willing to help Loki do it.

Despite a lingering touch of disgust, Tony mostly felt strangely disconnected, and he knew it wouldn't pass until it was over. For they may have got the leader but they weren't out yet,

they hadn't even found the exit, and they knew for a fact that there were still a good number of terrorists between them and their freedom.

There was still a hell of a long way to go.



They continued down the hallway with equal caution to before, being sure to check every nook and cranny, every door, every place that any of the bastards could be squirreled away. They came across a kitchen staffed by two elderly cooks, and they suffered the same fate as all the rest. They worked for the Ten Rings after all, and Ivan had proven that there was no one innocent here.

As they continued though, the number of people began to dwindle. They found living quarters, and also an armoury, decked out with HammerTech and enough explosives to take out three New York City blocks. (At least there were no Chitauri weapons— it would seem that the only ones they had possessed had already been destroyed by Loki following the fight in the hallway.) A small firing range was positioned right beside what appeared to be a rec room, adorned with only a dilapidated pool table and cracked television. There was little order to the rooms save for the fact that they were clearly meant only for the 'staff', as it were, rather than the prison area that Loki and Tony had come from.

Except, then they pushed through a door and into a rather disconcerting room, all shining metal and white plastic.

At first, Tony thought it might have been a medical suite, somewhere for the Ten Rings to patch up injuries without needing to visit a hospital outside. But then he saw the blades, the syringes, the *restraints*. They weren't anything like the usual steel or aluminium handcuffs used on prisoners admitted to hospitals, either.

"Oh my god," Tony whispered hoarsely, taking half a step inside, drawn in by a twisted mix of morbid curiosity and burning anger more than he was pushed away by his horror. His gaze ran over the familiar runes etched into the heavy Asgardian manacles, which were connected to a thick chain and locked securely to large metal rings in the ground either side of the metal slab. Similar contraptions lay at the foot, ready to restrain ankles as well. "Loki—"

"They wanted to see if they could bottle my seiðr and use me as a battery," Loki explained before Tony could properly ask. He sounded absent, with no level of spite or even fear in his tone— and the emptiness was more than enough for Tony to tear his gaze from the steel bed and turn toward the god instead. Loki was frozen in the doorway, staring into the room but not appearing to see any of it at all.

"What do you mean, a battery?" Tony asked slowly. "Surely that's impossible—"

"Is it?" Loki's green eyes finally focused, sharpening in on Tony's face. "At its core, seiðr is energy."

"Are you saying they might have been able to take it away from you?" Tony couldn't help but glance back to the horrid set-up, the bed and restraints seeming so much more abhorrent

now that Tony knew their purpose.

This was what Loki had been so afraid of, this was what had scared him so deeply down to the bone. Surely, if it weren't possible, Loki could have just shrugged it off. Except—

“They could not have taken it away entirely,” Loki said, shaking his head. “But my seiðr is part of me, and I knew that if I gave in, if I allowed them some of my power, they would have used it for something entirely repulsive. They had that ring, but it wasn't powerful enough or dangerous enough to sate their desires. They wanted to use my very essence to commit darkness, and you may think that I am a monster, but I would have done anything to stop that.”

“I don't think anything like that,” Tony said quietly, trying to offer comfort, but Loki merely continued, taking no notice.

“To stop it once it had started, I would have had to...” Loki looked away. “My will to defy them would not have been the only thing to snap.”

“You were afraid of what you would do,” Tony realised. It was yet another area that they were painfully similar. “If they forced you to use your power like that, you would have done some horrible things if it meant keeping one of the most important parts of yourself safe.”

“I...” Loki tensed up again, and looked away. Tony was still waiting for an explanation, but Loki's next words were a firm end to the topic of conversation. “We should go.”

“Loki, just...” Tony sighed, knowing from the steely glare that he would get nothing else. “Are you going to be all right?”

“I'm fine,” Loki replied— and it wasn't quite a snap or snarl, just a low warning growl that Tony knew wasn't really aimed at him, anyway.

Before turning to follow Loki from the room, Tony allowed his gaze to linger just one last time. He hated this room, hated that metal slab and the heavy Asgardian restraints and the clear attempt to make it as horrible and awful and *clinical* as possible. Blades too large to be surgical scalpels glinted in the fluorescent light, and Tony shuddered with the thought of what they might have been used for had Loki not managed to stay as strong as he had.

When Tony shuddered, though, it wasn't only at the thought of someone planning Loki's torture, though that, of course, did play a part. But the concept of using magic as a battery reminded him uncomfortably of what SHIELD had been trying to do with the Tesseract, and he couldn't help but dwell on the possibilities of what the Ten Rings had been hoping to use Loki for. It didn't take a whole lot of imagination, of course— because when had human beings ever come across something new and not wondered how to make a weapon out of it? Tony himself had made his fortune on that very fact.

And, *god*. What if *that* was why they wanted him? What if they hadn't wanted him for Iron Man after all, and that had just been an added bonus? What if they had hoped he'd help them design the perfect way to weaponise Loki's magic, to rip and tear at Loki's insides until they were able to harness all that power, probably shredding Loki to pieces in the process?

What might Tony have done, if he had been given the offer before he'd come to know Loki as a friend?

He liked to think he would have refused outright, but before he knew the whole story, before he realised that Loki was not the evil everyone thought... Tony might have agreed, if it had meant he could have stalled on giving them Iron Man and halted his own torture. The only thing that might have held him back would have been the thought of one of his most hated enemies having access to the power of another.

Feeling like he was going to be sick and half hating the person he used to be, Tony shook his head and swallowed hard. The theory made a certain level of sense, but not entirely. This all felt like it was too much at once, too much to process in one go, and certainly too much for the Ten Rings to have devised. After all, the Ten Rings were a big organisation, but Tony had seen them operate first hand. He knew this was beyond their capabilities, even taking the weird magic ring into account. And those vicious fire people just screamed with all the hallmarks of a complicated biological experiment— if the Ten Rings were capable of feats such as *that*, then surely Tony's presence would lose all relevance.

He was just left with the ever present questions of *why* and *how* that never seemed to dissipate no matter how many pieces of the puzzle he uncovered.

“There's no way they came up with this themselves,” Tony said aloud, pushing past the persistent lump in his throat. “Something isn't adding up. There has to be another player here.”

“Perhaps.” Loki shook his head, his earlier unease still lingering so long as they stayed in the room. “You know more of these people than I.”

It wasn't a pleasant thought, but there was little they could do about it now. They had signed a contract the moment they'd put down Thing 1 and Thing 2, and they no longer had a choice. They had to keep pressing forward, because if they turned back now everything would only be a thousand times worse.

When Tony pulled the door to that room shut behind them, he swore that he wouldn't leave it untouched.

They continued on their bloody course through the facility, cutting down the very few people they found without ceremony. They had an idea of the shape of the building by now— it seemed to be large and rectangular, the hallway running in an angular spiral toward a large central space. It was an odd design that both made it easy to navigate and difficult to attack, as there could be danger lurking behind every corner.

At the end of the spiral, they came to a door— notable as it was larger and thicker than any of the others, made out of heavy grey metal with no attempt to disguise its shielding. Clearly, that was where they needed to go.

“Ready?” Tony asked grimly, despite knowing that the question was as unnecessary as it had been back outside their cell.

Loki nodded, and raised his hands.

With Meathead gone and his ring in Loki's possession, there was no magic warding the door, and Loki was able to open it simply by using his power to manipulate the lock and then giving it a good hard kick.

Tony braced himself as it swung open on surprisingly well-oiled hinges, but this time, they weren't met with bullets. The door opened to nothing but the anxious and panicked breathing of a dozen people, all of them wringing their empty hands and pulling at their shirts. They were of varying ages and ethnicities, though Tony hardly took in their various features and uniform expressions of terror. His gaze even skimmed over the multitude of computer screens lining the walls of what was clearly their command centre, because his focus was rapidly and entirely drawn to the man standing right at the front of the group.

"We surrender," Ivan said without prompting, raising his hands. "You've killed almost everyone, we know we can't win. Just go. Leave. We won't try and stop you if you don't hurt us."

Tony tilted his head. "It seems you're under the impression that you're being given a choice," he said, taking pleasure from the way that Ivan instantly paled. "We're going to get out of here either way. But you're not."

Loki moved first, his body flickering out of existence and then reappearing in the middle of the group. Screaming and begging erupted instantly, as Loki wasted neither time nor the advantage of surprise. The terrorists did have weapons on them but they hadn't drawn them in an attempt to appear unthreatening, and they were not given the chance. Loki danced between their falling bodies, daggers cutting bloody arcs as he *slashed* his way from the centre of the group back to where Tony was standing, using his repulsor to keep them off Loki's back. He was lucky the weapon was strapped to his uninjured arm, for the other had begun to ache like hell despite the adrenaline coursing through him. As it was though he was able to keep his arm up and give Loki some cover as he made his way across the room.

It wasn't a fight, but Tony didn't quite think that the word 'massacre' applied either— a massacre, after all, is supposed to be indiscriminate. None of those people were innocent.

No.

It was an *execution*.

By the time Loki was standing beside Tony once again, there was only one other person left standing, spattered in the blood of his very dead comrades, his expression twisted into pure rage.

"I'm not afraid of you," Ivan spat, his empty hands clenching at his sides. "I'm not afraid of either of you."

"Then you are just as dull as you look," Loki replied. His eyes were bright with the fever of fighting and the anticipation of yet more violence, but still he glanced to Tony as if asking for permission, checking that it was okay for him to step in.

It was exactly what he had done back in the cell before killing Thing 2, but it felt... odd. Tony thought he'd wanted nothing more than to take his vengeance from Ivan, to remind not only the lying bastard but also himself of what happens to those who try to betray him. It was the same logical reasoning that'd had him giving his first torturer over to the people of Gulmira years ago, throwing him at their feet with a "*He's all yours,*" because it wasn't fair for Tony to take their retribution from them when they had suffered so much more than they had. Tony's desire to get the same from Ivan was still there, but when he thought of his revenge being enacted by Loki instead... confusingly, Tony found that he didn't really mind. He maybe even *enjoyed* the thought.

So he gave his partner a nod, and Loki advanced on Ivan with a predatory stride. But to Tony's surprise— rather than hurting, or maiming, or some other horrible variation of violent torture, Loki merely pressed the palm of his hand to Ivan's forehead, his own brow furrowed in concentration.

For a moment, nothing happened, and Tony wondered if Loki was just biding his time, maybe trying to scare Ivan with anticipation. But then Ivan started to *wail*, and Tony understood.

Yet again, he knew that he probably *should* have been horrified. Ivan was a living, human being, no matter how horribly he'd treated Tony. He was even a person for whom Tony had once felt some level of sympathy, some camaraderie, even, which had been real on Tony's part even if it had been false on Ivan's. Yet as he watched Loki tear through Ivan's mind, bringing up every one of his worst memories, forcing him to relive every horror he'd seen, every regret, every fear— as Tony watched that flicker of absolute *terror* slacken Ivan's limbs and widen his mouth into a bloodcurdling scream, Tony simply felt *satisfied*.

By the time Loki pulled free, Ivan was a quivering mess, his face pale and his muscles so weak he fell to his knees, no longer possessing the strength to remain standing.

"You're a monster," Ivan spat, the tremor in his hoarse voice eliminating any threat he might have been aiming for.

"Yes," Loki agreed easily. It clearly wasn't what Ivan had been expecting, and he merely began to shudder harder.

Tony noted that Loki looked a little pale as well— he had expended too much energy. Perhaps that was why, instead of continuing with magic, Loki chose that moment to finally use his dagger, raising it almost lazily and letting it hover less than an inch from the skin of Ivan's face. His free hand gripped Ivan's blonde hair, pulling his head back and baring his throat. The translator's hazel eyes almost crossed as he fought to keep the blade in his line of sight, his lips twisting and pulling apart. It seemed that all of that rage had been replaced by simple fear.

"Please," Ivan begged. "Please, I'm not a bad person—"

"I don't care," Loki said. "You hurt Anthony."

"I didn't want to," Ivan said immediately. "I'm as much a prisoner as you are."

He was lying. Tony knew he was, he'd seen the enjoyment in Ivan's gaze when he'd ousted Tony's plans to Meathead, when he'd revelled in Loki's pain. But faced with the fury of a vengeful god, Ivan was willing to say anything that might grant him mercy.

He just didn't realise that Loki wasn't the merciful kind.

"I'm a reporter, they kidnapped me and threatened me until I worked for them," Ivan continued desperately. "Just ask Stark, he'll tell you—"

"You can't think I'm going to help you after what you did," Tony said incredulously, almost amused.

"But you're an Avenger," Ivan tried.

Tony laughed, short and harsh and *dark*. "Oh, Ivan," he said. "I've always been so much more than that."

"I shouldn't have done it, I'm sorry," Ivan continued to beg, the edge of desperation turning into hysteria. "They made me, they—"

"Do shut up," Loki said, sounding bored, and then he shoved his blade in and out of Ivan's throat in a single, swift movement. Then Loki let go of him half a second later, like he was something dirty, letting the translator fall like a heavy sack of worthless nothing.

Ivan was still alive when he hit the ground, and his final breaths were choked and gurgled as he drowned on his own blood.

Tony watched for only half the short time it took Ivan to die, stepping over his almost-quiet body toward once of the computer's he'd noticed initially. It shouldn't have been so easy to sit in chair in front of computer screen dripping with human blood, still warm corpses wetting the carpet at his feet. Yet Tony did it without a care, not even flinching as the pads of his fingertips stuck to the keyboard with his first few taps. Perhaps all the blood and the killing had made him apathetic. Perhaps it was the fact that these people had all been complicit in Tony's torture, in Loki's starvation. In their inhumane captivity.

They didn't deserve anything better.

Loki checked the door while Tony navigated past the lock screen, vigilant despite the fact that Tony was as sure as he could be that they had killed every living thing in the hallway they had walked the entire length of.

"We need to find an exit," Loki said half a minute later. "We're running out of time."

"You focus on that," Tony said distractedly. "If they have all these computers, they must have something on them. I'm going to see what I can dig up."

"There's nothing obvious. I haven't seen any windows," Loki said wearily, his gaze flicking slowly to the corner of the room. "We must be underground."

“There are stairs over there,” Tony told him, gesturing vaguely with one hand while he kept the other on the keyboard. He was surprised Loki hadn’t noticed them, actually— but dismissed the thought in favour of the information he was pulling up on the computers.

After all, there were so many questions left unanswered, so many things about the ordeal that Tony didn’t understand. And he needed to, he needed know that there was some kind of reason for everything they had been forced to endure— because if it had all just been on the whim of this single facility of people, if there was no one else left to interrogate or *blame*, Tony wasn’t sure he’d be able to cope with it all.

He still didn’t know anything about the fire people, or that weird magic ring. He didn’t know whether the Ten Rings had simply seen an opportunity to kidnap him way back at the start, or if the entire thing had been planned. He didn’t know who, if anyone, had helped them with their plan for Loki, or how the hell they had managed to take Loki from SHIELD custody. And then there was the fucking fact that the Ten Rings had known that he was Iron Man right from the very start.

The ever-present questions of *how* and *why* had been his constant companion even longer than Loki had, and he could *not* miss the opportunity to finally put them to rest.

“Anthony, you must hurry,” Loki said, his voice already weaker than it was before. “If they sent out an alarm, more could be on their way.”

“I know,” Tony muttered, his fingers still playing the keyboard. “But the last time I escaped from these guys I made a mistake, and I will not be making it again.”

Loki’s voice suddenly sharpened. “What do you mean the *last time*—”

“Don’t worry, it’s nothing, I got out fine,” Tony said. “But I thought I’d destroyed them afterward. Clearly I missed a few.”

“Anthony—”

“I’m not going to let that happen again,” Tony said firmly. “I can’t. This time, I’m getting every last one of the bastards, but for that, I need information. I don’t need to look through all of it now, if I just find something to take with us, we can be out of here in a heartbeat.” He cast his gaze around, sure that there must be *something*—

And there! A hard drive sitting in one of the computers, still flashing, clearly having been left in use when the room was interrupted by news of the escape. He wiped it clean of everything first, finding only pirated episodes of *Gilmore Girls*. Even cleared it wasn’t big enough for everything, but Tony ignored all their surveillance tapes, their information on Tony, their plans for Loki save for any link to who else might have been involved. He even ignored the information on the Ten Rings’ next targets, and instead focused his sweep on the files that looked like they contained information on the organisation itself.

Because sure, he could save the information about future targets and pass it on to the good guys, and let the Avengers and the CIA run around trying to save a small group of people at a time.

Or, he could turn his attentions to the head of the snake and stop the attacks all together.

He couldn't afford to leave a single stone unturned. He'd made the near fatal error of only half-finishing the job last time. This time, there wouldn't be anything left.

It was as he was digging through the files, saving everything that looked important onto the too-small hard drive that he saw a familiar acronym—

It shouldn't have been there, it shouldn't have been *anywhere* near the Ten Rings' files—

“No,” he whispered, his fingers pausing as he stared at the screen in horror. “No.”

“Anthony?” Loki asked worriedly. He gave up his vigil by the door to stand behind Tony, looking over his shoulder. A hand came up to slide under the loose collar of his shirt and rest against the base of his neck. *‘What is it? What have you found?’*

Hardly able to say the words himself, Tony just pointed.

‘I don't understand,’ Loki said, leaning forward over him. *‘I thought SHIELD was on the Avengers' side.’*

‘So did I,’ Tony replied. Then he spoke aloud, his voice hard and cutting. “But clearly not. This is hard evidence, this is... There's no getting around this.”

It wasn't faked. It *wasn't*. As much as Tony wanted it to be, he could see that much— those were SHIELD emails, SHIELD IP addresses. Tony had hacked into their systems often enough for those to be burned into his mind, no matter how much time had passed since he'd been locked up.

Locked up, apparently, on SHIELD's orders.

“SHIELD set me up,” Tony snarled. “They're the reason the Ten Rings knew where I was, and how to kidnap me. And to make matters worse, they're the reason the Ten Rings knew that I was Iron Man in the first place.”

“Anthony...” Loki said quietly, almost a mumble, and Tony shook his head in horror.

“All this time, I thought I was doing something good, that I wasn't wasting my life so long as I was helping them... but *all this time*, they've been planning to send me right back into the hell where I started.”

There was no comment or reply other than a tremor in the fingers that still rested on Tony's shoulder.

“Loki?” Tony asked, curiously, reluctant to turn from the horrifying information on the screen before him.

Loki's grip on Tony tightened for a moment, like he was trying to steady himself. “I think... I'm going to pass out,” he said.

Tony immediately spun in his chair, grabbing Loki by the shoulders. Despite this thin frame the god was far too heavy for him to hold up, but he at least managed to slow him down enough to prevent further injury and to stop his head from hitting anything on the way down.

“Shit,” Tony said, kneeling on the ground beside Loki’s prone body, pressing two fingers against his throat. Tony’s only reference for an Asgardian’s heart rate was the time he’d spent with his face hidden in Loki’s neck, but he thought it felt normal enough.

There was a drip of crimson running down from Loki’s nose, the trail long enough that it had clearly been there for a while, the blood mingling with that of the terrorists they’d killed that was sprayed across both of their faces and clothes. His expression was pinched even in unconsciousness, like he was still stuck in some horrible nightmare.

It shouldn’t have been a surprise. Loki had warned him, had mentioned that he needed to be able to trust that Tony would be there for him when the exhaustion kicked in. But Tony had spent too long looking at the monitors. This was what Loki had meant when he said to hurry up, he hadn’t *only* been concerned about possible backup, but knew he was right on the edge of losing the burst that energy drink had given him— and he’d been trying to let Tony know without admitting weakness.

And Tony had let him down.

He held Loki tight, leaning over him and holding him close as if pressing their bodies together would help to wake him up. But Loki remained as deeply in his troubled sleep as before.

“Don’t worry,” Tony whispered, pressing the words breathily against the crown of Loki’s head. “We’ve won.”

He knew he really needed to get moving, but he allowed himself half a moment of rest. He stayed kneeling on the floor, cradling Loki’s head in his lap as he glanced around at the room full of bloodied corpses, his gaze skimming over the monitors that bore information both too terrible to think about, and yet all too easy to accept.

Despite his words, the truth of the matter hung heavy in the air— because they might have won a battle, but they had a whole war ahead of them yet.

A mystery burritoed in a riddle

It wasn't unusual these days to walk into the kitchen of Avengers Tower and be able to feel the tension in the room prickle across your skin with the intensity of broken fingernails, but Clint still couldn't repress the tiny shiver that arced down his spine. It wasn't that people were antagonistic— they were all just aware of the gaping space in their team, with not just one but *two* integral pieces missing from their mish-mash whole.

They hardly even all congregated in the one place any more, perhaps because the loss was less obvious when there were only a few in the room. But Colonel Rhodes was due back today for an update, and despite their increasing attempts at emotional detachment they couldn't stay away when there was a chance for news.

A slim chance, so very slim in fact that it might as well be non-existent. But even no news was *some* news, in a way.

It would at least give them another tiny corner of the map to cross off.

No one looked up as Clint slid into a stool at the kitchen counter. The open floor plan of the area meant that Clint could see the others scattered around, either in the living room or the kitchen itself. No one was talking. They were all just... waiting. Like they had been for months.

Clint had only just realised that he had neglected to grab something to do with his hands when a plate was placed in front of him, stacked high with eggs and bacon. It wasn't breakfast time, and at 3pm nor was it even any other normal time of the day for eating a full meal. But Steve had clearly needed something to occupy himself while they waited, and going by the equally large portion Bruce was fiddling with further down the counter and the empty plate beside where Nat was perched on the couch, Clint figured that Steve had been cooking for a while.

"Thanks," Clint grunted, grabbing the proffered knife and fork.

Steve nodded, and then, since Clint had been the last to arrive save for Rhodes himself, moved to grab some food of his own.

His silence wasn't exactly anything new. Steve had been wound tight since they'd returned from Afghanistan, but since the funeral he had been pretty much despondent. Clint might have called him mopey, but he wasn't that mean.

He couldn't afford to be, when he shouldered just as much of the blame.

Coming home with Iron Man held limply between them had been an awful experience. They'd informed the others over the comms that they were bringing in an injured teammate, and Bruce had been ready with his new friend Doctor Cho, waiting on the landing pad to attend to the patient.

At first, that had been it. They'd been swamped by the others as well, checking for injuries and demanding to know what had happened— and then they'd told the story, and everything had changed.

He's a civilian!

What were you thinking?

Stark is not an Avenger— Iron Man could have defended himself!

How could you?

Amongst all the accusations and complaints and claims by literally everyone else that they could have, *would have* done better even though they *weren't fucking there*, Clint could still feel most keenly the sharp sting of Nat's words as she had torn them both to shreds. She didn't care so much that Stark was a civilian, citing that he had put himself in danger before, but the fact that they had left someone so valuable as Stark in the hands of people like that was such a large misjudgement in her eyes that she didn't even *look* at Clint for a week afterward.

Clint and Steve had tried to explain their reasoning, but she had cut them off sharply.

“Iron Man is our friend, and his suit is a terrible weapon, true. But Tony Stark is the man who *created* that suit.” The glare she had pinned them with was enough to make any man wither. “Don't you realise what you've done?”

Of course, *of course* they realised, and Clint felt like shit even thinking about it. Because leaving Iron Man behind would have gifted those terrorists with *one* suit, and yes, that would have been awful. But who knew how many Stark could be making them while the military and the CIA scrambled to find him?

Well, no, that was probably unfair. Stark had survived three months of captivity with the Ten Rings before and hadn't given an inch.

Of course, it wasn't *entirely* their fault. It was pretty clear that they had been led into a trap, that the antenna had been set up to ping the signal and send them walking into an ambush. Outnumbered and outgunned, there was no way they could have avoided that turning sideways.

Without Stark, they hadn't even been able to work out how the Ten Rings had managed to trick them into it. They shouldn't have had the intel and they shouldn't have had the resources to achieve something like that. The whole thing was a mystery burritoed in a riddle, and there were still far too many missing pieces for Clint to be comfortable with any of it.

For example—

None of them had any fucking clue as to why Stark had been there in the first place.

He was supposed to have been back in New York, doing things that normal – at least as far as anyone could call an eccentric billionaire inventor *normal* – people do. Clint had seen him

that morning in fact, complaining to Nat that he wouldn't be able to get the upgrades to her weapons finished that day like he'd promised because he had a meeting with a shareholder or something.

So *how*? And *why*?

Surely a genius billionaire playboy philanthropist wouldn't choose to follow along on a dangerous mission of his own accord.

Except... what if he didn't?

Director Fury knew more than he was letting on, Clint was certain of it— and he had the strange feeling that Pepper Potts did, as well. When they'd found out, Fury had simply accepted it all in his stride with a wry determination to move on to the next step, and while Potts had seemed distraught—

She hadn't been *surprised*.

Steve had insisted on telling Potts himself when they returned. Despite his attempt for privacy her broken cries could be heard throughout the common floor of the Tower. And when they told her that Iron Man was non-responsive, that all of JARVIS' scans were coming up with not a single life-sign, and that they could not pry open the suit no matter how many different things they tried...

Well, actually, funnily enough, that had been what made her eyes go dry.

"Tony will be all right," she'd said firmly, and she almost didn't sound like she was trying to convince herself as well as everyone else. "He always is."

At the time, Clint had believed her. Maybe Stark would be fine— he'd got himself out once before, hadn't he? And back then, he hadn't had a whole team of Avengers waiting to rescue him.

Stark was in a tight spot but, there was still a *chance*.

Iron Man, though... there was no hope for him.

It had been the one redeeming thought about the whole thing— that hey, at least they'd managed to get one person out of there despite their chances. They'd lost the civilian, but at least they'd managed to save the hero.

Except... Iron Man had never even moved, not once. Doctor Cho couldn't do anything with a hunk of metal, and they *couldn't get him out*.

JARVIS told them that there was no heartbeat, that *Iron Man is gone*.

Steve had yelled and shouted and cursed and JARVIS had shown them the readings on a screen.

“He’s not in there,” JARVIS had said, his voice harsher than Clint had ever heard it. And then... he’d fallen silent.

The AI had locked himself down, and refused to speak to any of them.

Another difficulty, another mystery, another goddamn *problem* that they couldn’t find the answer to. Nat said that he was probably focusing all his attention on finding his creator, but—Clint had seen what JARVIS was capable of. There was no way he wouldn’t be helping them save Iron Man’s life if there was any way that he could.

But before going quiet, JARVIS had told them he couldn’t open the armour, that Iron Man had initiated a lock down sequence that could not be overridden by anyone.

Well.

Anyone except for Tony Stark.

(And still, Nat’s words rung in Clint’s ears.)

Hulk might have been able to make a dent in the metal, but Bruce refused. Even if he was as careful as possible – and he would be, because Hulk adored Iron Man – there was the chance of crushing the body inside. With every scrap of evidence pointing toward the worst, that was something none of them wanted.

Except.

“What if the scans aren’t working?” Steve had asked desperately. “If there’s even the *slightest* chance—”

“JARVIS’ scans are in perfect working order,” Rhodes had snarled at him, having arrived as soon as he’d heard the news from Potts. It was strange seeing him so worked up— usually, he was as stoic as they came, but Stark was Rhodes’ best friend. “If JARVIS says he’s gone, then he’s gone. You’re just looking for a way to take the blame off yourself, but guess what? This is *your fucking fault Captain*, and if you try to shift it anywhere else rather than dealing with this and accepting the consequences of what you did, then you’re not even half the man I thought you were.”

“James,” said Bruce, his soft voice almost sounding sharp in contrast to the near-shouts. “All of us care about finding Tony, and we all know that Steve and Clint made a bad call. But let’s not get angry about it, okay?”

The look in Bruce’s eyes had almost made Clint want to take a step back, but Rhodes merely sighed in the face of it. It was, unfortunately, rather clear who’s side Bruce was taking, if there was a side to be taken at all.

“Iron Man deserves better than *this*,” Rhodes muttered, and Bruce nodded in agreement.

In the end, they’d been forced to bury him in the suit. He was given a state funeral and hero’s honours, with canons and flags and the whole shebang. It really was no less than what he

deserved, and Clint had watched the entire thing with clenched fists and a heavy weight in his chest.

Clint thought Potts had tried to argue against it, though. He couldn't think why she would, especially after SHIELD assured the security of the grave, but he also couldn't think of another explanation for why he had seen her storming from her own office one morning, the tears in her eyes not from sadness but anger. Fury had exited a moment later, and given Clint the 'don't tell anyone about this or else' look that had Clint nodding his agreement immediately.

After that, Nat said that Potts had locked herself in the workshop with Iron Man's silent body for a few hours, and when she came out she was once again dry-eyed and determined.

Ms Potts didn't come to these little meetings any more, though. She received her updates from Rhodes in live time, the two of them keeping closer contact than they did with anyone else. After all, they had both been friends with Iron Man and were family to Stark. They had little reason to keep close contact with the Avengers when both of their links had been cruelly severed.

Rhodes could have kept them all updated in the same way as Potts, but he chose to continue their meetings. Sometimes, Clint wondered if Rhodes just enjoyed watching the way their faces fell at the inevitable report of 'nothing'. But seeing the way that his spine was hunched over with the heavy weight of months of searching, Clint found that he couldn't truly believe that. Rhodes was putting everything he was into the effort to bring back his friend, but even with the Air Force at his back, he was still only one man.

(One man in a can, as Iron Man used to say.)

Maybe their little meetings just made him feel like even though he was finding nothing he was still doing *something* useful, by keeping them all involved.

Clint wished that they could be out there doing more as well, but things out in the world were a little tense. The Avengers' international operations had already begun to receive some concerned comments. It was nothing big – not *yet* – but it was enough for both SHIELD and the CIA to politely ask them to cease and desist. Stark had never truly been part of the team, not in the way Iron Man had been, so their pleased to remain involved had been dismissed. But he had been a constant presence in their lives that was missed the moment it was removed. Their continued efforts resulted in them being given permission to be part of the rescue effort when Stark had been located, but not before, and the exclusion burned at Clint like a brand– a reminder of his hand in it all.

As it stood, the meetings with Rhodes, were really all that they currently had.

Months ago, when they were all still full of hope, they had gravitated toward Rhodes whenever he came back with a report. Now, though, they all remained still as he sunk into an armchair, only their gaze following his movements.

“Still nothing,” Rhodes said predictably, his voice heavy. He shrugged his shoulders. “The Air Force wants to stop.”

Oh, shit.

Well, okay, *that* wasn't expected.

"They think it's been long enough without any new leads," Rhodes continued. "They're arguing that the search is expensive, and that Iron Patriot is needed for more *important* missions." His voice eased into a sneer at the end there, and to be honest, Clint couldn't really blame him.

"Can they make you do that?" Bruce asked.

"Of course they can." It was Steve who had spoken, low and emotionless. He'd moved to sit beside Nat on the couch while Clint had been caught in his musings, and he was hunched over, staring at his hands in his lap. "They're the military."

"They don't have complete control over me," Rhodes replied. "The contract the Air Force has with Tony states that no one other than myself may pilot the Iron Man Mark II. So as long as I make sure that they want that suit in action more than they want to get rid of me, I can manage a little leeway— but I can't defy them outright, not forever."

"So basically, you've got blackmailing power," Nat summarised.

"A little," Rhodes agreed. "But don't use that word, it makes it sound worse than it is. The Air Force wouldn't like it."

Nat frowned. "And if they decide to take it off you anyway?"

"Like I said, they can't." Rhodes shrugged. "They're not SHIELD, they have to play by the book. And legally, they can't put anyone else in that suit. Tony made sure of it."

"But if Tony's declared dead—"

"Then it all just goes to Pepper. You do remember *when* Tony wrote that, right?" Rhodes asked, raising a brow at Nat. "He was more than careful."

"He must have written it afterwards, he had too much on his mind at that time," she argued back.

"No, he knew what he was doing," Rhodes replied. Then he sighed, and rubbed a hand over his face. "Whatever. Trying to claim Tony as dead when it's only been a few months will be too much work when Pepper would deny them anyway. They can't take the suit from me, and I'm not going to stop looking for Tony. Not until I've brought him home."

"You said you couldn't push them too far," Bruce said, concerned. "What happens if you do?"

"The worst they can do is dishonourably discharge me, but if they do that—"

"Then you'll just be one of us," Clint cut in. "And we can't do shit."

“Exactly.” Rhodes’ tired gaze landed on Clint. “Then you see the problem. We need to find him soon, or I’m going to run out of options.”

“Have you been looking wide enough?” Steve asked. “Sometimes, even the tiniest of clues —”

“We’ve been checking everything, worldwide,” Rhodes snapped. “You name it, we’ve looked at it. An out of the ordinary radio broadcast from the middle of Russia, an explosion in a Turkish warehouse— hell, even a tip off from Singapore of an American with a goatee who bought a new laptop with cash. There’s not a single stone we’ve left unturned, and we *still* can’t find a single fucking thing.”

“Can you pull back a little?” Nat asked, and when Rhodes turned to her expectantly, she continued. “You know. Tell them you’ll do some other missions, but keep your friends in intel searching for leads. If you keep the higher ups happy, they’ll be more likely to let you out when something stronger comes up.”

“And when that happens, we’ll be right on your tail,” Clint added, and the others chipped in with various sounds of agreement.

“Yeah, maybe,” Rhodes allowed.

“Besides, it’s not just the Air Force out there,” Nat added. “I know SHIELD is still looking.”

“But they haven’t found anything yet either,” Rhodes pointed out. “SHIELD, CIA, the entire Defence Force— everyone is *looking*, but no one is finding. Since that confirmation that Tony had been moved out of Afghanistan we’ve all had *zilch*. And when that many people with that many resources have been scouring the globe for this long...”

“Don’t lose hope,” said Bruce. “This is Tony we’re talking about.”

“Yeah,” Rhodes sighed. “Yeah, I know. There’s never been a hole that he couldn’t dig himself out—”

Rhodes stopped as he was interrupted by a voice that Clint had not heard once in four months.

“Colonel Rhodes,” said JARVIS. “I—”

“J?” Rhodes asked at the pause, frowning.

“I thought...” The AI trailed off, which was odd enough that every one of the Avengers tensed.

“What is it?” asked Clint, speaking up for the rest. “Is something wrong?”

“No one in this room is in danger,” JARVIS replied. “My apologies for worrying you.”

“No, JARVIS, wait,” Steve said, standing and staring at the ceiling. “Where have you been? Have you heard anything about Tony?”

But, of course.

There was no response.

“Aaaand he’s gone again,” Clint grumbled.

“No, he hasn’t,” Rhodes said. “He’s just mad at you guys.”

“Mad,” Nat muttered under her breath, sounding almost fond. “Trust Tony Stark to make an AI capable of being *mad*.”

“I was worried that he was damaged,” Bruce said. “He’d never gone quiet like that before.”

“He’s not damaged,” said Rhodes, getting to his feet. “Excuse me. I believe that I have somewhere else to be.”

Like a reversal of when Rhodes had arrived not even a half hour before, they all watched as he headed back to the elevator. He didn’t turn to face them as the doors closed, and their last view of him was of the back of his head.

“Does anyone else here think that was weird?” Clint asked. “Like, really weird?”

“He knows something,” said Nat, tilting her head.

“What does he know that we don’t?”

“I think JARVIS still talks to Ms Potts,” said Steve, not looking up as he twisted his fingers together in his lap. “And probably Colonel Rhodes as well.”

“Why not us?” Clint asked. “Do you think Rhodes is right, about JARVIS being angry?”

“I don’t know,” Nat said, frowning. “I think it’s more than that. JARVIS wouldn’t just ignore us like this out of pettiness or spite. Even if he thinks we’re the reason Tony’s missing, he knows Tony cared too much about the Avengers’ Initiative – about helping people – to let us flounder.”

“JARVIS must know that working with us rather than ignoring us would mean finding Tony faster,” Bruce added.

Nat nodded. “Exactly.”

It was another question, another puzzle– and yet again, not one of them had an answer. Oh, there were ideas and theories and discussions that had floated around, but not a single concrete fact that they could build on.

The ever increasing pile of nothing was weighing down on them all.

True to the pattern they had all been holding for weeks and months, the moment the conversation died the other three began to file out, heading for their various rooms and favourite spaces to spend time by themselves.

Soon, Clint was the only one left, sitting at the kitchen counter in the large, empty room. When it wasn't only the four of them and they were left without distraction, the missing became far too obvious, and none of them wished for the reminder. Maybe if Thor had come back, if there was another body to pad out the skeleton crew, it wouldn't seem so bad.

But that was a pipe-dream.

The Avengers.

Ha.

They were little more than a dream themselves, now.

Thor had been gone for almost a year without a word. Steve was practically a zombie, and Bruce hadn't smiled in months. Nat was the most lively out of all of them, and that was fucking saying something. And of course, it was all made worse by their charitable lodgings. Large and empty and without the mad inventor and the sassy bodyguard in the metal suit to fill the space with their huge personalities, the Tower felt as cold and dead as Clint's still untouched plate of breakfast food.

They were living in a graveyard, a monument to the dead and the missing. And sometimes...

Clint couldn't shake the feeling that there were ghosts lurking around the corner, just waiting for the right moment to take their dues.

Getting skinny jeans onto an octopus

When Tony realised that he would have to leave Loki alone in the command room, a spike of panic sped his mind into overdrive.

He didn't want to, not when the whole place was just so *dangerous* that it left his every nerve shaking with a spark of electricity. Loki was unconscious and exposed and would be able to do nothing to defend himself. If Tony left him there, he might very well be leaving him to die —

But that was just the fear talking, and he *knew* it.

Because as much as he wanted to cut and run he knew that they couldn't just *leave*, not if they wanted a chance at a proper getaway. They'd taken out all the terrorists in the areas they'd been through, and they'd been through the whole facility save for what was up the stairs in the corner of the room. But since it had been several minutes since they had killed Ivan and no one had shown up, it was likely that if anyone had been up there, they had either fled, in which case haste was the key, or they were preparing to fight when Tony and Loki ascended the stairs. Either way, Tony had a few minutes to get things in order, and while he would need to work fast, he knew there were certain things they couldn't afford to do without.

If they simply ran, they wouldn't get far. Tony had learned that last time— he'd escaped into the middle of a desert, and he would have died if the explosion hadn't been enough to summon Rhodey and the Air Force.

He might not be so lucky this time, and they would need a contingency plan if they were to survive.

But to collect supplies... he'd need to leave Loki, even though leaving him there alone and vulnerable in that hornet's nest scraped at Tony's every nerve like a rusty saw.

"I'll be right back," Tony said, speaking almost as much to reassure himself as he was speaking to Loki. "I promise."

He'd made quick work of retrieving anything that would be useful— some food and water from the still bloody kitchen, some not-too-bloody-shoes from a couple of corpses, a mostly stocked first aid kit from a storeroom, and, of course, the explosives from the armoury. He threw most of it into a decently sized black backpack he'd found in the same cupboard as the first aid kit, set up what he needed to, and then hurried back. The relief that coursed through him when he saw Loki in exactly the spot that Tony had left him almost buckled his knees, and he couldn't help but kneel down and run a hand over Loki's cheek just to be *sure* that he was still all right before moving on to the next task at hand.

Note for future reference— getting shoes onto someone's feet when they're unconscious and unable to help is about as easy as getting skinny jeans onto an octopus, and Loki's long legs

were not helping the situation at *all*. But Tony managed as best he could, and when he was done it was almost a relief to put his own shoes on, taking only a fraction of the time.

Wrapping his arm was another job that couldn't wait, since the continuous use had prevented the cut from congealing. It wasn't deep though, just long, and the blood that was spattered across his skin was more of a concern than the cut itself, since Tony knew that it wasn't all his. He didn't want to waste too much time on it though, and wiped it hastily with some antiseptic from the first aid kit and wrapped it firmly with a wide bandage. It was messy and rushed, but it would have to do for the time being.

Moving Loki himself was the hardest part of the whole operation, since he was so goddamn heavy. But Tony managed to lever him onto a trolley that was probably designed to carry heavy office equipment, and rigged something of a pulley system to get the wheeled platform up the steel stairs. If there was an elevator in the building, it had been too well hidden for Tony to find.

Before opening the door at the landing, though, Tony made sure that Loki was lodged far enough down the steps that he would be safe, should there be more terrorists waiting for them in the next room. Only when Loki was secure did Tony open the door— at first just a crack, and his repulsor was the first thing through.

Thankfully, though, he didn't need it, since the overturned chair at a desk a few yards away clearly indicated that whoever had been stationed there had fled in a hurry. And yeah, that might mean that they had abandoned the Ten Rings entirely— but it could also mean that they would be on their way with back up, it and did nothing but assure Tony of their own need to hurry.

Tony managed to pull Loki through the door, and it was a relief to finally get the wheeled trolley back on flat ground. Although no red was seeping through, the bandage on his arm felt sticky and itchy, and, you know. That probably wasn't a *great* sign, all things considered.

The area they'd come out into appeared to be a warehouse, full of boxes and crates that Tony didn't bother looking into. They wouldn't exist in half an hour, after all, and if this was the ground level then they were likely just a front, a hiding place for the facility below.

(The implications of the necessity for that didn't quite sink in until after they managed to get outside, though.)

There were a couple of cars in the loading bay, missing licence plates but otherwise seemingly fully operational, and the roller door was operated by a switch. Tony chucked his bag in the trunk and used the last of his strength to get Loki inside, desperation fuelling him with strength he probably wouldn't have been able to muster otherwise, though leaving no room for finesse. Tony winced as Loki's head knocked against the door as he tried to get him inside, but a few more bruises were certainly preferable to staying in place.

A quick fiddle with the wires under the wheel, a flick of the switch on the wall, and then the roller door was up and they were moving out, and as sunlight hit Tony's eyes for the first time in god knew how long, he stared out at the world in awe.

He had been expecting a desert.

He'd been captured in a desert, after all, and the last time he'd escaped from the Ten Rings the sun had been blinding, the air had been hot, and the sand scorching against his skin. But instead of the expected dunes, the horizon was instead cut off by numerous buildings, low and grey and all very similar to the one that their car had just pulled out of.

It seemed to be early morning, the sun just beginning to peek out over the back of some of the other warehouses. It definitely wasn't a desert— there was a seagull pecking at something on the side of the road, and the tree growing on the street corner was far too green, sprouting with new spring growth. The few signs Tony could see used the Latin alphabet, which meant that they most likely weren't even in Afghanistan.

Could they have taken him to another country? Well, he *had* been knocked unconscious, and had woken in that first cell, strapped down to a bed with no way of knowing how long he'd been out for. He could have been taken anywhere in the world, and he would have no way of knowing.

God, he couldn't even be sure which side of the road he was meant to be driving on. The fact that the steering wheel was on the left side of the car was something of an indicator, but he still decided to err on the side of caution and pulled out slowly into the right-hand lane. There was no need to go too fast, anyway. Not when the wheel felt strange under his hands, it having been so long since the last time he drove, and not when he really needed to do his damn best to not act suspicious.

He had no destination in mind other than *away*, and he just kept driving, turning corners now and then but mostly focusing on the distance between them and where they had come from.

The seagulls and general shape of the buildings suggested that they were somewhere near a port, but it wasn't until they drove past their first car – which also proved Tony had been right to drive on the right-hand side of the road – that Tony was even able to work out which *country* they were in, the licence plate embossed with a little blue flash and a white TR giving it away.

Turkey.

Right.

Well, again, not quite what he'd expected but, it was workable. Probably.

His mind whirred with possibilities as he continued to crawl through the streets, the warehouses giving way to truck depots, the roads starting to get progressively busier. They came out onto the coast after only a couple of minutes, tall piles of shipping containers blocking the view of the ocean.

The entrance to the port had signs around though, written in both the local language *and* English, which finally gave Tony a better idea of where exactly they were.

Port of İzmir.

Well, great. Tony had only a passing knowledge of where İzmir was in relation to everywhere else. He'd never been before, and didn't have any useful resources squirreled away anywhere close like he had in a few other places across the globe. They were in totally unknown territory, driving an unlicensed car that would probably result in them getting pulled over by the police at some point— and since they were still both covered in drying blood, he knew that wouldn't end well. Loki was still out for the count, slumped against his passenger side window, and wouldn't be much help for the foreseeable future.

Honestly, this escape attempt seemed to be getting more and more difficult by the moment. They'd managed to get out, but if they couldn't keep going things were going to get very bad very quickly.

The smart thing to do would probably be to call for help, but when Tony pictured finding a phone and using it to contact the Avengers, something heavy settled in his stomach and he felt so anxious that he thought he might vomit. After all, SHIELD were no doubt looking for him and Loki, mad beyond measure that they had lost valuable prizes. At least three of the Avengers worked for SHIELD when they weren't in the Tower, and remembering that Steve and Clint had been there when Tony was kidnapped... he was no longer sure whether he could trust them. So he couldn't call them for help, either. He had been betrayed too many times, and he'd fought too hard to get out to risk being put back by a stupid decision. The only person he knew he could trust *for sure* was Loki, and he wasn't willing to put either of them at risk of exposure until he was certain there was no other choice.

The car, though, was a problem in and of itself. Even with the missing plates there was a chance that it could have allowed them to clear a good distance— but using a car that they had taken from the Ten Rings put Tony's teeth on edge, because what if they had some way of tracking it?

The thought was a niggling itch in the back of his mind that grew worse and worse until it burned, scrabbling at every thought and catching at the reminders of what *could* happen if he wasn't careful enough. Maybe the car was tracked. Maybe there had been CCTV cameras near the warehouse, and the authorities would find them, thinking that they had something to do with what they will inevitably find there after—

A rumbling boom and a roar echoed through the streets, and in the reflection of the rear view mirror a large cloud of smoke billowed up into the sky—

And Tony could no longer take it. He was too full of emotions— he was elated, panicked, *scared*, and everything was clashing together and making a mess of his ability to focus. He tried to sort through it all, but even that wasn't really helping.

He was elated, because it was done. The timer he'd jockey rigged to some of the explosives back in the armoury had finally clicked to the end. The laugh that tore from his throat was almost manic because the facility was *gone*, but...

He was panicked, because at the time, he'd set that explosion thinking that they had been somewhere secluded.

What if there had been innocents in the neighbouring warehouses?

What if Tony's explosion had hurt them?

It wasn't like he'd done it maliciously, he'd done it to save their lives, his and Loki's. Thinking of that room which had been set up with the entire purpose of turning Loki inside out, Tony couldn't be sorry that he had wiped the whole place off the map.

But he knew that if he were to see a newspaper tomorrow that headlined people dying when a warehouse exploded in İzmir, he wouldn't be able to live with it.

If they made it to tomorrow, that is.

(He was scared, because he didn't know what would happen next.)

Tony forced himself to inhale deeply, hold it for a few seconds, and then let it out again. Loki's breathing was slow enough in his unconscious state that Tony tried to follow along, and Loki had asked him to do so often enough after a nightmare that Tony could easily conjure the exact tone of Loki's voice in his mind.

In and out. Breathe, Stark. Follow me.

As he began to calm, he reminded himself that the facility had been underground, and that the building on top would have dampened the blast. The placement of the explosives would have ensured that the entire basement was destroyed, and the warehouse would have fallen in on top of it, if his math was right.

Which, of course, it always was.

No one would have been hurt— at least, not anyone who wasn't already dead.

In and out. Slow.

Still, the walls of the car felt like they were closing in on him, and Tony shoved open the door, almost falling out of it and onto the asphalt. He went around the back of the car, grabbing the bag on his way to the passenger side. Loki felt even heavier than before, a dead weight that near knocked him down and sent him sprawling. He had wanted to try and get to the next street at least, but his muscles were screaming, his head was pounding, and he had nothing left. His grip on Loki's waist was slipping with every step, and it was all he could do to drag him to the sidewalk and slide him down against a wall. The car was sitting mere yards away, and they were left in essentially an even worse conundrum than before. Because the car might still be emitting some kind of signal— only now, leaning against a brick wall on the side of the road, they were sitting ducks.

Well, if Tony couldn't move Loki, then the best thing to do would be to move the car.

But that would, once again, mean leaving Loki alone—

And this time, Tony couldn't do it. They were out in the open, and as the sun rose higher more and more people would be out and about. The thought of leaving Loki there, even just to dump the car around a corner, left a horrible taste in his mouth and made his whole body recoil. He couldn't have physically torn himself from Loki's side if he had tried.

So, instead, he settled beside him, manoeuvring Loki's head so that it rested on his shoulder rather than flopping downward.

Footsteps clacking against the pavement caused Tony to freeze, and he held his breath as someone approached. But the woman barely spared Tony and Loki a glance, speeding up as she walked past them, eyes straight ahead.

It took Tony a moment of confusion before—

Oh.

Dirty, unkempt, and wearing only rags and ill-fitting boots, they looked like street urchins, the kind of people that most liked to avoid. The dark colours of their clothes did enough to hide the blood on them for a passing glance, and with their heads pressed together most of their skin was not visible. Tony's beard had grown out enough that he was mostly unrecognisable, and no one would be expecting to see Tony Stark on the ground in the middle of a coastal Turkish city, anyway.

So they were probably not at risk from the civilian population, but still they were so exposed, so close to the explosion and the facility and the *goddamn car* for it to soothe Tony's nerves.

Especially when, you know, there was a chance that the reason for the woman's speed walking hadn't been the two strange men on the sidewalk but had actually been the explosion itself. Tony'd been told several times that when *normal* people see an explosion, they head in the opposite direction.

Tony shook himself, and pressed the heel of his palms against his closed eyes, trying to relieve some tension. It was hard, dealing with everything by himself when for so long he'd had someone at his side. He knew that Loki needed to recover. Loki had warned him back in the cell that this would happen, had *trusted* him to get them both out safely in the end.

But Tony was so, so tired, and he didn't think that he could keep going alone.

"Loki, please," Tony whispered with his lips against Loki's hair, his voice breaking with desperation. *'I need you.'*

For a moment, nothing happened. Loki's breathing remained exactly the same, his head slumped down toward his shoulder awkwardly. Tony let out a long breath—

But then Loki's fingers tightened infinitesimally, and Tony felt that familiar caress of another mind against his own.

'Anthony?'

"Yeah," Tony said, closing his eyes in relief. He shifted slightly and leaned down, pressing their foreheads together softly. "Yeah, it's me. How're you feeling?"

Loki's answer took a few moments to come, and his voice sounded so very weak as it brushed against Tony's mind. *'Tired.'*

“That’s okay,” Tony said. “But... Loki, we need to move.” Loki stayed quiet, so Tony kept going. “The facility just blew up, so the police will probably be crawling through here at any moment. And we really should get away from that car. Just in case.”

There was no response other than Loki’s slow breathing, and Tony wished that he could just let Loki rest— but they *couldn’t*.

“Loki, I can’t carry you any further,” Tony said, twisting back to his earlier position and slumping beside Loki again. “I’m sorry, but I... I can’t.”

Loki hummed, the noise not unlike a purr from deep in the back of his throat, as he curled into Tony’s body until they were leaning together much like they had in their cell, only in reverse. Loki’s head was resting on Tony’s shoulder, his legs falling into Tony’s lap, their arms around each other in an attempt to prop themselves up.

“Rest,” Loki said, the word hardly more than a breath that ghosted across the skin of Tony’s neck.

“We’re out in the open,” Tony replied, shaking his head gently, so as not to dislodge the god pressed into his side. “We can’t stay here—”

‘We can’t move,’ Loki replied, and as much as Tony hated it, he knew that Loki was right.

They were exhausted, completely and utterly. Loki had used everything he had in the fight, coming down from his high in a crash that would likely take him a generous amount of time to recover from— time that they did not have.

“But the car... and if the police come through here, they might want to ask if we saw anything. Loki, you know we can’t afford for anyone to recognise me.”

There was a moment where Tony thought that Loki couldn’t have heard him, because he didn’t say anything. But then he tugged his arms away from Tony’s, seeming to have a little trouble disentangling them. In the end, he kept his left elbow hooked around Tony’s right forearm, and twisted the fingers of his right hand with a faint, almost-not-quite-there green glow shimmering around the tips.

Loki’s expression contorted into a pained grimace and Tony was about to tell Loki to stop, that he could manage, that Loki didn’t need to injure himself further— but then Loki was holding a terribly familiar chunk of flesh. The strange ring was stuck to the finger with congealed blood, but Loki didn’t seem to find it difficult to pull the gold and orange band free from what was left of Meathead’s finger.

Loki stared blearily down at the now bare body part, clearly not entirely sure of what to do with it. After a moment, he simply flicked it down to the pavement, and turned his attention to the bloodied jewellery resting on his palm, poking at it absently.

Tony, though, couldn’t stop looking at the finger, disgust curling through his stomach. It was white and horrible and almost didn’t look real, and surely they couldn’t just leave it lying there. If someone noticed it, it might just raise a red flag or two—

And besides, it was *gross*.

Tony kicked out with his foot, his already filthy boots sending it rolling across the pavement and neatly falling off the edge of the curb, into the gutter, and then down the drain.

Problem solved.

Loki's full body shudder drew his attention back to the matter at hand, and he turned to see that Loki was doing magic again.

"Should you be—"

'I may not have used my seiðr in a while, but neither am I out of practice,' Loki replied, his voice a little harsher, as if the use of magic had woken him a little despite the difficulty of using it. Tony fell quiet at that, trusting that Loki would know his own limits.

It took a while, but slowly, the stone imbedded into the ring started to glow— bright at first, before fading to a steady gleam that was almost unnoticeable. The moment it was done Loki sagged, sinking back down against Tony even more than he had before.

"It should... hide," Loki said tiredly, his eyes closed and his breathing slow. "I am not familiar with... but. The current in the ring, should hide what it is in contact with."

"Oh, cool, so it's like an invisibility cloak?" Tony asked interestedly.

'Not invisible,' Loki said, clearly too tired to waste energy speaking aloud. *'Just... unnoticed.'*

Right. Not an invisibility cloak, but more like a perception filter, then.

Despite the fact that it was something they'd stolen from the Ten Rings – not to mention exactly *how* they'd stolen it – it was pretty awesome, and Tony itched to understand the technicalities of how it worked. So, it's pretty understandable that it took a moment for the rest of what Loki had said to sink in.

"Wait, you mean that I have to touch it?" Tony said, staring at the ring in disgust. It wasn't the blood that was still encrusted on it that made him slightly queasy, but rather the fact that it was the very thing which had kept them locked up for so long. No doubt that without it, Loki would have been able to break out far more easily, and they wouldn't have suffered through everything that they had.

But Loki had stressed his reserves to make this work, and he was right– it would be an invaluable asset. So, grimacing, Tony plucked the ring from Loki's palm and slid it onto his right index finger. It felt crusty and horrid, but when Loki looked at him, his eyes unfocused slightly and he glanced away with a smile.

'It works,' Loki told him.

Of course, they weren't both hidden by the ring, since Loki was not in contact with it– but that was easily fixed by entwining their fingers back together, Tony's right hand with Loki's

left, their arms still linked at the elbow.

The knowledge that they were a bit safer now was enough to calm Tony's anxiousness, and he was finally able to relax into the cool comfort of the body beside him. Loki was practically limp now, and his breaths were still slow. But as Tony listened to them, he realised that they weren't slow only from tiredness. They were a little raspy, a little desperate. But it was Loki's pallor that scared him the most— his skin so waxy, his cheeks so thin. To make the picture even worse, the cuts on his lips were still not healing as fast as Tony knew an Asgardian should.

Oh, *crap*.

How the hell had Tony managed to forget that Loki hadn't eaten?

Tony pulled some food and a water bottle out of the bag, searching through what they had. From his earlier search for antiseptic he knew that there was a sachet of hydralyte powder in the first aid kit, and he tore it open with his teeth before shaking it in as best he could and handing Loki the bottle.

“Small sips,” he said, hoping that was correct— but even if it wasn't, surely it couldn't hurt.

As Loki worked on that with his free hand, Tony dug through his small pile of food, trying to remember through his tiredness what you're supposed to give someone who has been starved. He remembered that you're not supposed to eat greasy food after a while of not eating, though he'd managed to eat several cheeseburgers after his stint in Afghanistan. He'd had a bit of stomach ache after though, and of course, he hadn't been starved entirely, and certainly not for fucking *months*—

Tony didn't even know how long it had been since Loki had eaten— since the invasion at least. And while obviously Loki's constitution was stronger than a human's to have even survived so long without sustenance, Tony knew better than to try and give Loki the more unhealthy items he'd ended up with in his mad raid of the Ten Rings' kitchen.

Hopefully, a granola bar would have to do. He opened that with his teeth as well, for lack of a better option since one of his hands was currently occupied.

During Tony's perusal of their supplies, Loki's hand had slumped to the side, the bottle listing dangerously as his head lolled back against Tony's shoulder.

“Come on, Lokes,” Tony said, nudging him gently. “You need to wake up, just for a minute. You need to eat something.”

Loki groaned as his eyes pulled open, and he glared at the granola bar in Tony's hand like it had done him a personal insult.

'Is there not something...'

'More appetising? Sorry, but—'

'Less like what one might feed a horse,' Loki complained, but he accepted the granola bar nonetheless. He took only tiny bites at a time, his nose scrunching up as he struggled to swallow, and his chews were far slower than they should have been. Tony watched, making sure that he ate, concerned because Tony knew that Loki had been hungry. He'd seen the way Loki had watched Tony eat back in their cell, when he'd worn that awful muzzle. But now it seemed like the food was disgusting him, and that thought sat heavily against the rest of his worry.

Loki only ate half of the first bar, and Tony went to wrap it back up in the packet for later.

'No,' Loki said, his grip tightening around Tony's fingers. *'You need to eat as well.'*

But Tony pulled a piece of dried meat from the bag instead. He wanted to save the precious few granola bars for Loki.

That done, there was nothing for them to do but try and rest. They'd need the energy— the future was looking a little bleak, after all, since the current sit-rep was that they were stuck in Turkey, with no foreseeable way out. Tony couldn't access any of his money without alerting JARVIS, and JARVIS would tell Pepper, and Pepper would tell SHIELD. Or, Pepper would tell Rhodey, and Rhodey would tell the Air Force, and then *they* would tell SHIELD.

Maybe, just *maybe* Tony still had friends, but even if he did he wouldn't be able to contact any of them without SHIELD knowing first.

Loki's eyes were closed again, and Tony sighed as he stared down at his friend's pinched expression. Curled together on the side of a road, still tired and injured and only a half-hour drive from the Ten Rings' now destroyed torture facility wasn't exactly the *ideal* situation, but it was far better than where they had been. To be out and at least hidden from view was enough of a relief that Tony allowed himself to partially relax, his left arm reaching across their bodies and pulling Loki even closer against him.

"Escape? A+," Tony muttered. "The getaway? We'd be lucky to get a C-, though it's still a bit up in the air."

'Give us time,' Loki's voice whispered. *'We're not there yet.'*

'Yeah,' Tony sighed back. *'That's what's worrying me.'*

There was, after all, still plenty of time for them to get caught and be awarded with that F.

Loki offered no further response, though— his breathing had already slowed, his body going limp against Tony's side once more. He was not as unconscious as he had been before, not entirely knocked out. Just properly asleep.

That was good. Loki needed the rest.

The sun was even higher in the sky now, shining proof that they were no longer stuck beneath that infernal white ceiling and the irritating whirr of fluorescent lights.

It was true that they hadn't managed to get away entirely, not yet, but *they were out*.

And with that honestly comforting thought, Tony let his head bow down, buried his face in Loki's hair, and allowed his eyes to fall closed.

Ghosts in the night

When Tony woke, he initially panicked. He hadn't meant to fall asleep, he'd meant to stay vigil, not wanting to be subject to the vulnerability of being out in the open with both of them unconscious— especially since he didn't exactly trust that goddamn magic ring, not when it had spent so long keeping them locked up. But he did trust Loki, and Loki had said that they would fine.

Instead of looking around at their surroundings and working himself into a nervous wreck, Tony focused on the god that was pressed up against his side. Loki was not resting peacefully— Tony couldn't see his expression due to the way that his face was buried in Tony's neck, but every line of him was taut, his muscles tense in a way that they shouldn't be while sleeping. Even as he watched, Loki shifted slightly in Tony's arms, his thin fingers clenching into Tony's shirt before stilling once more.

Concern rose up Tony's throat, tasting like bile and burning like acid. The frenzied escape had taken up too much space in Tony's mind, but now that he was able to *think* he knew there was no way he should have been able to move Loki as easily as he had. He remembered the dent Loki had left in the floor of his penthouse after being swung about by the Hulk, and how dense Loki's body must be to survive something like that. He *should* weigh a ton, but the months of captivity and starvation had hit him hard. He was too thin, his face gaunt, his fingers bone wrapped in skin with hardly an ounce of flesh. The rags hid the worst of it but Tony could still feel the hard edges of bone cutting into his side.

As strong as he was, Tony knew he had to get Loki somewhere he could recover. He'd managed to survive as long as he had by sitting still and conserving what little energy he had been able to hold on to, but the fight and subsequent attempt at a getaway had taken what little he had left.

But... Tony didn't know what to do. He wasn't trained for this, he'd never even researched it. All the information in his head about dealing with starvation was a result of skimming over articles of the Maria Stark foundation's work in Africa. He didn't know whether what he'd done the night before was the right thing, but he knew that he'd had to do *something*. Hopefully, if they could get somewhere safe, Loki would be able to recover enough to help Tony understand what he needed.

But where could they possibly *be* safe, when one of the most covert and far-reaching organisations in the world was most likely doing all that they could to catch them?

With that worrying thought continuing to knock around in his mind, he shifted slightly, his back rubbing against the coarse bricks of the wall they were leaning against, his feet scuffing in the dirt that was scattered over the pavement. He had never been good at sitting still, and trying to do so when all he wanted to do was run grated against every nerve.

The cut on his arm was throbbing slightly, but it felt a bit better than it had before he'd fallen asleep. Still, it was uncomfortable trapped between their bodies, but Tony didn't dare move

too much since he couldn't afford for the ring to lose contact with Loki's skin.

It tested the limits of his flexibility, but he untangled their fingers only to run his hand up Loki's arm, so that he would have enough space to fit Loki's head under his elbow. He then pushed Loki gently off his shoulder and allowed the god to slip down, so that his head was resting in Tony's lap instead. From there, it was easy to clasp their hands back together atop Loki's chest, feeling the steady rise and fall of every breath.

Through it all, Loki remained completely out of it, his eyes tightly closed. His damaged lips did pull down in a frown, but he relaxed as Tony threaded the fingers of his left hand through Loki's hair, stroking gently and trying not to catch on the numerous tangles.

Tony couldn't say how long they sat like that, but the sun was starting to sink below roofs of the taller buildings and the streetlights began to flicker, casting unusual shadows that had Tony on high alert. People walked past on the street, their feet carrying them around the pair entwined against the wall even though their gaze never landed upon them.

He had almost managed to make himself comfortable when a white sedan with a blue stripe pulled up behind the car sitting only a few yards away. While it looked different to those Tony was used to seeing back home, the distinctive colour scheme and the word 'POLIS' on the side was more than enough identification.

Oh, shit.

Of course, it wasn't as bad as being found by the Ten Rings or SHIELD, but Tony was not keen on being picked up by authorities. He sat rigid, his hand gripping Loki's tightly as he remembered what the god had said about the ring.

Not invisible. Just unnoticed.

Unnoticed was not the same thing as unseen, and Tony had the horrible feeling that if they were to do something *noticeable*, then the magic of the ring would no longer hold.

So he held still and stayed quiet as two uniformed police officers stepped out of their vehicle and inspected the car, barking words at each other. They were, of course, speaking in Turkish so Tony had no way of knowing exactly what was being said, but it was clear that they had not merely stopped here because the car was unlicensed— they had been searching for it, and only gave it a cursory look over before they pulled out a radio. While one dealt with that the other was watching the surrounding street, and Tony felt something lodge in his throat as she glanced in their direction.

But the moment her gaze landed on them her eyes unfocused and she looked away, shaking her head slightly, almost comically, as if she were a cartoon character attempting to clear her mind. Then, she turned back to her conversation with her partner as if nothing had happened.

Well then. Guess that meant the ring worked.

Regardless, Tony thought it best to err on the side of caution, and remained as still as he could while the officers arranged for a tow-truck to remove the car. It was something of a

relief to have it gone, and the sight of both the squad car and the stolen vehicle disappearing down the road was something of a huge relief.

But, unfortunately, that didn't change the fact that they still needed somewhere to go. They couldn't sit on the street forever. Throwing his head back against the wall and closing his eyes, Tony tossed up his options.

Turkey, for all that it was unfamiliar to him, wasn't actually such a terrible place to be. It was rather central, with the Middle East and Asia to the south and east, and Europe to the north and west. He wasn't keen on going too far east, though, since that was where he had been brought from after being captured— but he had a few places in Europe that would serve their needs. Of course, SHIELD and the Avengers knew about a couple of them, Pepper and Rhodey knew about a couple more, and the very few that were left would be difficult to get to without money and transport. Especially since to go north from İzmir and into the rest of Europe would mean crossing through Sokovia first, which, since the country currently at war, may prove difficult. While two more refugees certainly wouldn't raise any suspicions, they would be unlikely to get out of the country without attracting notice once they were in.

It would be easier to go around, but go east first would be a long trek around the Black Sea—
To the west, though, was just the Aegean.

And although the thought of it had Tony shivering in dread...

"They won't be able to track us as easily if we go across the water," Tony realised, muttering the words aloud. "And if we can hide without being seen, then we can get on a boat."

Loki stirred at the sound of Tony's voice, his head shifting first as a sigh pulled from his lips. Then his eyes blinked open, and—

He froze, his muscles tensing as he struggled to try and pull himself upright as quickly as his emaciated limbs would allow.

"Where—"

"You're okay," Tony said instantly, leaning down slightly so that Loki could see his face, squeezing his hand gently in an effort to calm. "A couple of police officers impounded the car, but other than that nothing's happened. We're fine."

Loki didn't look entirely convinced, but he allowed Tony to help him get upright, this time with more of his weight on the wall than Tony's shoulder. He did not complain when Tony pressed the water bottle full of electrolytes back into his hands, and took a few sips. He did, however, turn his nose up at the granola bar.

"It made me feel ill," Loki said, and despite his frustration at the words Tony was glad that there was some strength back in his voice. The sleep must have helped. "There is something wrong with it."

"There's not, it's fine," Tony pleaded. "Please, eat something."

Loki frowned. "I'm not hungry."

Tony didn't want to be angry with him, and he wasn't, not really. It was just frustrating because he *knew* Loki had to be, and he didn't understand why the god would not eat. He was entirely out of his depth, struggling to keep his head above water while he desperately tried to keep Loki afloat. And it was just... hard, to feel so fucking *helpless*.

"Please, Loki," Tony said. The next words were not spoken aloud, and perhaps that was why they were so full of desperation, aching with pain that a spoken voice would find difficulty replicating. *'I need you, and I can't... you're all I've got left.'*

'You're all I have, too,' Loki admitted. Then, he sighed. "Very well. But... not the granola bar. Please."

Tony frowned with concern and guilt. "Did I get that wrong? I'm so sorry—"

"No, do not apologise," Loki said. "You were not to know that I... that there are differences in my physiology—"

"I know you're not human," Tony mumbled. "I'm not *stupid*."

"But nor am I Aesir." Loki paused, something painful dancing on the edges of his expression. "My... well. I *believe* that in my current state, it would be best if I consumed meat. Is there any left in your bag?"

For a moment, Tony was stuck, because— oh, god. Tony had eaten some of the meat from the bag earlier, before Loki had fallen asleep. He'd given Loki the granola bar which was apparently *wrong*, and had sat right in front of him and eaten the thing that might have actually helped—

"*Stop*," Loki commanded— and it was a *command*, despite the soft tone. "Do not do that yourself. You meant well, and I appreciate everything that you have done. I would not have made it out, if you were not there."

Tony offered a watery smile. "It was a team effort."

His next task was to dig through the bag, searching amongst all the various loose items and pulling things out that had been grabbed without prejudice from the kitchen store. The dried jerky Tony had started earlier might be too tough, even if Loki said that his stomach would respond better to meat than anything else. But then his fingers brushed over something round and hard, and he thought he had his answer.

"Hey Lokes?" Tony asked, pulling the small can from the messy bag. "Is fish okay?"

Loki pulled a face, but he still held out his hand and accepted the tuna. He almost seemed to eat it a flake at a time, picking the pieces from the can with delicate pinches and chewing unnecessarily. As good as it was to see him getting more sustenance, it was still painful, watching Loki eat so slowly, so clearly hating every second even though he *knew* he had to eat it to get stronger.

It only made Tony hate the Ten Rings even more.

They couldn't do anything about that now, though— they had destroyed all they could, and Tony could do nothing with the small hard drive sitting at the bottom of the backpack until he had a computer to stick it into.

Silver lining, though— Loki managed to eat more of the tuna than he had the granola bar, and he promised that it settled better in his stomach. Tony had enough food to last them another day or so, longer if Loki kept refusing to eat more than tiny portions, but they'd run out if they didn't find more soon.

Ha. They were still stuck, weren't they?

They still needed money.

And transport.

There was an obvious solution, but still Tony shirked from the thought of asking for help. And besides, there was *another* option—

Because he'd already concluded that a boat was their best chance, and they had driven past a port mere minutes before stopping at their current location.

Once Loki had eaten and Tony had taken the time to drink some water himself, he made the motions to begin to get a move on.

“Do you think you can walk?”

Loki grimaced. “I think that I can try.”

It was difficult but not impossible to lever themselves to their feet while keeping their hands clasped together, and they managed with minimal grimacing. Loki still leaned on Tony for support, his fingers gripping Tony's tightly, but he was still far too light and it wasn't too much of a burden. Then they moved slowly but steadily back the way they had come, passing other pedestrians as if they were nothing but ghosts in the night.

It was properly dark by the time they reached the port, but it was still busy enough, people dashing about and making final arrangements so their ships could make the morning tide. They had no way of accessing shipping manifests, no way of knowing which of the ships currently at port would be going where, but Tony didn't think it mattered too much.

Anywhere was better than where they were.

The only issue was that they couldn't afford to get on a boat destined for Australia or somewhere equally far away, and get caught below decks without enough food. It was something that weighed on Tony's mind as they slid through the gates and onto the pier, but then, completely by chance, they struck gold.

There were two men glancing at a clipboard, going over a list and checking off last minute items. But it wasn't their actions that caught Tony's attention— it was the fact that they were

speaking Italian, the familiar language washing over him like a cooling balm. And as he listened in on the conversation, their destination became clear.

Naples.

A slow smile started to spread across Tony's face as he realised, for the first time, that they *really had a chance*.

'We should get on this one,' Tony said, his eyes running over the bright red hull of the ship.

'You wish to travel to Italy?' Loki asked. He did not sound like he was going to argue— he was just curious.

'I have a place there that no one else knows about,' Tony said. *'Bought it a couple years ago, right after Afghanistan. I have a few safe houses around, but— not even Pepper knows about that one.'*

'Good,' Loki said. *'Then let's go.'*

Tony knew Loki would never say it, but he could tell that the god was about ready to pass out again. His hand had begun to tremble in Tony's, and his face was awfully pale. He wouldn't last much longer, and Tony took that as their cue to keep moving.

Getting on the boat was stupidly easy—

Or, at least, it should have been. The gangway was unobstructed and there was nothing standing in their way. No one tried to stop them, no one even *saw* them, but... Tony could hear his blood pumping through his veins, that gushing, surging sound that seemed to grow louder and louder because—

It wasn't in his head, that was the water washing against the side of the ship, flowing between the pylons underneath the pier, underneath his *feet*. The gangway's rail was low and simple, and Tony could easily see the surging sea below. His hands tensed, one in Loki's and the other on the rail, his knuckles turning white. Just the movement, the *sound* of the water was enough to have him clenching his teeth hard enough to hurt.

'Anthony,' said Loki, and Tony met his gaze.

Breathe, Tony.

They were on a gangway, a narrow strip of metal twenty feet above the waves, but the water wasn't the largest concern. They may be using the ring, but surely someone would notice if they walked right into them. That didn't tend to be a thing that was easy to ignore.

Steeling himself, Tony dragged his feet forward, slowly at first but picking up the pace as the relatively solid surface of the ship grew closer. He wasn't going to let a stupid little *fear* get in the way of their chance to find somewhere safe. Loki followed behind and Tony had to steady him as he began to sway, afraid that he'd topple over. But they made it to the ship unharmed, and Tony let out a sharp breath.

They found an open door that lead inside, and began the search for a hiding place. The ship itself was large, as most container ships are, but most of the space was reserved for containers themselves, and the area that was actually for the crew was relatively small. It meant that every bit of space was used efficiently and there were not many hiding places left.

Still, it was better than if they had tried to steal a boat of their own. Tony had driven boats before, but never across such a large span of open water, and it wouldn't do to leave a trail of stolen vehicles behind them. That would be far too easy to track. And while the space was small, so too was the crew, which meant they would have an easier time hiding than if Tony had decided to hop aboard a cruise ship instead.

The sound of voices froze Tony on the spot, but there were no footsteps accompanying them. He and Loki slowed their pace as they grew closer, but the added caution was unnecessary— it was just a pair of men in something of a mess hall, drinking from steaming mugs.

“Did you see him?” one of the men was asking in Italian, his voice low and excited. “He flew right over us, around lunch time—”

“It was hard to miss,” the other replied. “Not often you get to see an Avenger this far from the US—”

“He must have been looking into that explosion.”

A woman in the same uniform as the men walked into the room from the other side to join them, a mug of her own in her hand.

“Who's this you're talking about?” She asked in English.

The two men glanced at each other, rolling their eyes before answering in unison.

“Iron Patriot.”

“Oh,” she said. “He's that Avenger who looks like Iron Man and Captain America's love child, right?”

Her innocent smile made it clear that she knew the reaction she was going to get, and she continued to smile as the two other sailors blew up about it. Tony no longer felt the need to listen in— he ushered Loki further down the corridor, searching for a safe place to stay.

The ship itself was large but there did not seem to be many crew, and other than the three in the mess hall most of those that were present were busy on deck, readying the ship for the voyage.

They continued through the halls, glancing into rooms to see them packed with shelves and items, or bunks already made up with sheets. There were plenty of maintenance rooms and whatnot, but they were all likely to be accessed periodically, so were not good places to hide. And through it all, despite the urgency of trying not to be seen and trying to find a place they could stay for... well, probably several days, one thought kept sticking in Tony's mind.

Who the fuck is Iron Patriot?

It really shouldn't have mattered. A detailed clock at the port had finally given Tony a clue as to how much time had passed— it was nearing the end of March, which meant that it had been four months since he had been captured. Of course the Avengers would want to add to their roster when they were a man down—

But it still wasn't a nice feeling, knowing that he had been replaced.

Replaced.

Because from what those sailors had been saying, the Avengers hadn't simply found another hero. They'd found another *Iron Man*.

'Anthony?' Loki asked.

'I'm fine,' Tony replied instantly, instinctively.

'No, you are not,' Loki shot back. 'What is it?'

Tony sighed, and ran his free hand through his hair, using the need to check through another door as an excuse not to look over at his friend. 'I just... I don't suppose you know who *Iron Patriot* is?'

'No.' Loki frowned. 'I assumed that he was one of your creations. Such as *Iron Man*.'

'Hell no. As if I would ever give something a name as tacky as *Iron Patriot*,' he grumbled.

'At least you know that you have not been forgotten,' Loki whispered.

Tony squeezed his hand, and pushed open the next door.

It was a cabin, smaller than the others that they had seen so far— basic and sparse with two bunks, a shelf, and nothing else, all crammed into the space with only about two feet of standing room. The bed was not made, and Tony wondered if that was because it was because its occupant simply hadn't arrived yet. But he hoped it was because it was empty. After all, the crew were clearly settled, and there were no bags on the shelf. It was small and tiny and likely not a first choice— perhaps it was a spare, or—

'Some container ships take passengers,' Tony said. 'Maybe this one doesn't have any on this trip. Or maybe the crew is just smaller than normal.'

Whatever the reason, Loki didn't really seem to care. He merely blinked at Tony slowly,

'Do you think that we will be safe here?' he asked.

Tony shrugged. 'Safe enough, for now. I don't think we have any other option.'

Loki fell asleep almost immediately, curling up on the bottom bunk. Tony considered climbing into the one above, but they couldn't risk someone walking in and seeing them. So, he shoved the bag on the ground where it would be behind the door should someone open it, and then slid in beside Loki. The bunk was tiny, too small for even just one of them, really,

but they were used to being close. And strangely, the tiny space was comforting in a way that it probably shouldn't have been. They were cramped together in a space that was too small, where the air smelt old and still despite the fact that they had not yet started the voyage. They were in a cabin with no lock on the door, they were stowaways trying to enter another country entirely illegally— and yet, Tony finally felt his racing heart begin to calm.



The hours passed peacefully, and Tony only knew they had begun to move when the rocking of the ship grew more pronounced, the waves knocking them backward and forward and sometimes forcing them to brace against the barrier on the side of the bunk. The cabin was dark, since they weren't turn on the light, and whenever they woke from slumber there was no mistaking it for the place they had escaped from. They held each other through their nightmares and kept each other quiet, and the ring remained between them as a terrible reminder of both why they were running and the fact that they were still free. There was just enough space in the cabin to stretch when they needed, and they were able to learn the movements of the crew through the corridor by listening at the door. They found a toilet not far down a corridor from their cabin, and they did their best only to go during the night shift, when most of the crew were asleep save the few on watch.

The biggest problem though, was the food. Loki had slowly worked his way through the tuna cans but he still couldn't stomach the granola bars, neither of them had eaten any fruit, and they were running low on supplies anyway. They couldn't split up because they only had the one ring – and Tony found that the idea didn't sit quite right, anyway – so they crept out of their cabin together, moving slow through the middle of the night until they found the galley.

Tony felt a bit guilty at first, since he was fairly certain that ships' cooks kept a tight count on everything and someone would no doubt get in trouble for the theft— but then he looked at the colour that was slowly starting to return to Loki's cheeks, far more rapidly than he could have hoped, and he knew it was worth it.

Plus, on the same outing they also came across a store room, and inside were some spare clothes. Nothing fancy, but nothing terrible either, and they weren't covered in blood. It was trivial to be wearing something *clean*—

And god, but after Tony had managed to wash himself with clean water from the sink in the bathroom, removing about fifteen layers of blood and grime, he felt like an entirely new person. Then Loki saw him cleaning the cut on his arm with the first aid kit, and had insisted that he heal it.

'You need to conserve your energy, I don't want you to exhaust yourself,' Tony argued.

'And I don't want you in pain,' Loki replied. *'If you fight this, I will fight you back and I will win. There will be no difference, other than the fact that I shall be more exhausted than if you just let me do it.'*

Unfortunately, there was no arguing with that, so Tony simply held out his arm and allowed that familiar flow of magic to caress his skin, knitting his flesh back together and chasing away any remaining chance of infection.

'Thank you,' Tony said when it was done, smiling gently.

Loki smiled back, his now almost-healed lips no longer paining him. *'My pleasure.'*

It didn't take as much out of Loki as Tony had worried it would, and he only continued to grow stronger. While he still looked skinny, the edges of his bones were no longer quite so pronounced— and by the time the engines of the ship went quiet, Loki was able to eat the same amount of food as Tony.

Getting off the ship was far harder than been getting on it, as the sun was high in the sky, and the port was awfully busy. But they were well practiced at remaining unnoticed after the almost three days at sea, and they were more than capable of avoiding the quarantine and border officers. They were off the ship and walking toward the gate of the port authority within minutes of leaving the relative safety of their cabin.

And plastered across the side of the port authority, with tall, bright letters glinting in the sunlight, was a large sign which read: *'Benvenuti a Napoli.'*

Welcome to Naples.

"Hey look, Lokes," Tony said, gesturing to it with a tilt of his head. "We're not far, now."

"How far is it?" Loki asked. He was able to stand on his own, now, and as he looked around his eyes were alert.

"It's probably, uh," Tony frowned, wracking his memory. "About a four or five hour drive from Naples?"

Loki frowned. "We do not have a car."

"Yeah, I know," Tony sighed. "We'll have to work something out."

"Perhaps, I could try to get us there," Loki said. "I have recovered some, I could—"

"No, don't even," Tony said. "I don't want you to hurt yourself. If there's no other option—maybe, but only then, okay? And only if you're sure you can do it. None of this 'perhaps', all right?"

Loki nodded, and Tony thought he looked a little relieved.

"Is there some way you can contact your JARVIS?" Loki suggested instead. "You have told me that he is loyal, that he will not betray you."

"He won't," Tony said. "But he will contact someone else straight away, and he might... he might do something about you."

Loki understood immediately. "He will think that I aim to harm you."

"Yes," Tony said, seeing no need to sugar coat it. "He'll listen, but I need to make sure that I can speak to him and stop him from calling for help straight away like his emergency

protocols dictate. And If I contact him and he sees you before I can explain...” Tony sighed. “Well, anyway. Even if we can convince someone to let us borrow their phone, he’ll be into the camera app in a heartbeat and he’ll see you. He’ll get into the security system of any shop with a landline, so unless we can find—”

Tony stopped, and stared.

“Wow, okay,” he said. “There’s a blast from the past.”

Maybe it was because it was a port, full of people keen to be phoning home. Maybe it had just been forgotten by the passing wave of time. But there, sticking on the side of the wall, all silver and blocky and with a bright red receiver, was a payphone.

Tony never even would have taken note of it if he hadn’t been thinking of that exact thing right in that moment.

“Is that a *phone*?” Loki asked, staring in confusion as Tony dragged him over and reached out to pick it up. “I thought they were far smaller than that.”

“This is just an old one,” Tony explained. “But it won’t have a camera, and while the port almost certainly does, they’ll all be aimed at the doors, the gates, the cargo, the boats, anywhere but here.” He smiled, almost feeling giddy. He held the receiver loosely in his left hand as he looked back to Loki. “I can call JARVIS.”

“Go on, then,” Loki said, a tiny smile of his own starting to form at the sight of Tony’s sudden excitement. “What are you waiting for?”

Loki kept their hands together as Tony reversed charges and dialled a number that had long since become burned in his mind, and that was a bit weird and unwieldy, but necessary.

Tony drew in a deep breath— then the call picked up almost immediately, and he didn’t wait even half a second to receive a greeting. He just started to *talk*.

“Voice Authorisation, Anthony Edward Stark. Activate Protocol Fortress of Solitude, confirmation code Papa, Alpha, Romeo—”

“Sir!” JARVIS exclaimed—

“—Against, November, Oscar, India, Amsterdam,” Tony continued, speaking the words as quickly as he could without mispronouncing them, just hoping he was fast enough. “Total silence JARVIS, no one knows you’re talking to me, no one gets to know where I am. *No one.*”

“Confirmed, Protocol Fortress of Solitude activated,” JARVIS said. “*Sir*, it is such a relief to know that you’re safe.”

“Not quite, J,” Tony said, though his smile remained in place. “But I think we’re getting there. How is everyone at home?”

“Worried. Colonel Rhodes has been working with the military and the CIA to find you. Ms Potts has been keeping the company going in your absence, and has been liaising with SHIELD.”

“Do not give any information to SHIELD, JARVIS,” Tony said instantly. “Not a single thing.”

“Sir?”

“They’re dirty J, that’s all you need to know for now,” Tony said. He felt Loki’s thumb begin to rub soothing circles into the back of his hand, and he leaned slightly toward the god in both thanks and a further search for comfort.

“Should I inform Ms Potts to cease communications with them?” JARVIS asked.

Tony only mulled it over for half a second.

“No,” he said. “Watch over her, keep her safe— but don’t let anyone know you’re doing it. I can’t afford for SHIELD to think that something is up. They have to know that we’ve escaped, but I don’t want them knowing I’ve made contact. Maybe they’ll think we were caught in the explosion, or that we died on the streets, or something.”

“Sir, is there something I can do to help?” JARVIS asked. “I am tracing your location to—”

“Yes,” Tony interrupted. “Do you think you’ll be able to get the house ready, without getting anyone else involved?”

“Of course, Sir.” JARVIS didn’t need to ask which house, and Tony loved him for it. “And may I ask— is there another person with you?”

Ha. He should have known that JARVIS would pick up on that.

“Yes, but listen,” Tony said. “The person I have with me, he’s someone that might... well. I need you to swear that you’re not going to do anything without asking me. You can’t turn us in, okay?”

When JARVIS answered, his voice was low and worried. “Sir, if this person is a threat to your safety—”

“I know what your primary protocols are, and I also know that you learned to override them a long time ago,” Tony said slowly. “I never would have got out without him, J. He won’t hurt me, and if you give him a chance, you’ll see that.”

“Who is this person?” JARVIS asked, concern bleeding from his tone. “Sir, I must insist—”

“J,” Tony said, his voice a little rough. “Please. Promise me.”

There was a long pause, the only sound the slight static from the payphone, and it felt like a nervous twitch.

But, then—

“Yes, Sir,” JARVIS said. “I promise.”

“All right,” Tony said, tugging Loki closer and holding the receiver slightly away from his ear. “J. I would like you to meet Loki.”

“Hello, JARVIS,” Loki said, leaning close. “I understand that you have no reason to trust me, but I promise that I have no intentions of harming Anthony. He has become... quite dear to me.”

“Aww,” said Tony, unable to resist leaning back and knocking their shoulders together. “I think you’re pretty awesome, too.”

“Mr Stark says that you are to be trusted, and that you have saved his life,” JARVIS replied, ignoring Tony entirely. “So I shall reserve judgement of my own until I have got to know you myself, Mr Odinson.”

Loki grimaced, and Tony knew it hadn’t been JARVIS’ reservations that he objected to.

“Not Odinson,” Tony said, and Loki glanced across in surprise. “What *is* your name, anyway?”

“In truth I am the late King Laufey’s son,” Loki said, his gaze darkening. “But I think... I would prefer a name of my own making, if you would allow me some time to decide. But I thank you, JARVIS, for giving me a chance.” Loki caught Tony’s gaze, and held it. “I will not let you down.”

“No,” JARVIS said. “I don’t believe that you will.”

Somehow, JARVIS’ simple acceptance of Loki made it feel like a weight had been lifted from Tony’s shoulders. It proved that there was still one person from his old life that Tony could trust implicitly, and that...

Well.

Tony had never really doubted JARVIS, but have the confirmation there almost brought tears to his eyes.

“Okay, JARVIS,” Tony said, clearing his throat. “You know where we are, but I need funds and I need transport. What do you think?”

“I... think that I can arrange that, Sir,” JARVIS said, and Tony smiled when he recognised the pause not as hesitation, but as JARVIS already beginning to work his magic.

The conversation that followed was full of coded details and implied locations that none of them would have been happy to speak about over the phone, even with JARVIS protecting the line from prying ears. And in less than half an hour, JARVIS seemed to have fixed almost every problem Tony had thought of.

He felt light as he prepared to say goodbye, only willing to do so because he knew JARVIS would be patiently waiting when he and Loki finally made it to the house.

“Before I go, might I say, Sir,” JARVIS said, “It has been a pleasure to hear your voice.”

“Yeah,” Tony said, swallowing down against the lump in his throat. “Yeah, J. I’ve missed you, too.”

Hello cruel world

JARVIS was an absolute miracle worker.

Tony had no idea how the hell JARVIS had managed it without raising any red flags, but by the time he and Loki had walked to the agreed upon parking lot, there was a car waiting for them with the keys in the ignition. On the backseat was a bag filled with bottles of water and Gatorade, along with snacks that would be perfect for getting both of their energies up. And so, within forty minutes of speaking on the phone, they were powering north along the A1 as fast as the speed limit would allow. Loki was once again curled on the passenger seat, as Tony felt awake enough to safely drive the distance.

As Tony had told Loki it would while they were back at the port, the trip took them several hours, but by the time the scenery gave way from the beautiful fields of Tuscany to thick forests and towering mountains, Tony felt lighter and more alive than he had at the start of the trip. And when he pulled through the winding driveway and the electronic gate let them in without a fuss, he finally felt like he might be able to breathe.

The house was situated on the side of a steep drop, looking down over the forest that spread for miles and miles. It was nestled amongst trees with thick vegetation on its three other sides, the while the winding branches of the tall, old beech trees below hiding the house from view on the other.

It was the perfect hiding place, completely secure, and entirely private.

And when Tony pushed through the front door with Loki at his side, he nearly fell over from relief right then and there.

“Welcome home, Sir,” said JARVIS, and Tony felt his eyes begin to prickle.

“Hey, buddy,” he said, blinking away the tears before turning to Loki with a shaky smile. “We made it.”

“Yes,” Loki replied, his own smile tired but true. “We did.”

They couldn't just find somewhere to fall unconscious though, because despite JARVIS having already promised that the house was safe, Tony couldn't help the tiny but growing scratch of nervousness that ate at the back of his mind. He hadn't visited the place in years, and after spending so long in a constant state of alertness, he found it difficult to simply turn it off and trust in JARVIS' assessment.

In his head, he knew that he *could*, of course, but it the thought of simply falling asleep without first checking made his breath catch.

Loki noticed, of course he did— he was probably feeling the exact same. So they ran a quick check of the main floors, glancing into every room that wasn't certainly secure and looking for signs of life before they were absolutely sure that they were alone. By the time that was

done, they were both stumbling through halls and almost tripping up the stairs, holding on to each other to stay steady on their feet until they pushed through the door of the master bedroom. JARVIS had arranged for the large bed to be made, and they both collapsed on top of it with barely a thought, arms twisting around waists, legs tangling together, heads resting on shoulders.

Their breathing slowed and they fell asleep almost immediately, finally surrendering themselves to complete and utter oblivion.

Because, *finally*, they were able to feel like they were really, truly *safe*.

—•—

Tony was woken by a scream, a loud, piercing thing that cut straight down to Tony's soul. The cell was as white as always, the lack of colour blinding as he jumped to his feet and charged through the door that lay ajar. His feet pounded against the ground as he ran down the hallways, doing his best to ignore the walls that dripped blood— but the red burned in his vision, a stark contrast to the white that reminded him of everything he had done—

He turned a corner and stumbled out into his living room, the sound of the ocean through the window almost loud enough to be deafening.

“Did you really think that you could beat *me*?”

Tony shook his head frantically, trying to throw away the image before him. No, no, no—

Obie had Loki by the throat. He was wearing a red and gold suit, one of Tony's, and he had a repulsor primed and ready to go, pressed to Loki's temple. Loki was struggling to breathe, pulling at Obie's hand— but he wasn't strong enough yet to be able to fight it.

“You can't protect him,” Obie snarled. “You can't even protect *yourself*.”

Loki looked so tired, so weak—

Maybe if Tony had fought harder, moved faster, maybe then Loki would have been all right and he would have been able to get himself out of this—

Again, always, it was all his fault.

“Anthony, calm down. I need you to breathe.”

Tony turned, his eyes widening in confusion. Standing beside him, wearing a soft green shirt under a dark leather tunic was *Loki*, looking far healthier than... well. Than literally any other time that Tony had laid eyes on him, basically. He flicked his gaze back to Obie, but found that he and the other Loki had vanished.

“Anthony, you are fine,” Loki soothed, reaching out to curl his fingers around Tony's wrists, staring at him intently. “Listen to me. This is not real. You are safe.”

Tony shook his head. “What about you?”

“I am fine, as well.” The corner of Loki’s mouth turned up, but he still looked sad. “I am with you.”

Tony blinked his eyes open, his gaze catching on the features of the unfamiliar bedroom. The lighting was dim, not the bright white he was expecting, and he was no longer alone— there was a body pressed over his, as if he were being held down, but somehow that was more comforting than concerning. He recognised the hands that were cupping his cheeks, the soothing sounds that crooned in his ear.

“*Loki*,” he gasped, following the god’s movement as he let Tony go, curling against his side instead.

“Shhh, now,” Loki said, pulling Tony tightly into his chest. Tony clutched at Loki’s shirt, grateful for the closeness and more than willing to take as much comfort as Loki was willing to give. “It was just a nightmare.”

A nightmare. Yeah, Tony knew all about those, and Loki had talked him down from more than a fair few in the past. But as Loki’s soothing words and the hand stroking his hair worked to calm his racing heart, Tony realised that there had been something different this time.

“You were actually there,” Tony said, his voice hoarse. “You weren’t just talking to me, and I wasn’t just... you were *there*.”

He lifted his chin to see Loki’s expression, but Loki would not meet his gaze.

“Yes,” he said, his voice suddenly rather stiff. “I apologise for the intrusion.”

“Intrusion?” Tony asked, disbelieving. “What was that, exactly?”

“That was...” Loki seemed to grit his teeth, and Tony got the impression that if not for his death grip on Loki’s shirt, the god would have pulled away. “I wished only to talk to you, as I always do, but maybe I was too tried to concentrate and I fell further than I intended.”

Tony frowned slightly, the explanation tugging at a past memory. “What do you mean?”

“Do you remember when I first taught you to speak with your mind?”

Ah, yes. That was it.

“You said that there was a way you could hear me without me needing to do anything,” Tony recalled. “But you wouldn’t do it.”

“Because it is both intimate and dangerous.” As Loki spoke, Tony felt the hand at his back curl into a fist. “I did not wish to intrude upon your privacy, and nor did I mean to do so tonight.” Finally, Loki looked down and met Tony’s gaze, his eyes shining with regret. “I *am* sorry, Anthony, I didn’t mean—”

“Hey, hey,” Tony soothed, forcing one of his hands to unclench from Loki’s now ruined shirt and reaching up to gently touch Loki’s cheek instead. “Do you remember what *I* said, that

day?”

“I remember that you complained a lot,” Loki muttered, turning his head away slightly but not enough to dislodge Tony’s hand. “You said you would let me do it only because you believed we had no other choice.”

“No, I said I’d let you do it because I *trusted you*,” Tony interrupted, only barely managing to hold back from rolling his eyes in fondness. “And I still do, all right? I’m not mad— in fact, I’m *glad*.” He let his hand fall away from Loki’s face and left it to rest on the god’s shoulder instead, as that made it easier to hide the way it trembled. “That... it really shook me. And I... you just, you helped, okay? So I’m glad that you did it. I was *glad* to know that you were safe.”

Loki’s eyes widened— just a tiny fraction, but enough for Tony to notice. “You mean that?”

“Oh, for god’s sake,” Tony groaned, pressing his forehead to Loki’s shoulder. “It has to be some ungodly hour right now. I’m going back to sleep, we can deal with the rest of this in the morning.”

Loki let out a soft exhale, but allowed Tony to rearrange them back into a more comfortable position for sleeping. That done, Tony relaxed back down into Loki’s hold, not dreading returning to sleep half as much as he should have after such an awful nightmare.

The thought of why that was put a soft smile on his lips.

‘And yes,’ he said, brushing his fingers along Loki’s skin just under the collar of his shirt. *‘Of course I meant it.’*

There was a beat of quiet before Loki shifted, his arms tightening ever so slightly where they had wrapped around Tony’s waist.

‘Thank you,’ Loki whispered, his voice little more than a breath on the wind. But it made Tony smile, glad that the incident hadn’t shaken Loki to the point of no longer communicating silently at all.

It was interesting, in a way, that their conversation had begun with Loki comforting Tony and had ended with the reverse, but then maybe that was just why they worked so well. They were both broken, shattered beyond repair— but when they stood together, they were strong enough to stand tall.

—•—

When Tony woke again a few hours later, it was to find that Loki had woken first. Tony’s arms felt empty and the bed felt far too soft, far too *big*, and his heart began to race as he frantically wiped the sleep from his eyes so he could sit up and search until—

“Good morning, Anthony,” Loki said, not looking away from the far wall. Tony pushed himself up to sitting, still reeling a bit from the moment of panic.

“Morning,” Tony managed to say, though it came out as a bit of a croak. He swallowed, and tried again. “Are you all right?”

“Perfectly fine,” Loki replied, his tone light. Once again, of course, his response was *relative*, but it was nice to hear all the same. Tony didn’t think that Loki would lie— at least, not about that. Not now.

“Good.”

Loki didn’t respond to that, so Tony merely sat quiet, twisting his hands in his lap. It was strange, that after they had been able to talk so easily the night before, it could be so difficult to find the right words to say.

Tony didn’t understand why Loki was being so aloof— he hadn’t closed off like this since before they had begun to work together. They had always talked about *everything*, so what had changed?

Well.

For a single, horrifying moment, Tony was struck with the thought of *what if Loki was planning to leave?* After all, they had agreed to work together so they could get out of captivity, and now that they were safe there was no reason for Loki to stick around.

No reason, of course, save the fact that they had promised each other that they would exact revenge—

And besides, they had long since moved past relying on that simple agreement as a basis for their amicable relationship. The simple truth was that they were *friends* now, and if Tony trusted in anything, then he trusted in *that*.

Despite what his darker thoughts might try to convince him Tony *knew* that Loki wasn’t about to leave—

But then, what other reason could there be for Loki’s strange silence?

It only took a very short run down of the night before for Tony to realise just exactly what Loki might have objected to. Because in all honesty, there was no reason for them to have been entwined while they slept. No cameras to hide from, no small hiding space to fit into, and there was no reason for them to continue the skin contact when the perception altering power of Meathead’s ring was no longer needed. Yet Tony had curled into Loki’s side and pressed their bodies together without even considering how Loki might have felt about it—

And yeah, sure, maybe Loki initiated the hug to comfort Tony after the nightmare, but the clinging like a limpet afterward was all on *Tony*. Maybe Loki didn’t want a measly mortal hanging off him like that when he was trying sleep.

Tony cleared his throat. “Hey, about what happened last night,” he said as he scooted across the bed to sit beside – but not overly close to – the still silent god. “I’m sorry, I– I guess I got really clingy—”

“Only to be expected, after a nightmare,” Loki said, finally turning and meeting Tony’s gaze. Clearly, whatever he had been thinking so hard about had been pushed to the wayside for the moment. “Especially considering it what it was about.”

“You didn’t mind?” Tony asked, slightly irritated by how weak it came out.

But Loki only smiled, the corners of his mouth turning up just a fraction. “No,” he said. “Not at all.” Loki’s gaze seemed to trace the space between them, but he didn’t move any closer. Still, Tony decided to take that as a good sign, and shifted a little until their knees brushed together.

When he received no complaints, he began to smile a little as well.

“That’s good,” he said. “And, thanks. Despite being woken up, I feel like I’ve slept for hours.”

“You have, Sir,” JARVIS piped up. “Sixteen of them, in fact.”

Tony grinned. “Awesome, thanks J.” He nudged Loki’s shoulder. “Have I told you before that you’re actually a really great pillow?”

“Ah yes,” Loki sighed. “That shall become my legacy. Loki Liesmith— god of mischief, rightful king of Jotunheim, and a ‘really great pillow.’”

Tony chuckled, though there were quite a few things in that sentence that piqued his curiosity. He just decided to focus on the easiest one— since only the day before, Loki had asked for more time to decide upon his own name. It was interesting that he had come to a conclusion so quickly.

“Liesmith?” Tony asked.

“It is fitting,” Loki said with a shrug. “And while it is a name that was given to me in cruel jest when I was younger, it is one that I decided to twist until it became my own, until they could no longer use it thinking that it would hurt me. It reminds me of who I am, without links to anyone else. And it reminds me of what I am capable of.” He turned slightly, a fierce smirk flashing across his lips. “It’s something that they can’t take from me, and something that I can use against *them* to become stronger myself.”

“That’s an interesting way of looking at it,” Tony said, tilting his head. “I think I like it.”

“Good.” Loki leaned just a little bit further into Tony, and it made something in his chest grow a little warm. “I do, too.”

They sat in silence for a moment, far more comfortable than a few minutes earlier. It still felt strange, almost disconcerting to not have a guillotine waiting to fall on their necks. Strange, because it felt unnatural, it felt false, it felt like a *trap*, and—

Even just thinking about it made Tony’s chest tight, and he shoved the thought away. They were fine, for now. They had space to breathe before *they decided* to make the next move.

“Right,” Tony said, loath to break the comfort but starting to feel a little antsy just sitting and doing nothing. He wanted to up and *move*, just to prove that he still could. “I’m going to go and freshen up, okay?”

He pushed off from the bed— and then immediately stopped and swayed for a moment as his body and brain realigned themselves after such a long time horizontal. Thankfully, that lasted only a moment, and he headed into the en suite bathroom, feeling Loki’s gaze follow him. It made the skin on the back of his neck prickle, and he had to shake off a tiny shiver of irrational dread.

He was only going to the en suite. He’d even leave the door open. Loki wouldn’t be far.

The moment he reached the counter though, Tony had to stop. JARVIS had called in one of the caretakers to fill the house with essentials before they had arrived, so of course there were two toothbrushes and a tube of generic mint toothpaste sitting innocently beside the sink.

It was nothing unusual— but Tony couldn’t help but stare.

“Anthony?”

When Tony turned and saw that Loki had followed him into the bathroom, some of the tension he had barely noticed building in his chest released in a sigh.

“I’m okay,” he said, turning back to the counter, glancing at the toothpaste once again. “I just...” He knew it was ridiculous to be so shocked by something so small and *mundane*, but he was unable to push the feeling away nonetheless. “I only just realised how long it’s been since I last brushed my teeth,” he said, shrugging in an attempt at nonchalance and hating the curl of embarrassment in the pit of his stomach.

Loki didn’t say anything in response— he simply stepped a little closer, and pressed his fingers to the small of Tony’s back. It was the kind of comfort that didn’t feel stifling, a simple *I’m here* that let Tony draw support without feeling like he was about to fall down, and it gave him the strength to reach out and gingerly pick up the toothbrush.

As he began the bizarre (and actually a little bit painful) task of brushing his teeth, Tony turned the incident over in his mind. It was no doubt going to happen again— Tony had already freaked out on the ship over clean clothes, then the soft bed, and now a toothbrush. There would no doubt be more moments such as those to come, since so much of what he had once taken for granted had been taken from him for such a very long time.

Ah, well. He was going to have to get used to it all again eventually— there was no point in trying to hide from it, he was better off just facing it all at once. Hello cruel world.

Thankfully, though, the rest of their bathroom experience passed fairly easily. It was simple for one to shower while the other dealt with other tasks, such as teeth and hair and everything else that was required for simple personal grooming. Tony did have a bit of a moment as he stared at the mirror after cutting down his beard and coaxing his facial hair back into its old shape, as he found he could hardly recognise the face that stared back. There was half a second where he considered shaving the goatee off entirely and starting anew. But even

though he wasn't the same person he used to be, he felt a bit like this was one last thing he couldn't let the Ten Rings take from him. He had changed, yes— but he was still *Tony Stark*, and just like Loki with his name, Tony rather liked the idea of having something to remind him of who he *used* to be without limiting who he could become.

When they were both clean and dressed in clothes they found in the closet and dresser, Tony led the way back through the house and into the large open plan living room and kitchen. He offered to make breakfast so that Loki could sit down, and then when Loki tried to help he all but forced the god onto one of the couches.

The fridge and cupboards had been stocked, and it was easy enough for Tony to make an omelette. It was one of the few foodstuffs he was capable of cooking to an acceptable standard (since the incident with Pepper, learning how to do so had become a matter of *pride*), and he thought the egg might fit well enough with Loki's description of what would be all right on his stomach— for even though he had been doing a lot better with his eating, Tony preferred to be cautious, just in case.

When Tony was done with the food, he looked up to see that Loki had left the couch and was standing by the floor to ceiling windows that ran the length of the room, his arms crossed over his chest as he stared out wistfully over the endless stretch of forest. The early morning sunlight cast his pale skin in a slight glow, and his hair was still a little damp from his shower, but appearing far healthier for having been washed. He was wearing an old Led Zeppelin shirt and dark wash jeans that Tony recognised as his own, though they seemed to have been resized. All in all, Loki actually looked quite...

“Beautiful,” Loki said, noticing Tony's gaze. “It has been a long time since I have seen trees such as these.”

“Yeah.” Tony swallowed, and glanced away. He left their plates on the counter and moved to stand beside his friend at the window. “We're uh, about an hour south east of Florence, close enough to the city that we'll be able to get whatever we want but far enough away that we won't be bothered. Florence gets lots of tourists, so no one will notice a few unfamiliar faces. And I own most of this surrounding land, so. There aren't really any neighbours to worry about, either.”

“A perfect hideaway,” Loki mused, tilting down his chin to look at Tony. “You don't want to tell the Avengers where you are.”

It wasn't a question, so Tony didn't answer. Instead, he asked one of his own.

“Do you think I should?”

Loki considered him for a moment, but Tony kept his gaze solidly on the trees.

“No,” Loki eventually said. “I believe that this is the smartest course. At least until we know who to trust.”

Tony nodded. “Exactly.”

It was, of course, impossible to know for now, because with SHIELD in the position they were it was too difficult to be able to not only sort out those who could be trusted, but also doing so in a way that avoided garnering notice. And even *then*, if someone really was on their side, it would be too difficult to ensure that they would not let something slip.

Even alerting JARVIS had been a risk—

A risk that only became all the more apparent when JARVIS spoke up while Tony and Loki were halfway through their *delicious* omelettes.

“Sir, I am sorry to interrupt,” he said. “But Colonel Rhodes has grown suspicious. I am afraid that I almost alerted him before you activated Protocol Fortress of Solitude, and while he knows nothing of importance, he has begun asking me questions that I do not wish to answer. With the state that he is in, I fear Iron Patriot may be on your tail before long.”

“Iron Patriot?” Tony asked, his ears pricking at the name he’d heard back in Turkey. “You mean my replacement?”

“Colonel Rhodes, Sir,” JARVIS said mildly, and Tony spluttered.

“Hang on, what?”

“The Air Force and the United States’ government believed that in order to boost morale during the increased Mandarin attacks and... your kidnapping, it was for the best that they rebrand War Machine into, ah, a more positive message, Sir.”

Tony exchanged a confused glance with Loki, but the god just shrugged.

Thankfully, the television screen against the wall flickered to life, showing what looked to be old news footage of Iron Patriot’s unveiling.

And, god, Tony could see what that girl on the ship had meant. It was clearly still War Machine, with the same shape and weaponry, the arc reactor in the chest, and the distinctive Iron Man faceplate. But where War Machine had been matte grey, this suit was shining blues and reds, adorned with a single, five-pointed star right over the reactor.

To call it the ‘love-child of Iron Man and Captain America’ was to be *kind*, in Tony’s opinion.

“What,” he said, his teeth gritting together. “Has Rhodey. Let them do. To *my suit*?”

“He did not have a choice, Sir,” JARVIS explained. “His superiors insisted, and without you there to say otherwise Colonel Rhodes could not deny them. And as the rebranding did not affect the weapons nor internal systems of the suit, Ms Potts could do nothing, either.”

“I can’t believe it,” Tony whispered, still unable to tear his gaze from the screen, feeling an inexplicable urge to reach out and run his fingers over the outline of what had once been his Mark II suit. “Oh baby, I’m so sorry. Look at what they’ve done to you.”

“There, there,” Loki soothed, patting Tony on the shoulder. “We shall teach them why they should not touch what is not theirs— but only *after* we have dealt with SHIELD.”



Tony didn't quite manage to get over the trauma in a single sitting, and it was Loki who ended up strategising with JARVIS for ideas of what to do with Rhodey's suspicion.

Once they'd eaten their breakfast and it had been decided that JARVIS would misdirect for now, Tony took Loki through the rest of the house, showing him the details they had missed on their rapid check the night before. The house was large, of a similar size to Tony's home in Malibu, and it had everything they would need to be comfortable.

Loki looked everything over with a critical eye, and while he seemed satisfied, he didn't really look particularly impressed.

Pft. *Royalty*.

However, when they descended to the lower levels and Tony showed Loki his favourite area of the house, he was gratified to see Loki's eyes light up. Ha, *validation*.

“You have a workshop here?” Loki asked in awe.

“I have workshop in all of my houses,” Tony told him. “Just in case. This one is pretty well stocked, since this is a safe-house and, you know. Better safe than sorry.” He paused as he cast his gaze over the space again, feeling something in him wilt at the sight of the *stillness*. “It's very quiet, though,” he said.

Loki touched the back of Tony's hand and tilted his head curiously, a silent invitation to talk about it— but only if Tony wanted. And at first, Tony didn't think he *did* want to, but— he missed them dearly, and he thought that if they had met, they might have liked Loki. This way, he could almost imagine what it would be like to introduce them.

So he led Loki back up to the living room so that they could be a little more comfortable, and then Tony told him all about his dearest creations.

“Back home, I have these bots,” Tony said, feeling both sad and fond. “They're a nuisance, and they always get in the way— DUM-E especially, though both he and U *do* try. At least, I assume they do, because otherwise that means they're being deliberately obtuse. And they... aren't the sort to do that. I'd get a lot more work done without them there, but they're sweet, and...”

“And they are yours,” Loki said softly. He was listening attentively, as if he were hanging on to every word, and Tony appreciated that so much more than he could say.

“Yeah,” Tony said with a smile. “I miss them, but I know JARVIS and Pepper are taking good care of them.”

“Of course, Sir,” JARVIS piped up. “Although, keeping DUM-E from trying to force feed U his new special motor-oil smoothie has been a daily struggle.”

Despite the way it made his chest ache, Tony couldn't help but laugh.

"This DUM-E sounds like quite the character," Loki said, his eyes glittering. "I cannot wait to meet him."

The words rang through Tony's mind, coloured with hope. Loki hadn't seemed like he was simply considering the possibility. Not 'may I'— not 'I wish I could'— Loki had spoken as if his meeting DUM-E was a *certainty*, and it settled the anxiety from Tony's earlier depressing thoughts like nothing else had managed.

"I can't wait for that either," Tony said, and he shared Loki's grin.

"Speaking of my care-taking duties Sir," JARVIS interrupted again, "I feel that I must ask." There was a slight pause, and Tony's smile was gone and his eyes were narrowed before JARVIS continued with his question. "Will you be wanting to use any of the other bedrooms? Or should I close them off?"

Tony froze.

It wasn't something that he and Loki had ever talked about. They had fallen into the same bed the night before without a single consideration otherwise, so used to the other's presence that they hadn't even thought about doing anything else. Just as Tony had thought earlier, there was no need for it anymore— but the thought of being separate from Loki for a whole night, a full several hours during which anything could happen was—

Well, it was—

"We will not, thank you, JARVIS," said Loki, speaking with a matter-of-fact tone that would have been incredibly difficult to argue with, had Tony been so inclined. (He wasn't.)

"Of course, Mr Liesmith," JARVIS said courteously. Then, he paused again, and Tony was about to make some comment about *glitching* and *poor maintenance* and *JARVIS could you stop trying to give me a heart attack every two seconds* when JARVIS said, "Then, Sir. I would like you to know that I am happy for you, and glad that you have found someone who clearly cares for you dearly."

"JARVIS, *no*," Tony said immediately, feeling his neck flush, glaring at the wall so he wouldn't have to look in Loki's direction. "We aren't like that. We grew close while we were captives, we're friends, and we trust each other— but no more than that, all right?"

"Yes, Sir," JARVIS said, still sounding a little hesitant. "Of course. I apologise for my misinterpretation."

"Yeah, well." Tony risked a glance over at Loki. "Good."

Loki's expression was carefully blank, and Tony was rather envious— to be able to hide embarrassment like that would be an incredibly useful skill. Tony could do it, of course, but not quite so *perfectly*.

Tony swallowed. “Come on,” he said, grabbing a remote from the side table to his right. “Let me show you how the TV works. I have the feeling we’re going to be stuck in this house a while, so it might come in handy.”

It didn’t take long for Tony to hook into some American cable channels, and he flicked through the options. There were new things, things he’d missed, episodes of continued old shows that he vaguely remembered following. It felt disjointed, and it didn’t really hold his attention, not when he found it difficult to muster up any care for the stories that had held his attention a lifetime ago. But Loki quietly asked about the kinds of things that one could watch, and it was enough of a distraction from the thoughts JARVIS had unwittingly put into Tony’s head with his question.

And besides, it was kind of nice, being able to simply sit with Loki and do something just because. Still strange, but... nice. They had a lot to do, a lot of things to go through, but for now, something mind-numbing and relaxing was probably exactly what they needed.

Well.

It *was* relaxing, right up until the television begin to flicker and buzz, flaring with colours and lines—

And then, flashing amongst the coloured stripes was a silhouette that made Tony’s blood run hot with rage.

It was only on screen for a fraction of a second, but that image of ten interlocked rings encircling a pair of crossed swords had been etched into Tony’s mind for *years*, and he knew it was symbol that he would never be able to forget.

Scratching at the walls

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Tony snarled, on his feet with his fists clenched at his sides. He had moved without conscious thought, burning with rage and frustration and *fear*. “Are you actually—”

“Calm down,” Loki said firmly, pushing up from the couch and stepping beside Tony. He reached out hesitantly, his fingers brushing Tony’s arm, but nothing more than that, as if he wasn’t sure whether his touch would be accepted.

“*Calm?*” Tony asked. “Did you not see what that was?”

“I know,” Loki soothed. “I *know*. But working yourself up is not going to help.”

Something low and angry pulled from Tony’s throat, halfway between a growl and a whine, and he turned and stepped into Loki’s embrace without any hesitation at all. Loki’s arms came around his waist, and they helped to ground him while the rest of the world was thrown out of balance.

With his face buried in Loki’s shoulder, Tony didn’t see the broadcast flicker and change, but he heard the words.

“*America*. It’s been a while since we last spoke. I believe it is time for another lesson.”

Tony’s fingers twisted in Loki’s shirt. It was the same voice, the same *fucking voice* that Tony had heard over the broadcasts before he had been captured, before this whole thing had even started. This was what had led Tony to convince the Avengers to go after the Ten Rings in the first place, and now— Tony was a broken mess, and the Ten Rings were still alive and kicking.

They’d failed in their escape. Oh, they might have got themselves out, and they might have made it to a place where they could be as safe as it was possible to be— but they hadn’t wiped out the people who had made them suffer so very much, and Tony knew that neither of them would be able to rest until that mistake had been rectified.

The Mandarin’s words were not significant, not really. He spoke of attacks, of a weak president and the Avengers’ inability to protect their own.

“Down one member, and they hide in their tower like a princess in her castle. They are not knights in armour come to save you. *America*, it is time to realise that you have a new protector.”

Through it all Tony just clutched Loki tightly, and when the TV finally turned back to the channel they had been watching earlier, Loki let out a heavy sigh, his fingers carding through Tony’s hair.

“Anthony,” he whispered. “It will be fine. *We* will be fine.”

“You can’t be sure of that,” Tony muttered.

“I can. I know we can beat this.”

“We shouldn’t *have to*,” Tony snapped, pulling back just enough to see Loki’s sad expression. “Why is this just on us— why aren’t the Avengers onto this? How haven’t they caught this guy by now? How have they— it’s been *months*. What have they even been doing? Hanging around my tower and drinking margaritas? Was he right, are they still *in* my tower?”

“They are, Sir. But they have been unable to locate the Mandarin,” JARVIS said. “The broadcast location is too difficult to track, and the Avengers have been wary of another ambush should they follow another false lead.”

“Are you telling me that they’re *afraid*?” Tony asked, his hands so tight in Loki’s shirt that his fingers were beginning to ache. “The Avengers? *Afraid*?”

It seemed that JARVIS had no answer, and Tony’s voice cracked in a bitter laugh.

“So it *is* on us, then.” He forced one of his hands to let go, and reached to gently cup the side of Loki’s neck instead. “We’re going to cut them down, Loki. We’re going to kill *every last one*—”

“Yes,” Loki agreed, and the dangerous glint in his eye assured Tony that it wasn’t just a simple platitude. “But for now, we need to rest—”

“Rest?” Tony laughed bitterly. “We can’t rest— while we were stuck in that fucking cell, they’ve been growing and planning and getting their claws into everything—”

“And we will be useless against them if we do not recover.” Loki leaned back slightly, and raised his own hands to cradle Tony’s face between his palms. Tony’s breath left him in a heavy sigh, and his eyes fell closed as Loki’s touch calmed him like nothing else ever could.

“Everywhere we turn, there’s something else,” Tony whispered. *‘It’s not going to stop.’*

‘Not unless we make it.’ Loki leaned down and pressed their foreheads together for a moment. *‘We can do this. But first, we need some time, or we risk ending up right back where we started. If we’re going to beat them, then let’s make sure we do it right.’*

“Okay,” Tony sighed, opening his eyes. Loki pulled back as well, his arms falling to rest around Tony’s shoulders. “All right. So what, we just sit, and—”

“I am not saying that we do not plan,” Loki said. “You are right, we have too many enemies to just sit and do nothing. We will learn about them from the information you stole from the computers. JARVIS will discover everything he can from your Midgardian networks. We will *plan*, and when we are ready, *only* when we are ready, we will break them.”

Not only did that make sense, it sent a thrill of anticipation surging through Tony’s veins, and he looked up at Loki with a vicious smile tugging at the corner of his lips.

“Let them flounder for now, they don’t know where we are,” Loki added. “They may not even know we are alive. We have the advantage, so let us use it.”

“J, see if you can’t offer some hints to Rhodey, set him and the Air Force on them for now,” Tony said with touch of agreement. “It might get him off our backs, and we might as well focus his attention where it’s needed.”

“You want him to attack them first?” Loki asked.

“If he can find them, then yeah,” Tony said with a shrug. “Batter them around a bit, pave the way for us. At the very least, he can get them scared, making mistakes. Can’t hurt, right?”

Loki nodded once in agreement. “Very well.”

Tony smiled. “Okay. You got that, J?”

There was a moment’s pause before JARVIS replied. “Sir, I believe it might be useful if you —”

“JARVIS, *no*,” Tony cut in, already knowing what he was going to say. “I won’t bring him into this, okay? I won’t.”

A light shift of fingers against his shoulder drew Tony’s attention, and he glanced back around to see that Loki was watching him cautiously.

“Anthony,” he said, his voice guarded, “if you wish to contact your friend—”

“No,” Tony said again. “Loki, you said it yourself. We can’t take that risk.”

Loki nodded, tension Tony hadn’t even noticed form melting away. “Then it shall be just the two of us,” he said.

“It’s me and you,” Tony agreed. “You were right, before. That’s all we need.”

“And JARVIS,” Loki added.

“Yeah,” Tony said, something warming right through him. “Me, you, and JARVIS. Talk about a dream team.”

Loki looked so pleased at that— it wasn’t that his smile was overly large, but his eyes were shining with a kind of contentment that almost seemed a little out of place, and Tony had to comment on it.

“What is it?” he asked lightly.

“I just...” Loki *did* smile, then, looking down at Tony softly. “I was always an outsider in Asgard, and have never truly had shield brothers before, nor been considered one myself. It is a pleasant thought.”

Somehow, oddly, that made Tony need to fight to keep from frowning. He was happy that Loki felt *pleasant*, he really, truly was— but still, that one word pulled at Tony’s heart with a strange kind of itchiness that he wasn’t sure he understood.

Brothers.

It was a normal word, a familial word, even, something that denoted a close relationship between two men. So why did it make him feel like there was a dead skunk stuck in his throat?

“Yeah,” Tony said, hoping his voice didn’t echo with the oddness in his mind. “Yeah, shield brothers.” He forced a smile. “That’s what we’ll be. The most freaking awesome team on the planet.”

And despite the lingering unease, Loki’s smile was bright enough then that Tony couldn’t help but return it properly.

—•—

They spent the rest of that day just talking, pressed together on the couch, resting and discussing increasingly elaborate plans for how they could take down the Ten Rings the rest of the way and destroy SHIELD in the process— plans that were fun and cathartic to concoct but which would never actually work. Tony’s favourite was definitely Loki’s suggestion that they somehow convince a pack of hamsters to invade SHIELD’s helicarrier, so they could chew on all the wires until the thing fell out of the sky and landed directly on top of wherever the Ten Rings were operating from, taking out both with one stone—

Or one helicarrier, as it were.

“Why hamsters?” Tony asked, tilting his head. “Hamsters are cute.”

“My first preference would have been a knot of snakes, but alas, while their venom would help to spread the chaos, they are not very good at chewing.” Loki smirked. “And besides— just think of how embarrassed SHIELD would be when they realised they had been defeated by a horde of rodents.”

It was useless but it was *fun*, and Tony didn’t think he’d smiled so much in months.

From there, time passed slowly and yet all too quickly all at once, expanses of quiet that were peppered by moments of irrational panic. The strangest things would send Tony’s breaths shuddering into shallow gasps, his heart racing and his mind falling into the darkest depths of memory. The sound of a lock clicking and the creak of a door would have him on his feet expecting to be taken to the workshop in seconds, and while he could shower without a problem – as long as Loki was just outside in the bathroom, at least – Tony could not run a sink of water to wash dishes without feeling like he was drowning. And on top of that, he still could not cope with Loki to being out of his sight for more than a few moments.

Loki was struggling as well, just as much as Tony though in rather different ways. Sometimes he would have long stretches of silence followed by hours where he would not stop talking,

as if just to prove that he could. And even as his cheeks filled out and his bones became less prominent, Loki still had moments where the thought of eating would make him go pale and scared, his eyes widening as he refused to accept even the smallest bite.

Whenever one had a moment, though, no matter who it was or what had set it off, they would just curl around each other and croon assurances that they were *out* mixed in with sweet nothings, or simple talk of what they would do later that day, whether it be planning or reading or combing through information. Sometimes, it would take a simple hug, or even just a brush of fingers along bare skin to calm a racing heart. But others, it would take a little bit more.

Once, when Tony was shaking hard with the remnants of a nightmare in which Loki had been shot with a Chitauri gun, he thought he felt Loki dot a kiss to his forehead.

'Shh, it's okay. I'm here.'

During this time, Tony found the chance to go through the hard drive, plugging it into an old laptop he was certain was not connected to the house network. It meant that he had to search through it all manually and without JARVIS' help, but he was not willing to take the risk that SHIELD or the Ten Rings might discover where they were hiding, or that whatever he had managed to save onto the drive would not infect JARVIS with some kind of virus.

Immediately, it became clear that he was correct in his initial assessment. SHIELD were definitely behind it all— their slimy little fingerprints were dotted all over the information, over orders and promises and *deals*, over emails and requests, codes and simple, clear instructions.

>>Capture Tony Stark. His mind is a valuable asset.

He was far too creeped out to be flattered by it— far too *angry*.

For years, he had helped Nick Fury and his band of Men in Black. He'd helped with their projects, he'd worked on their schemes, he'd played messenger and benefactor and errand boy, and all but cheered at every song and dance. He had been sitting in their back pocket for so long that his eyes had been blinded to the truth, and that almost felt worse than the fact that they had ever betrayed him in the first place.

That, of course, was nothing more than what he had already worked out. He lingered over it, of course he did— he had time, and he allowed his anger to fester, to peel up at the edges and expose the pure rage that simmered underneath. But it wasn't what he had taken the information to find, and he continued to dig deeper.

Unfortunately, it seemed that the Ten Rings were smart enough not to have kept locations of other cells or member lists on their computers, so it wasn't going to be as simple as a walk in the park. But as he sifted through the scores of data, there was one thing that caught Tony's gaze, something he pegged as more than just a little unusual.

A reroute, just an order and a payment that had passed through the Turkish cell on its way somewhere else, just a tiny sliver of data that likely would have been overlooked had Tony

not been so terribly thorough.

It was a goddamn *billing address*, attached to some kind of order for— a boat? Some guns, a new TV, and a pool table.

Tony frowned, seeing, but not quite *getting*.

Miami.

Uh, what?

“Hey, JARVIS?” Tony asked, his frown audible enough that Loki glanced up from where he was meditating in the middle of the room, one eye cracking open curiously. He had been doing that a fair amount while Tony had been working through the data, sitting and thinking and recharging his batteries, coaxing his seiðr into the force it had been before it was locked away for the better part of a year.

“Yes, Sir?”

“I don’t suppose there have been any Mandarin attacks in Miami?”

“No Sir,” JARVIS replied. “Not one.”

“Huh.”

He met Loki’s gaze, knowing that the god was most likely thinking along the same lines. Tony was almost vibrating— they had a new lead, they had somewhere else to go. And yet...

“Add Miami to the file, J,” Tony said, glancing back down. It was certainly something to think about, but they still were not quite ready. They weren’t there yet, but they would be, given time.

Loki gave him a soft smile and closed his eyes again, and then they both turned back to the task at hand.

There was still a lot to do.



When he felt that his magic was up to it, Loki took Meathead’s ring into the attic, and Tony watched as he’d muttered over it and then simply placed it on the dusty ground, leaving it there to glow a faint orange. They didn’t need it while they were inside— but it had worked so well to hide them during their desperate flight that, despite their reservations about the ring’s origins, they were loath to let its usefulness go to waste.

Of course, it wouldn’t make them *entirely* invisible, but it would allow a curious gaze to slide off to the side, for people to pass by their driveway or fly over their roof without noticing anything worth noting.

“The Ten Rings were using this to hide the place in Turkey, weren’t they?” Tony realised. “That’s why they were able to keep a torture chamber in the middle of densely populated city.”

“Yes,” Loki said, staring down at it in anger. “It is more than likely the reason why the people looking for you never found it. And now, the ring will stop them from finding *us*.”

Between Tony’s paranoia and Loki’s work on the magic ring, there was no way someone would stumble over them even if they were searching right outside their door. They couldn’t be safer, and yet, Tony skin still itched and he still felt like he was scratching at the walls, stuck behind boarded windows, shouting into a void.

They still had a lot of planning to do, and he had promised Loki that he would wait, that they would *rest*. But there was a big difference between turning through files on a hard drive and doing something active and Tony was just *struggling* with sitting still.

The broadcast had reminded him of what they were up against, that there were still people out there who wanted nothing more than to force him to build a legion of armoured soldiers for their army, and to cut Loki to pieces until he was nothing but a battery to power their weapons. Tony knew he’d never be able to relax until that was an impossibility, until everyone who had ever thought of such a thing had been strung up by their toes and flayed living.

And even though they were planning, even though they were *healing*, it still didn’t feel like enough.

Tony was standing in front of the window in the living room, staring out across the tops of the trees and just imagining the WSC sitting in their chairs, hidden away in their corners of the world, laughing about how well they had managed to break Tony Stark.

He pulled his arms tight across his chest, trying to quell the ache in his shoulders, but it wasn’t caused by anything so easily dispelled.

When Loki stepped up behind him, he did not flinch despite his surprise— they were too used to each other’s presence for that. Tony merely leaned into Loki’s touch as his fingers pressed down into Tony’s shoulders, smoothing knots with a hard stroke as Loki gently turned him around. Loki didn’t say anything at first— he simply considered Tony’s expression with a soft look in his eyes, his fingers still resting lightly on Tony’s shoulder.

“Come on,” Loki sighed, taking Tony’s hand and pulling him toward the stairs. When Tony realised where Loki was leading him, he paused.

“What—”

“Resting is not helping you,” Loki told him, smiling softly and rubbing the back of Tony’s hand gently with his thumb. “I think I know what might.”

Loki let him go when they reached the workshop, heading straight for the dust-covered couch that was pressed against one of the walls. He used his seiðr to summon a StarkPad and then

settled into the cushions, probably planning to go through some of the data Tony had sorted from the hard drive. Or maybe he was just going to read.

Tony, meanwhile, looked around the room with a slow grin, feeling like he had just been relieved of a yoke. He didn't have *all* of the materials he would have had access to in either his Malibu or New York workshops, but there was enough that he could make *something*, at least, something to help his nerves, calm his mind, give his trembling fingers something to do. But all of his shops were stocked with the necessary resources to make at least *one* thing. And if he felt like he was making some kind of progress, then maybe it would keep his darker thoughts at bay.

It was easier to fall into building than it probably should have been. Minutes, hours passed, time beginning to flow in blur like it hadn't for days. Able to build without looking over his shoulder, making things only because he needed to rather than as a distraction, Tony lost himself in the familiar clang of a hammer and the scent of burning metal.

It was only as he had the wiring done for a proper, *fully operational* repulsor and he looked up with excitement to show Loki that he realised just how much time had passed.

The lights were dimmed in that far corner of the workshop, but Tony could make out enough to see that Loki was curled into a ball, his knees hugged into his chest and his head leaning awkwardly against the back of the couch. The StarkPad had fallen to the floor, and Loki was fast asleep.

Tony sighed, and placed his half-finished repulsor down on the bench before getting to his feet and crossing the room. Loki didn't stir as Tony slid beside Loki on the couch and gently pulled the god against his chest, aligning their bodies so they could both lay down comfortably. The rest of the suit could wait a while.

"JARVIS," Tony whispered. "Get the lights."

He leaned down and touched his lips to Loki's hair in a light kiss that lasted a little longer than he meant it to, and then, with a sigh, he let his cheek come to rest on the top of Loki's head.

"Are you sure that you are only friends, Sir?" JARVIS asked gently, almost hesitantly, and for once, Tony was too tired and too relaxed to argue.

"It doesn't really matter, J," he said, believing himself to be honest despite the way that the words tasted strange on his tongue. "This is more than enough for me."

JARVIS' silence somehow seemed louder than anything he could have said, and Tony merely used the chance to hold Loki a little tighter.

Right over the coals

Over the next few days, Tony tried to pay more attention to how Loki was reacting, keeping a closer eye on his friend while they were in the workshop, making sure that he wasn't growing bored or feeling locked in by Tony's need to tinker. He started trying to talk a bit more, not losing himself entirely in his projects, trying to include Loki in the process. At first, it was a struggle, but he could see that Loki appreciated the effort— and before long they were working *together*, Loki helping with wiring and using his magic to make things move faster or fuse stronger.

They didn't just build, though, and they didn't only work on Tony's projects with single-minded determination. They still discussed what they could do, how they could make their first move.

Loki was sure that he would be able to traverse the distance between Italy and the US in a single teleport – or, *skywalking*, as he called it – which was such a cool and interesting concept Tony spent a full two hours grilling him on how it worked. He apologised a couple times in the middle, for prying, but Loki seemed genuinely pleased that Tony was showing interest, happy to talk about a skill he was proud of. The simple joy in his eyes as he spoke about his magic was infectious, and Tony found himself grinning back despite the original reason for the discussion. Plus, the fact that Loki could travel so far – practically across the *entire world* – in the blink of an eye was insanely impressive, made even more so by the complexity of Loki's explanation.

When Tony said that aloud, though, Loki ducked his head, his pale cheeks dusted with a faint tint of pink. It gave Tony the impression that Loki wasn't quite used to compliments – a thought that was only reinforced when Loki was quick to point out that he had mentioned it to be helpful – because if they were able to travel so far and so fast, they would be able to stay in the safehouse without difficulty, and use it as a base of sorts while they enacted their revenge.

Of course, Tony missed Malibu, and he missed his bots. He missed Pepper and Rhodey, and he missed the simple pleasures of the place he had spent so long making his own. But he had Loki, and he had JARVIS, and together, they could turn the Italian safehouse into something of a permanent home.

And that felt... nice.

He kept waiting for the catch of course, always sure that something was waiting just beyond the treeline, a monster in the shadows just waiting for them to grow comfortable and drop their guard. But they remained safe in their hidden little corner of the world, plotting and inventing and *recovering*, just being themselves for the short time that they could.

But of course, it couldn't always remain so easy— and the first problem occurred when they started to run out of food. JARVIS had stocked the place before they'd arrived, but it wasn't an infinite supply, and after almost two weeks they hardly had anything left.

The way Tony saw it, they had two options. They could either head in to the city to get what they needed, or they could have something delivered. Neither choice sat particularly well with Tony, since both involved dealing with other people. But they *needed food*, and asking a grocery store to do a dead drop somewhere would probably arouse more suspicion than getting food delivered up to the middle of nowhere. But of course, that opened up a whole slew of other problems and *fuck*, they needed to eat, but the should-be-simple act of getting groceries just seemed to become more and more difficult the longer Tony thought on it.

“Anthony?” Loki asked, jolting Tony from his thoughts with a soft touch to Tony’s waist. “What is it?”

“That,” Tony said, jerking his chin toward the near-empty fridge he was standing in front of, the chilled air raising gooseflesh on his arms despite the warmth of the spring afternoon outside. “We need more food, and look, I know we’re not far from a small town, and Florence is just over an hour’s drive from here. There are options for groceries, but I’m worried about being recognised. And we can’t even take the ring with us, since to buy anything we would need to *talk* to people.” Tony groaned and finally shut the fridge, turning to face Loki with a pleading expression. “I don’t suppose you’ve got any ideas?”

“I admit that this is not a problem I have encountered before,” Loki said, frowning.

“Right, yeah,” Tony remembered. “I guess shopping for groceries wasn’t on your list of princely duties.”

Loki rolled his eyes good-naturedly. “I am unaware of how you usually acquire food,” Loki pointed out. “You mentioned a town— is there a market?”

“Mr Stark usually orders his food,” JARVIS commented, and Tony pulled a face.

“So why do we not do the same thing?” Loki asked.

“Because then people will know where we are,” Tony said. “Someone has to come and deliver it, and having no one here and asking it to just be left by the door wouldn’t work either, because that’s just *weird*, and we can’t afford weirdness.”

Tony knew that he was probably being seriously paranoid, but Loki didn’t call him out on it. He merely stared at Tony for a moment, considering something. Tony was just about to ask when Loki stepped back, his hand falling to his side from where it had stayed at Tony’s waist. As he took a deep breath Loki’s eyes fell closed, and then Tony’s eyes widened as a line of bright green swept slowly across Loki’s body, starting from his fingers and changing everything it passed over. And a moment later, standing in front of Tony was someone he had never seen before.

Light golden hair fell in messy waves over bright blue eyes, and his goatee was a little fuller than Tony’s, though not quite as sharply styled. He wore Asgardian armour, but even as Tony watched, blonde brows pulled together in a frown before another line of magic replaced his armour with a simple T-shirt and jeans.

“There,” the man said, looking back up and catching Tony’s eye with a familiar smirk that seemed wrong when painted across an unfamiliar mouth and paired with a bright and cheerful voice. “Is this an acceptable solution?”

“Okay,” Tony said slowly. “Could you always do that, or...?”

“I have always been a skilled shapeshifter, yes,” Loki admitted. “But it takes more energy than I was willing to expend before now.”

“That... could really come in handy,” Tony said. “Oh my god.”

It would have come in handy when they were escaping as well of course, though Tony didn’t mention that. Loki had been well past his limits as it was, and knocking himself out from magical exhaustion for a second time would not have been helpful in the slightest. There was no need to imply that he hadn’t done enough.

“It does not... scare you?” Loki asked hesitantly.

Tony’s first reaction, of course, would have been to snort or laugh and make a quip about how Loki could hardly scare him in the face of everything he’d already survived. But the hesitation had Tony pausing to actually think, and the touch of uncertainty made Tony realise that while Loki had said *scared*, he had probably meant something else. Something *worse*.

So rather than a joke, Tony decided to reach out to touch Loki’s wrist, *proving* that he wasn’t afraid or repulsed in the slightest.

“No, it’s awesome,” Tony said firmly, and he knew he had made the right choice when those strange blue eyes brightened again. “And yeah, definitely a good solution. I mean, they’d still see me, but I can hide while you greet the delivery, or something—”

“I could do the same for you, if you wanted,” Loki said. “It would be an illusion, rather than properly changing your shape. But I could make it so that even JARVIS could not recognise you, and then there would be no problem at all.”

And then, Tony realised, a grin slowly pulling its way across his lips. Then they could actually *get out of the house*, without worry that they could be followed.

It was still a risk, of course it was— but so greatly diminished that it would be worth it for the chance of going outside.

The magic felt odd as it washed over Tony’s skin, a kind of tingle that sparked over his nerves, but in a good way. It felt familiar, almost comforting, and not entirely unlike the way that Loki’s mind felt as it pressed against his own. Tony watched in awe as his skin paled, his hands became more slender. He felt his hair grow long against the back of his neck, and as he looked down he saw that his chest—

Hang on—

“Loki,” he said, not entirely sure how he felt about this new development— especially when his voice came out sounding decidedly more feminine than he was used to. “Did you just...”

“I thought it might help us blend in,” Loki explained, tilting his head and inspecting his handiwork. “Of course, I would rather have turned you into almost *anyone* else—”

“Whoa, hold up,” Tony said, his hands instantly dropping from where they had been about to conduct a certain exploration. “Are you saying that these are real people?”

“It is far easier to turn into someone else than it is to create a new person,” Loki said. “People are complex, and it is so easy to make a mistake that will cause curiosity. By copying someone else, I can be sure that they look in proportion enough to be realistic without spending undue time designing their character.”

Well, Tony supposed that made sense. “Who are they?”

“Thor’s friends,” Loki said with a shrug. “No one here will know them.”

That was both weird and relieving all at once— because, *Thor’s friends*, ugh, the people that, as Tony had gathered from his conversations with Loki, were the ones to have made Loki’s childhood a living hell. But on the other hand, Loki *was* right, because by pretending to be someone that wasn’t even on Earth, there was no chance of arousing suspicion.

But he was pretty curious, so he gestured for Loki to follow him and headed up to their bedroom to look in the full-length mirror. He considered himself appreciatively, tilting his head for a different angle. He was the same height as he normally was, that had not changed— but everything else had. Long, dark, almost straight hair framed a pretty face with bright hazel eyes, which only seemed brighter when coupled with the light green top Loki had put him in. He supposed he should be grateful that Loki hadn’t made him wear a dress. Even if it was only an illusion, he didn’t think he’d be able to walk comfortably enough one – at least, not out in public – to make it seem like he did so all the time.

It was... kind of a strange feeling actually, because he still felt like *him*. If he concentrated, he could feel the tough callouses of his own larger hands, different from those that decorated the Asgardian woman’s, which had no doubt been made by a sword rather than tools. He could feel the brush of long hair over his cheek but it was ghostly, not quite there, more of a tingle than what it should have felt like.

He was still frowning at his reflection when Loki stepped up behind him, and Tony couldn’t help but think that Thor certainly seemed to like to surround himself with beautiful people. But while the blonde Asgardian was fairly good looking in a conventional, ‘hot dude’ sort of way, Tony missed the sharp green eyes more than he thought he would have.

“I can still see you,” Loki said gently, his eyes on the mirror as well. “Which is good. I do not particularly enjoy Sif’s company, and I’d much rather spend the day with you.”

“Can’t you make it so that I can see you?” Tony asked, the words slipping out before he had the chance to stop them.

Loki frowned. “Why?”

“Well, there’re a lot of people in Florence,” Tony said, half-scrambling for an answer that didn’t seem... weird. “What if we get separated? I’ll need to be able to spot you in a crowd, Lokes. I’m sure there’ll be loads of blonde nobodies, but there’s only one *you*.”

Blue eyes blinked in surprise, and Loki turned to look at Tony properly. “You... would rather see me? Instead of Fandral?”

“Sure,” Tony said with a shrug, forcing down the nerves. “I mean, uh– yeah, you’re... you’re *Loki*,” he said firmly, deciding to just fuck it and throw caution to the wind. They were close, it wasn’t weird. He’d have said the same to Rhodey or Pepper. Probably. “I want to see you, okay? Your skills are very impressive, and I’m glad that other people won’t see us, but. We’re going to get to go outside, and I don’t want to do that with some random.”

Loki’s lips turned up into a smile, and he leaned closer, his fingers brushing along the back of Tony’s hand.

‘*Thank you,*’ he whispered, and– Tony was half sure he wasn’t meant to have heard it, but he twisted his wrist and caught Loki’s hand nonetheless, entwining their fingers easily.

He felt like maybe he should say something back, take the opportunity to let Loki know that this wasn’t something he needed to *thank* Tony for, because... well.

Anyway, it didn’t matter, because Loki cleared his throat and started to speak again before Tony could even get his thoughts in order.

“It will take more energy to hold an illusion than it does to change my shape,” Loki said, and Tony immediately started to backtrack because, yeah, he wanted to be able to see his friend’s real face, but it wasn’t worth that.

“Oh. Well, don’t worry then—”

“No,” Loki cut in, smiling softly even as his features returned to normal. “I can do this for you. It will be good practice.”

“Only if you’re sure,” Tony said pointedly. “And you need to tell me if you get tired, all right? There’s no need to push yourself too far.”

Loki smiled softly again, and this time it seemed so much realer, now that Tony could see it properly. “I promise,” he said. “But only as long as you do the same. It would not do for either of us to become overwhelmed.”

It didn’t feel like they were holding each other back, or stepping on eggshells. They didn’t need to, because they were both all too aware that they weren’t being overprotective, they weren’t trying to coddle each other– they just *cared*.

Tony supposed that was what was so great about Loki. They understood each other so perfectly that they were capable of walking right over the coals without causing a single speck of harm– so long as they did it together.

The drive to Florence was so much more enjoyable than the one to the safehouse almost two weeks earlier. They took one of the Italian sports cars from the garage, deciding to indulge themselves a little where they could, driving with the top down through the winding mountain roads.

Tony couldn't help but turn and look at Loki every now and then, seeing his bright smile widen as he closed his eyes and let the wind whip through his hair. Simple pleasures could be hard to come by sometimes, and it was nice to see that such a thing could make Loki look *happy*.

Originally, Tony had planned to just go to a grocery store and get what they needed— though of course, they could have done that closer to home. But when they reached the sprawling city, Tony knew that the trip was going to be a fair bit longer than they had planned. Loki was looking around in awe as Tony tried to find a park, and by the time he had managed it, Loki seemed almost impressed.

“This place is... alive,” Loki said, looking around with wide eyes that shone a bright green in the sunlight. “It's old, but there are...”

“I know what you mean,” Tony said, smiling. He held out his hand, and offered Loki a smile. “Do you want to look around?”

It was probably a complete waste of time of course, because they could have been using that day to further their plan for revenge, to get more information on the Ten Rings and to try and work out what on Earth SHIELD were up to. But at the same time, it wasn't, because maybe this was exactly what they needed to clear their heads.

They were wasting time, and that was good. It was *fun*, even. They wandered through the streets, looking at the statues and the architecture, bickering and chatting and *laughing*. They walked along the Ponte Vecchio, and that was where Tony learned that Loki had never tried ice-cream before— an awful and truly horrifying fact that needed to be rectified *immediately*. So Tony dragged Loki to one of the gelato stalls and made him pick whichever one he wanted— and the look of stunned bliss as he had his first taste was...

Well, fuck. It was *beautiful*, okay, yeah Tony could admit that now— and he felt something warm curl in the pit of his stomach as Loki closed his eyes and ran his tongue over his still faintly scarred lips, savouring every drop.

Tony cleared his throat. “Enjoying that, are you?” he asked.

“I suppose it isn't *bad*, for Midgardian food,” Loki replied, opening his eyes and pinning Tony with a sharp grin. “You will have to show me more of it, of course.”

“Of course,” Tony said, and although he matched Loki's joking tone, he silently meant it as something of a deeper promise.

Because a simple realisation had wormed its way through his mind, something that had been there for a long time, even though he was only just now coming to see it. JARVIS had clearly

picked up on it from the start, and looking back, Tony knew that he had felt this way for a while— he just hadn't thought to look for it.

Despite what had finally opened his eyes, Tony knew it wasn't just that Loki was beautiful on the outside — although, of course, he *was* — it was the way that his personality shone through, the biting wit and sharp intelligence that Tony had come to adore brightening every other aspect, until Tony couldn't really see the scars and the echoes of pain that remained etched over Loki's face. Well, no— they were *there* of course, they didn't just disappear like in some kitschy romance movie. But the scars were still beautiful because they were a part of Loki, and Loki couldn't be anything else.

Loki was... he wasn't just Tony's friend, was he? They were already more than that, living in each other's pockets for so long and only growing closer, holding each other tight and refusing to let go. And maybe whatever they had was forged in fire, and maybe it wasn't entirely a healthy beginning— but Tony could have been put with anyone in that cell, and he knew he wouldn't feel half as strongly about them as he did about Loki. And equally, he knew that had they met in fairer circumstances, things would hardly have been different. They fit together better than Tony had ever believed possible, finding understanding though more than just their shared experience. They could joke and laugh, they could bicker and complain, and they could curl together at night and feel so completely safe because they knew that the other would never let anything happen to them.

They had been through a lot, but— that didn't change the way that Tony's heart beat a little faster when Loki looked at him with that soft smile, or the fact that the way Loki said his name made him feel like smiling himself.

Tony's mind was reeling, but somehow, it wasn't confusing.

Maybe this had always just been the next natural step.

But of course, Loki didn't see Tony the same way. He considered them something akin to *brothers*, teammates in every possible way and sure, the closest of friends, but— not anything *beyond* that. So Tony swallowed down his thoughts as best he could, and made sure his expression was arranged into something light before turning his focus back to the matter at hand.

Loki was watching him oddly, his ice-cream half melting down his hand, having paused in eating it to watch Tony with concern— because, Tony realised, it had been quite some time since he'd said anything.

“Anthony?” Loki asked. “Is something wrong?”

“No,” Tony said, offering a smile. “Nothing's wrong, I promise. Now, come on, there's still loads of stuff I'd like to show you.”

He took Loki's free hand (so they didn't lose each other in the crowd, of course) and tugged him further down the bridge and back down into the old town. They were just walking in the direction of the Duomo when an old lady reached out and asked whether they would mind taking a photograph of her patting this statue of a pig on the nose. They weren't in a rush, and

Tony was pretty sure even the Ten Rings' standards wouldn't stretch so far, so Tony good-naturedly took her camera with a smile.

Tony had to let go of Loki's hand for that of course, but Loki shifted close and touched his fingers to Tony's waist instead, no doubt just as worried as Tony about moving too far away when the streets were so crowded with tourists.

Once the picture was taken Tony handed back the camera and the old lady thanked them with a smile.

"I hope that you enjoy the rest of your trip," she added, smiling sweetly. "It's nice to see such bright young love. You make a cute couple."

"Oh," Tony said, feeling a little flustered, all of his thoughts on Loki rising to the surface and —

Oh god, he'd already been too obvious, Loki was going to notice—

He needed to nip this in the bud *immediately* before Loki realised that Tony had begun to want more than he was willing to give, more than what would probably be appropriate for them anyway, considering, even if Loki *had* wanted it—

Which he *didn't*—

And now it was going to be awkward between them and, oh shit—

"Thank you, ma'am," Loki said, offering her a bright smile. "We hope that you enjoy yourself, as well."

Oh.

Oh yeah.

Well, of course they looked like a cute couple. To everyone other than themselves they appeared to be a hot guy and a stunning girl, eating ice-cream together and holding hands.

It had nothing to do with the way Tony looked at Loki, or the way he responded to Loki's touch, it was just... the spell, making people see what Loki wanted them to, to help them blend in. Just another couple on a holiday, enjoying Florence same as all the others.

Tony drew in a breath, steadying himself, and gave the lady a smile before pulling Loki along again.

He tried not to look over at Loki as they made their way toward the piazza, though his grip on Loki's hand remained firm. Loki didn't really say anything either, both of them walking in far more silence than they had all day.

Maybe it was time for a break.

He glanced over to suggest it only to see that Loki was already looking at him, his eyes soft and wistful.

“Are you all right?” Tony asked gently.

“I am beginning to tire,” Loki admitted. “I do not wish to end this, but...”

“That’s okay,” Tony said, jumping on the chance to suggest something else. “I have an idea.” They still had their food to buy after all, and he’d meant what he said at the start of the day. Pushing too hard wouldn’t do either of them any good— but that didn’t mean that the day had to end immediately, not when they were both enjoying it.

They found a decent café with a more than decent view of the Duomo, and Tony ordered a coffee for himself and a tea for Loki. While they sat and let their legs rest for a while, Tony used the view as an opportunity to regale Loki with stories of the famous and interesting people that had lived in Florence, people that had inspired him as a kid— people that *still* inspired him, now.

“There’s a da Vinci museum around here somewhere,” Tony said at the end of a little spiel. “It’s amazing, isn’t it? That he managed to think of things that still manage to awe people five hundred years later.”

“It is,” Loki agreed— and he sounded like he was actually interested in hearing about what Tony was saying, unlike most of Tony’s other friends who used to simply nod and smile. They were great, don’t get him wrong, and he knew that his rambling could often be difficult to keep up with, but Loki just... listened. “It sounds fascinating. Why did we not go there?”

“I didn’t think that you’d be interested,” Tony admitted. “I mean, yeah, da Vinci was ahead of his time, but it’s still old tech, even for us. You’re from an advanced society, and... I mean, Thor has insulted the StarkPhone enough times—”

“I want to go because anything that holds your attention so is worth seeing,” Loki said firmly. “Where is this museum?”

Something heavy caught in Tony’s throat, and he tried to swallow it down. “You, uh. Really?”

Loki nodded with a single, firm jerk of his head, and Tony felt his lips lift into a smile. His fingers ached, wanting to reach across the small table between them to hold Loki’s hand and let him know how grateful he was—

But then, nothing had changed, had it? Nothing was stopping him. So.

Loki curled their fingers together when Tony’s hand nudged his, and Tony’s smile deepened just a little.

‘Hey. I had fun today, anyway.’

‘So did I,’ Loki answered. *‘But I would still like go to your museum.’*

“We can’t now,” Tony replied with a sigh. “It’s probably time to head home. It’s all right, I don’t mind, I promise.”

“We can come back,” Loki suggested, and Tony felt that warmth flood through him all over again.

“Yeah. I’d like that.”

With the promise of another relaxing day out, they were finally able to bring themselves to go back to the car. Of course, just because they were heading away from the quiet of the day and back to the reminders of everything that needed to be done didn’t mean that they couldn’t hold on to the soft enjoyment they had managed to find.

After so much darkness, a little bit of light was more than welcome.

Their trip to a grocery store on the outskirts of the city was a quick one, throwing items into a cart and hoping it would be enough to get them through a couple of weeks without growing sick of a lack of variety.

Tony made sure, though, to include some sweet items, to uphold his promise to keep showing Loki Midgardian desserts. They were all packaged, but he had to start somewhere.

And by the time they made it back to the house, they were both exhausted, but still smiling.

“Honey, we’re home!” Tony announced as he threw open the door, the shopping bags in his hands not hindering his need for dramatics.

“Good afternoon, Sir, Mr Liesmith,” JARVIS greeted. “I hope that you had a pleasant time on your d—”

“We did,” Tony said quickly, hoping that JARVIS knew the subtle glare was directed at him.

“Certainly,” Loki replied. “I am looking forward to the next trip.”

He brushed by Tony as he moved further into the house, and Tony smiled fondly as he followed.

“Any progress J?” he asked, throwing bags on the kitchen counter– but he was distracted as Loki suddenly stepped up behind him and placed a hand on his shoulder. He looked around with a question on the tip of his tongue, but Loki raised his other hand to cup Tony’s cheek, effectively quietening him.

Before Tony could ask, he felt the familiar spark of Loki’s seiðr arch over his skin, and he glanced down to see that he was back to being himself again.

“Thanks,” he said quietly– and as he lifted his gaze, he realised just how close Loki was, his soft smile mere inches from Tony’s own.

“Much better,” Loki said, his thumb stroking once over the edge of Tony’s goatee before he let his hand fall back to his side.

That— didn't make a whole lot of sense, because Loki could see and hear Tony properly. But then, not much made sense at all in that moment, his brain short circuiting just a little bit. If humans had error codes, his mind would probably be at least half way to a blue screen of death.

In a movement that was probably a little too sudden, Tony turned to lightly hand Loki the cold stuff to go into the fridge, and used the excuse of stocking the pantry to gain a hold on his thoughts. "J?" he asked again, looking for the distraction.

"Yes, Sir," JARVIS said gently. He seemed almost hesitant to break the soft moment, and Tony was grateful for that— but it was probably time to get back to reality. "I have made progress."

"And?" Tony prompted.

"And... I believe that I have found the Mandarin."

Tony dropped the jar of Nutella he was holding — thankfully, it was only plastic — and spun around instantly, his eyes meeting Loki's.

"Where?" Tony asked, right as Loki said—

"How?"

"I ran a facial recognition scan," JARVIS said. "It would seem that no one else has tried beyond comparisons to known terrorists and watchlists, due to the way his face is hidden in the broadcasts. But I ran a wider search, and his presence on screen is enough that I was able to find a match."

"What do you mean his presence?" Tony asked. "Because yeah, in every broadcast he's had his face covered, with those huge ass glasses that honestly *scraggly* beard, I mean he clearly has no respect for proper beard maintenance—"

"Yes Sir," JARVIS interrupted. "It's true that for the average person, that may not be enough to find him. But he is an actor. He is not well known, but he has played several supporting roles in musicals on the West End as well as in many BBC episodes, and his face has appeared online enough times and from enough angles to get an accurate match."

Tony only realised that he and Loki had moved closer together when their fingers brushed, and he couldn't say which of them moved to entangle them more firmly— it had become so natural now, it was almost instinctive.

"His name?" Loki asked, sharp and direct.

"Trevor Slattery," JARVIS said simply, the television across the room turning on and flickering with information. "He was last spotted in a liquor store in Miami."

"Well, well, Trevor Slattery," Tony said, eyeing the image JARVIS had projected of a clean-shaven, smiling *Mandarin*. "I think we're going to have a lot to talk about."

From the bowels of hell itself

Chapter Notes

So yeah, you guys get this chapter today because I'm going away this weekend and I decided early was better than late. (Next week, back to Sunday though. I need my weekends to write.)

ALSO, this chapter has *art!*

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

To be totally honest, Trevor wasn't really worried when the screaming started.

At least.

Not at first.

And yeaahhhh so he might have been a little high, but that's what he was there for, right? The drugs, the booze– the work was good, it wasn't *hard*, and they gave him everything he ever could have asked for. Plus, his face was covered most of the time, so facial expressions weren't even really a thing, and the scenes they wanted to film were generally short and over in just one take.

Honestly, the 'Mandarin' was probably the best thing that had ever happened to him.

He *had* got in a spot of trouble about two weeks earlier because he'd gone outside the mansion, but he'd run out of booze and it seemed that his keepers were too worried over something else to have the time for his drinking habit. It wasn't like he'd done anything, and he hadn't even talked to anyone except the cashier. They only even noticed that he'd *left* when he came sauntering back through the gates. But they hadn't taken any of his privileges away. A slap on the wrist and a promise to not do it again – at least until his contract was up, right? – was all he got. With everything he got in return, house arrest in the name of secrecy was a small price to pay. He had absolutely no desire to try and leave again.

He didn't care about the noises that came from the rest house either, because. *Actors*. Trevor knew very well himself the sorts of things they got up to, so a few screams weren't all that...

They weren't all that...

Were they getting closer?

Anyway.

Whatever, part of being an actor meant getting used to the noises that came from other sets, and when the gunshots and bloodcurdling screams began to reverberate through the huge – honestly, it was *huge* – and actually pretty marvellous house, Trevor simply shrugged his shoulders with half a thought to the actor’s skill and downed another can of beer. It would help him deal with the pounding headache that had been persisting for a few weeks, now.

God, the screams were *not* making that any better.

“What do you reckon they’re doing out there?” Trevor asked one of the girls. (Nellie? Nettie?) “Sounds like one hell of a fight scene, don’tcha think?”

She shook her head, her eyes wide.

Was she afraid?

Why?

Trevor frowned, and glanced at the door. It was true that the screams sounded more real than anything Trevor could have managed, he was sure, and the way they sounded like they were coming closer, echoing through the whole mansion...

Well. They were, uh. They were very impressive, actually.

Very.

He continued to tell himself that as he fidgeted in his chair, and he told the same thing to the two girls.

They were both glancing around nervously, *scared*, and—

“It’s fine,” he told them. “It’s the movie, it’s completely—”

The door crashed open with a loud *bang*, only to be slammed shut again by the man who had entered. Trevor recognised him as one of the camera guys, though he’d never known a camera guy to cover himself in splashes of fake blood before. He must have been really trying to get into the *mood*—

The camera guy’s eyes widened as he spotted Trevor, and he crossed the room in hurried, desperate steps. “We’re being attacked,” he gasped, “By— by *something*—”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Trevor said, rolling his eyes. “It’s only a—”

“I should have known you wouldn’t help!” the man muttered, still looking around, still terrified. Then he had the gall to grab at Trevor’s *favourite armchair*—

“Hey!” Trevor complained. “That’s my favourite armchair!”

“Yes, and it’s heavy,” the man snapped. “Give me a hand!”

Trevor crossed his arms and put on his best glare, and he was about to start with a *now, now, there's no need to be rude*—

But one of the girls – oh, *Nessie* – hurried over to help him push the armchair across the floor toward the door, and when the other girl saw what they were doing she went to help as well.

“That probably won’t be enough,” the camera guy said, his breath still coming in loud pants.

“Enough?” Trevor asked. “What are you trying to keep out? Genghis Khan and a Mongol horde?”

The camera man’s red spattered face was haunted as he said, “*Worse.*”

“What do you mean, worse—”

“I don’t know, I didn’t get a good look, okay?” the man snapped. Trevor thought he probably should have worked out the guys name, after all these months—

But before he had the chance to wonder on it there was a bloodcurdling scream from *right outside the door*—

And then, suddenly, nothing.

Silence.

The only sound was the harsh breathing of every person of the room. It was like some kind of second-rate orchestra, the echo of nails scratching against blackboards and the screech of wind through trees, heralding the ghastly melody of death itself.

Then, sharp and harsh in the silence was the sound of a light knock on the door, a small rap first on one side, then the other, as if testing for sturdiness– or simply letting the occupants know what was coming.

“Oh no,” the camera man whispered, backing away. “Oh—”

His words melted to a terrified whimper as green light began to seep under the door, almost like a mist. Trevor gulped at the sight, a shiver of fear finally running down his spine.

“Okay,” he said, swallowing it down and trying to focus on the fact that *logically*– “That was clearly some *really good stuff* they gave me this morning—”

He was cut off as the armchair began to creak across the ground, moving away from the door as if pushed by a ghost—

And then the doors crashed open once more with the suddenness of a tropical storm, and a tall, dark figure strode into the room with deadly purpose.

He was wearing a long black coat with a hood that pulled over his head, and there was something strange about his face that just made it... *difficult* to see. But it was still possible to make out long dark hair and eyes so green it seemed like they were actually *glowing*, as if he

were some kind of demon come straight from the bowels of hell itself. The wicked knives in each of his hands glistened a bright, menacing red, the sort of colour that made it difficult not to know *exactly* what they had just been used for.

And...

Trevor was starting to realise that, maybe, all of this was *real*.



His hands were shaking as he backed away, but he couldn't tear his gaze from those *eyes*, so bright and piercing and *inhuman*. He still couldn't have described what the demon looked like, but Trevor saw the flash of teeth as it grinned.

"I am looking for Trevor Slattery," it said, and its voice was low and amused, with something incredibly dangerous lurking underneath.

"Take him, then," the camera man blurted. "He's there, just—"

His words cut off with a gurgle as a knife landed solidly in his throat, and Trevor felt frozen with fear. A man had just *died*, and this monster, this *thing*— it was there for him?

The girls were cowering against the wall, and the demon hardly gave them a glance as he strode toward where Trevor was shaking in his dressing gown. It had two knives again, and a quick, frantic glance proved that the dead body near the girls was bleeding freely from the neck, with nothing to obstruct the wound— but the demon had not gone anywhere near it. How was that even possible?

"Hello Trevor," it said, leaning forward menacingly. "Oh, we have so *much* to talk about."

"Do... do we?" Trevor asked, his voice shaking so hard he would be surprised if the demon could understand him.

But the demon was smiling again, his darkened features sharp and horrible in the way they twisted, and Trevor was waiting for him to say something else when—

"There's more," someone called from outside in the hall, and Trevor's thoughts echoed the words in pure horror.

Bloody hell, there's two of them.

"One moment," the demon called back, its tone laced with anticipation now. And then, it turned that terrifying green gaze back to Trevor and ordered— "*Stay.*"

The single syllable rung loudly through Trevor's head like the chime of a bell, echoing and *thrumming*. The demon gave him one last frightening glance coupled with a feral grin, and then he turned on his heel and strode back the way he had come. The doors swung shut behind him, closing with a *click* that indicated the demon had somehow managed to lock it without a key or a touch.

And Trevor... couldn't move.

He'd expected his knees to give out at least, or, if he managed to hold on to his control over his muscles – unlikely, considering he had long since lost control over his bowels – he would be able to run. Not out of the house, of course, he *wouldn't* do that again, but just... he'd run *away*. But his legs felt frozen solid, and even though he wanted to get across the room, to reach for his panic button – because oh god but if there was ever a moment to panic this would be it—

But maybe it wouldn't have done any good, anyway.

Maybe there was *no one left*—

But no, that couldn't be right. There *had* to be—

The screams had started up again after all, though they seemed further away now, in a different part of the house. They echoed right down to Trevor's bones, and he was shaking and shuddering and wishing he could just curl up into a tight little ball, but he *couldn't*, because his legs didn't seem to be his own and whatever the demon had done to him had taken away all control over his body.

Trevor couldn't say how long it was before anything else happened– it could have been any span of time at all, because it felt like a terribly long and agonising wait and yet, when the time came, he wished that he'd had far longer.

They arrived in a flash of that menacing green, three figures in the middle of the room, dark and dangerous. The demon was holding a man by the neck, his feet dangling from the ground as he choked– and then a moment later he was thrown to the ground with enough force that Trevor heard bones *crack*.

Trevor recognised him– he was the guy who was generally in charge around the house, but not in charge of the whole... *thing*. He'd always followed instructions from a few others that came in and out, but otherwise, he'd been the top dog—

But now he was a snivelling mess at the feet of the demon and, and another guy, who looked slightly more human but no less dangerous.

The demon's companion wore a hooded coat as well, though instead of simply appearing dark and difficult to focus on the lower half of the man's face was covered with a bright red scarf of some kind, the tails of it tucked neatly into his hood. His brown eyes didn't glow but they were sharp and intelligent, and burned with a rage that almost hurt to look at. He had been staring down at the man on the ground, but as he glanced up his gaze came to rest on Trevor.



“Let’s get started,” he said, bringing up his arm— but he wasn’t holding a gun. He had something bright and round sitting against his palm, burning hot enough that Trevor shuddered and asked—

“Are you magic?”

“I’m not,” came the reply. Then the scarf moved, as if he were grinning, and he jerked his head in the direction of the other creature. “He is, though.”

The green almost seemed to *pulse* as if pleased by the attention.

“Demon,” Trevor spat— or, well, he tried to, but it came out as a bit more of a gasp.

“Oh, he’s not a demon.” The man in the scarf chuckled darkly. “He’s a lot more than that.”

The not-demon brushed a light hand over the man’s arm before stepping toward Trevor properly, his blade glinting as it headed for Trevor’s cheek.

“You mortals once worshipped me as a god,” he said slowly, drawing out the syllables and pressing the tip of his bloodied knife into Trevor’s skin. “Perhaps I should show you *why*.”

Trevor’s breaths were nothing but quick gasps, his heart beating so wildly it was hammering through his ability to think straight. “Bloody hell,” he gasped, “Bloody fucking *hell*, okay, calm down, I can tell you whatever you want, just please don’t hurt—”

“We don’t need you to tell us anything,” the god crooned. “No, we have a message for you to give to the rest of the world.”

“Wait.”

The god turned to look around instantly, the knife slipping slightly and pulling away from Trevor’s face as he did so. The man in the scarf had been crouching over the snivelling mess that used to be Trevor’s boss, and he lifted the man’s hand by the wrist, twisting it to show what adorned the thick fingers.

“Is this…”

“Another one?” The god left Trevor and went to kneel beside his friend. The two shared a glance, reaching toward each other so that the god’s fingers touched the man’s bare wrist, just above his weapons. There was a beat of stillness before—

“Hold still,” the masked man said to the broken, whimpering figure. “This might hurt a bit.”

Then, without any more warning than that, there was a flash of a blade and—

“Oh, that was unnecessary,” Trevor said, speaking over the pained cry. “You didn’t need to cut off the whole finger, you—”

“*Quiet.*”

Every word caught in Trevor’s throat, almost making him feel like he was choking as he watched the god lift the severed finger and pull off the gaudy piece of jewellery that rested upon it. The ring was large and pink and decorated with a Chinese symbol, and Trevor had always thought it an odd fashion choice for such a surly guy.

Both men considered the ring for a half a second, their hands brushing together again, before they caught each other’s gaze and waited in silence for several long moments.

Trevor watched, wondering, thinking that if they were distracted maybe he could—

Except he still couldn’t *move*, so—

“Later,” the god said suddenly, and then he twisted his fingers and the ring vanished in another flicker of green. “We have things to do.”

This time, the man moved toward Trevor while the god remained by the shuddering mess of flesh on the floor, though his gaze followed his companion’s every move.

“So, Mr *Slattery*,” the man said. “Are you ready to talk, yet?” As he leaned down, he lowered his scarf, showing off a well-kept goatee. It was familiar, but— through the fear and the haze, it took Trevor a few seconds to recognise it.

“Tony Stark?” he asked disbelievingly. “What—”

“Surprised to see me?” Stark asked. “Surprised that I’m not still kidnapped? I’m sure the news is still *singing* about the loss of my pretty face, even down here.”

“I... I don’t watch the news,” Trevor said nervously. “Why are you looking for me?” He couldn’t help the way that his gaze flickered to the other person, his green eyes still gleaming strangely as they followed Stark’s every movement. Why was a person who had supposedly funded the Avengers working with such a creature of nightmares?

Nothing was making any *sense*—

“I have a very simple question, Trevor,” Stark said. He leaned in, his eyes gleaming darkly, the silver metal of his hands glinting in the corner of Trevor’s gaze as they pressed threateningly upon his shoulders. “Who is the Mandarin?”

Trevor frowned, confused, his head tilting even though the dread. “Do you mean the character?”

“The *character*,” Stark echoed, straightening. Then he turned his attention to the broken man on the floor. “So JARVIS was right, and this one lied to us.”

“Of course he did.” The god smirked, and raised his blade. “And he shall come to regret that.”

Trevor squeezed his eyes shut, not wanting to watch. There were a few questions and some hoarse pleading— but the man wasn’t pleading for his *life*, and the sound of a gurgle and then awful, awful quiet as the whimpering suddenly cut off was more than enough for his imagination to fill in the rest.

There were two dead men in the room, now, both victims of this monster. Trevor just hoped it wouldn’t be his turn, next.

“I don’t know anything,” he said, panicked. “I don’t, honestly, I just— I only know what’s in the film, there’s nothing—”

“The *film*?” Stark asked. “Oh, Trevor. There is no movie, this is all real.” He turned to the god, arching a brow. “Do you think he needs another reminder?”

The god’s eyes weren’t glowing any more, but he looked no less menacing as he smirked and crossed the room to grab the cowering girls by their shoulders and shoved them toward the bathroom.

“Inside,” he hissed.

The door was left open, and the sound of the girls’ terrified screams shook Trevor to his core. It didn’t just sound like they were being murdered— it sounded like they were suffering through the greatest pain imaginable, like they were being flayed alive, turned inside out, burned at the stake or disembowelled or, or every other thing that Trevor’s imagination conjured at the sound of a horrifying, ghastly screech.

“This is the second Ten Rings cell we’ve devastated, and there’s nothing to give us more locations,” Stark hissed, seemingly unmoved. “The others know nothing, but you’re a nobody. Maybe they wouldn’t have noticed you noticing something—”

“I’m not much of a noticer,” Trevor pleaded. “Please, oh god, stop, don’t—”

“My friend will stop hurting them if you tell the truth,” Stark said simply, almost blandly. “And if you do not speak before he is done with them, he’ll start on you, next.” Then his lips twisted into a feral grin as he twisted his metal fingers in front of Trevor’s face. “Or perhaps I will.”

“I don’t know, I *don’t*,” Trevor begged. “There’s— there was something a while back, something with the president, I think, maybe if that wasn’t a movie— but they changed their plans, there was a rewrite—”

“Something changed,” Stark muttered. His eyes flashed with realisation. “Like they had a new goal?”

“Yes,” Trevor said. “I don’t know, I don’t— they wouldn’t tell me anything, they wouldn’t even trust me with a real *gun*—”

“Why would you want a real gun for a movie?” Stark asked suddenly. “Why would they even have a real gun?”

“I don’t know,” Trevor said again, praying that Stark would recognise the truth in his words. “I don’t, I’m just an actor. It’s not real, none of this is *real*.”

Stark’s eyes narrowed, but before he could say anything there was a sudden crash in the bathroom, and then the god was stepping back into the room. He looked no more blood-spattered than before, but Trevor saw the cruel satisfaction in his gaze and couldn’t help but cringe.

“Time’s up, Trevor,” Stark said lowly. “Last chance.”

Trevor simply shook his head, his gaze flicking from the two men, to the open bathroom door, to the corpses on the floor and then back again. He was absolutely flipping *terrified*, his mind was a mess, and he didn’t know what else he could do.

“You really don’t know a thing, do you?” Stark asked, tilting his head. “Well, that’s unfortunate.”

“No,” Trevor said, grasping onto that chance with every single piece of desperate hope that he had left. “No, I really don’t. I’m sorry, you’ll have to... I can’t tell you what you need, but, if you let me go, maybe I can help?”

The god stepped behind Stark, touching the man’s wrist again. Stark’s eyes gleamed he stepped away, and the god’s smile was tauntingly *kind* as he took his place.

“Oh,” he said, one hand coming to rest on Trevor’s sweaty forehead and eyes glowing bright with emerald hellfire. “Do not worry. There is another way for us to get what we need.”

And then, amongst piercing pain and the sharp bite of agony, it was Trevor’s turn to scream.

Chapter End Notes

[Art by Rabentochter](#) ♥

Descent into flame and smoke

Watching Loki work his magic was always something of a treat. The way that his eyes would light up with the joy of doing what he loved could enrapture Tony for hours, that rare delight difficult to look away from. And sometimes, when he was feeling dramatic, they would *literally* light up, all the power that he possessed swirling through those green depths, deep and *dark* and proving that there was so much more to him than most people could ever know.

Mind magic, though, was different. Tony knew that Loki did not like it, that he'd had his own head messed with too many times to be able to *enjoy* doing that to someone else. It was why they had hoped to scare Trevor Slattery shitless, to get the information out of him that the people upstairs had been unable to give, too quick biting into their cyanide pills for anything else.

Tony knew that once they were done with Slattery, they were going to have to go back upstairs to check out those bodies. It wasn't a prospect that he was excited by, but it was necessary— because Tony was starting to believe that this was a whole lot bigger than he had initially thought.

For starters, since when did an organisation like the Ten Rings use cyanide?

And then, there was that *ring*.

It was exactly the same as the one Meathead had worn, save the colour, which was a blush of pink rather than a splash of orange. The symbol on it looked different as well, though Tony did not know enough Chinese to understand what it meant. But it was definitely one of a set, and Loki confirmed that it was as powerful as the other.

Two rings, both magic, both in the possession of one of the organisations that Tony hated most.

In the back of his mind, a tiny little thought wondered whether there were *ten* of them.

It was one of the many questions they'd had, and one of the reasons why Loki had offered to try and pry the information from the mind of the literal face of the whole operation. It was a long shot, because they both knew Slattery likely didn't know a whole lot— but everyone else was dead, either killed when Tony and Loki fought their way in or by their own hand, so they didn't have a lot of choice left.

And, what Tony had said to the actor *was* true— he hoped that Slattery had noticed bits of conversation that he had not deemed important, that he had filed away but that still lingered in the darker recesses of his memory.

Slattery had screamed at first, his eyes widening in horror as Loki reached for him. but Loki had merely huffed in annoyance and pressed the palm of his hand to the faux Mandarin's forehead, and his eyes closed in concentration, his chin tilting up as he leaned back his head.

Tony's attention was, of course, on the door, because with Loki so focused he wouldn't be able to defend himself should there be anyone else left in the mansion. (Tony didn't think that there was, but he wasn't going to take that chance, even with JARVIS watching.) But Loki was just so captivating that he couldn't help but steal a few extra glances, admiring that precision even over an art that Loki did not enjoy.

It only took a few minutes, far shorter a time than it had when Loki had done something similar to fucking Ivan. But still, by the end Slattery was a weeping mess, pitching forward to the floor and clutching at the tatty rug.

Loki stepped out of the way in disgust, and joined Tony where he was still standing a few feet away. Tony reached out with his hand in a silent request— he couldn't take Loki's hand himself due to the repulsors he was wearing, but Loki obligingly curled his fingers around Tony's wrist.

'*Verdict?*' Tony asked.

Loki frowned. '*His mind has been altered already.*'

Tony's eyes widened, snapping down to the pathetic man who was still rolling on the floor.

Pathetic? Or merely unable to control his own body, his mind melted by people who were playing with powers that they did not understand?

'*So they had a ring that could control minds?*' Tony asked, not sure that he was able to keep all of his worry out of his tone. '*Seriously?*'

The possibility that Slattery might not even have been the only one hit Tony hard, and he glanced to the two bodies on the ground— one that was certainly culpable in all that had happened, but the other was just one of the film crew, and he looked like he'd suffered one of Loki's knives to his throat.

Tony knew that Loki did not feel remorse for that like Tony would have, that in his opinion, mortals must earn respect before they were treated like *people*. But he also knew that Loki felt a lot more than he liked to let on. If there was a chance that the man was innocent, Loki would be able to get past it— but it would still be another twinge of guilt on top of everything he was already carrying, and Tony didn't want him to have to suffer any extra burdens, no matter how small.

'*Not quite,*' Loki explained. '*These are powerful artefacts, but they are not quite as powerful as they may appear to the untrained eye. Shields like the one we saw in Turkey are not difficult to construct, not when all you wish to do is to halt a physical blow— and its reflective nature would have made it even easier to hold in place, since it would not need to be capable of absorbing the energy that it stopped. And the way that it can hide things takes little power as well, for it is merely diverting the gaze, more than actually creating a disguise.*'

'*So this... isn't all that powerful either?*' Tony asked warily.

Thankfully, Loki seemed to be able to guess what Tony was thinking, and he shook his head in slight reassurance.

'That man was here willingly,' Loki said. *'They all were, even this one.'* He jerked his head toward Slattery, though Tony didn't really need the specification. *'They were not forced to be, like I forced Barton during the invasion.'* He paused. *'Like I tried to force you.'*

'So they weren't controlled?' Tony checked, choosing not to comment on the last half of the statement. He knew that this was probably not the moment to be having this conversation, still in the Ten Rings' facility, but it *was* something that he needed to help calm his mind. Besides, they had JARVIS now— he would warn them if anyone else were on their way.

'I do not believe so. The stench of that ring is all over Slattery— whoever did this did not know what they were doing, and certainly did not think to be subtle. I did not sense the same on any of the others, but I can check again, if you wish?'

'Nah,' Tony said, tearing his gaze from the dead man to smile at Loki instead. *'I trust your judgement. Was there anything else?'*

Loki didn't look away as he said, *'Slattery believed that this was all a film, that it was fake. He saw the guns and he knew there was something wrong, but the power of the ring helped them keep him complacent.'*

'So... it's more just like they've made him susceptible to suggestion?'

'Exactly,' Loki agreed. *'It isn't control, they simply made him so that he would not question the things that he saw. After he left to buy liquor, they used the ring to compel him to stay. Other than that, though, he chose to be here. He might not have known what he was doing, but he was aware on some level that it was wrong.'*

It made sense, as well, that they would use it only on Slattery and not on all of the people working in the facility. After all, any of the others could be killed if they lost their usefulness, and they were more than likely aware of that fact. But Slattery needed to be kept in line, because they could not afford to lose him— if the Mandarin were to vanish then they would appear to lose the head of their snake, and their reputation and the fear of them would suffer.

It was almost amusing, that the most well-known terrorist in the world was possibly the most innocent person that had been in the house— save, perhaps, the girls that Loki had taken into the bathroom. They had played a part in this, after all, and had made no move to try and stop it. Although, Tony doubted that they could have made any difference without harm coming to themselves even if they had wanted to. There was the chance that they had been brought here not knowing what they were getting into until it was too late, so Tony and Loki had decided to give them the benefit of the doubt.

Mercy, but still with a reminder not to work for such people again, coupled with an assurance that they would never be able to do so anyway.

'It cannot control people, as you said— if it could, I imagine that it would have been used a lot more. You do not have to be concerned that these people were not here by choice,' Loki finished, reaching up to gently stroke Tony's cheek with his free hand, running his thumb over the edge of Tony's goatee.

It was soothing, and Tony leaned into the touch, letting his eyes fall closed for a moment. The day had been a harsh one, full of so much darkness, and it was nice to be able to remember that through it all, he still had *this*.

But, they really had been hanging around too long. There was no one left, nothing to worry about, but they still had things to do— and with Loki's assurance quieting his mind, Tony drew in a steady breath and forced his thoughts back to focus on the task at hand.

"Right," he said aloud. "Let's finish up here."

Loki nodded his agreement, but he lingered for a moment longer, letting his fingers trace the shape of Tony's jaw before finally drawing away. His nose wrinkled as he crouched beside the whimpering actor, and Slattery did not fight as Loki lay the hand that had a moment ago been holding Tony's wrist back upon Trevor's forehead.

This time, Slattery did not scream, and he did not weep. His eyes rolled back into his head as his body went limp, and by the time Loki was done, he lay unmoving on the ground.

Not dead, just unconscious. And when he woke up, Slattery would not remember exactly what Tony and Loki had done. He would, however, know his own actions— he would know them intimately, feeling the fear of some of his victims, knowing exactly how many lives he had ruined. He would also have a terrible, unquashable *need* to tell people itching in the back of his mind, a need to tell the world about himself, about the fact that he was a puppet—

And about how he had seen Tony Stark.

Slattery would remember the blood and the pain, and he would remember seeing Tony in the middle of it all, his face splashed with red. Maybe he'd remember that it was Tony who freed him from the clutches of the true terrorists. Maybe he'd think that Tony was a fellow prisoner, or perhaps that he had come as some avenging angel to destroy whatever was left of the people who had captured him.

Either way, no one would believe him — Tony and Loki's theatrics and Slattery's history of drug abuse would make sure of that — but he *would* spread the rumour that Tony was alive and well and *suffering*. Tony didn't really care about the public's opinion, though it probably wouldn't hurt. But what mattered most was that the information would get back to SHIELD, back to the Avengers, and would force them to make a move.

It sent a powerful message, a threat that SHIELD would not be able to ignore.

Tony Stark is still alive, and he's coming for you.

The likelihood of them thinking that Tony was only after the Ten Rings was fairly high, so Tony and Loki were still banking on an element of surprise. And even if they didn't—Slattery,

of course, would remember nothing identifiable about Loki. In fact, the way that Loki presented himself would only help the disbelief of Slattery's story.

The destruction would make it impossible to ignore the fact that *something* had happened, and would attract the attention of the world. But JARVIS was certain that he had blocked the cameras, and the only person who had seen Tony's face was Slattery. There would be no solid *proof*, and Tony could use the Ten Rings' own weapons against them.

Fear.

His lips curled into a satisfied smirk as he pulled his red mask back over the tip of his nose, and then he and Loki began to make their way back through the house.

"I don't suppose there was anything left worth bothering with in the bathroom?" he asked conversationally.

"No," Loki said with a bit of a grin as he closed the door behind them. "I didn't have to make much of a mess before they started to scream loud enough. You were right, that *was* the perfect way to deal with them."

Tony snorted. "Where did you send them, anyway?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," Loki said, tilting his head. "But it looked like it was cold there. You don't have to worry, they most certainly realise their mistake." Loki's smirk sharpened. "Neither of them were particularly pleased with their new faces. They won't be working for the Ten Rings again."

They walked back up to the top floor, scouring every room this time rather than the quick sweep they had done before. They found no one else – at least, no one else alive – and it was quick work. There were more computers to go through, and Tony did that manually– JARVIS was in the security system, but while he had full trust in JARVIS' ability to fight off a virus, he wasn't willing to take any risks when it came to his precious AI. Unfortunately, though, there was even less information in them than there had been in Turkey– but, of course, in the nature of keeping the cells entirely separate for security reasons, a fair amount of that information was *different*.

"There's something here," Tony said. "Something about a think tank." He cast his eyes over the information that he could find, committing a bit to memory and sticking the rest on a handy USB he'd brought with him, before they moved on to another room. He'd learned his lesson about lingering the last time, and wasn't going to waste precious moments here when they could be getting away and heading back *home*.

There was a lot of blood on the ground and spattered over the walls, dripping down over the plaster and making the whole scene look rather macabre. Loki's fighting style with his knives involved more slashing and slicing than actual stabs, since the movement was more efficient for speed and he had the strength to cut through flesh and bone like butter. Tony had seen him stab before of course, but it would seem that he saved that for when he was feeling particularly vindictive.

They had to step over the bodies of the people who had fought to stop them from getting in—and then later had fought desperately for their lives, begging and screaming when their guns did not work.

It had been strange for Tony to fight without armour, but Loki had written a few runes on the inside of his clothes and had promised that he did not need to worry about bullets. The mask had been a last-minute addition—Loki had offered to disguise his face like he had his own, but Tony rather liked the image he presented in the mask. Perhaps it was a remnant of watching westerns in his youth, but there was something that was just *cool* about wearing a scarf over his face like a highwayman of the days of old. And he was even more grateful for the scarf now, because it helped to filter out the scent of death, the metallic taste of blood that lingered in the air, and the stench of everything that happened to a body as it entered its final throes.

It was not the first time that Tony had killed for something other than to save his own life, though it was certainly the bloodiest. But he knew that they all deserved it, that these men and women had chosen to be here, had not only come to be part of an organisation that had made Tony's life a living hell more than once but had also *chosen* to threaten the lives of innocent people.

No, it was not the first time, and despite the way that his nose wrinkled and he flinched in distaste as the drying blood on the ground stuck to his shoes, the remorse that he felt had melted away entirely the moment that Loki confirmed these people were all aware of what they were doing, and were all there by their own free will. And when Tony saw the scorch marks on a few of the corpses and knew that they were men and women that *he* had killed, slaughtered with the repulsors he had put together in only a few days, he felt... well, no different than he did as his eyes traced the blood down the walls. A little disgusted by the mess, but not concerned over what they had done to create it.

The repulsors he had used were modelled on Iron Man's— but where Iron Man's were initially designed to be flight stabilisers, these were meant to be weapons from the start. They didn't match the old colour scheme either, mainly because... well. Tony had first designed the suit for *this very purpose*, not only to keep him safe but to go on the offensive. But in recent years, with the help of SHIELD and the Avengers, Iron Man had started to feel like a hero, like a mantle that Tony had to work to keep shiny and squeaky clean. So his gauntlets were a matte grey, with not a speck of red or gold to be seen.

The main office upstairs looked exactly as it had when he and Loki had left it earlier, when they had dragged the man in charge down with them to join Slattery. Most of the dead terrorists inside were bloody and scorched, but there were a few near the head of the meeting table that had not a mark on them save some white spittle around their lips. They had fallen as soon as Tony and Loki had crashed through the doors, biting through the capsules they had hidden between their teeth. They had no badges or insignias to identify them, and wore only plain black clothing.

But Tony recognised the gun that was still held limply in one of their hands.

“Fuck,” he said, pulling it gently from dead fingers and looking it over, knowing he was right but *hoping* nonetheless. “Well, I suppose that's even more confirmation that we didn't need.”

“SHIELD?” Loki asked.

“SHIELD,” Tony confirmed. It seemed that even though they had decided to focus on the Ten Rings, they had come across more of SHIELD regardless. At least it would not be a battle on two fronts— if SHIELD were here, in the place where the Ten Rings had been filming their Mandarin videos, then the connection really did go deep enough that they might as well be considered one and the same. Perhaps their threat had not been needed then, perhaps SHIELD would have received it anyway, without their extra work on Slattery. (Tony didn’t really mind that, to be honest— he loved the dramatics of it all.)

There was, however, another branch here that they hadn’t been aware of, another piece of the puzzle that until now, they hadn’t even known existed.

Because earlier, when they had been fighting, they’d come across another of those people who seemed to be made of living fire. It wasn’t too much of a problem— Loki had held him still with a barrage of ice too cold even for the extreme heat to melt, the tips of Loki’s fingers turning blue as they directed the onslaught, and Tony had shattered the frozen block to pieces with a well-aimed blast from one of his repulsors.

No, it wasn’t the person themselves that was the issue— it was simply their *existence*. Tony had thought that the fire person in Turkey had been the result of some kind of genetic experimentation, perhaps another accident of an attempt to replicate Cap’s serum, like the Hulk. But if there were more of them, and every single one seemed to have the exact same power— and there had been a few of them when he’d been captured as well, hadn’t there? The margin of error with something like the experiment Bruce had been a part of was huge, so managing it over and over on this scale had to be near impossible.

It more than suggested that there was something else at work here, something far more dangerous, and Tony hoped that the files he had saved on the USB about the think tank would offer some insight.

They stopped by the mansion’s arsenal before heading outside, and Tony selected what he needed with the anticipation of a nice big bang, hefting it over his shoulder with a anticipatory grin. Then, as they made their way through the garden, JARVIS assured them through their ear-pieces that he had destroyed all that remained of the mansion’s security and defence systems. And when they reached the garden wall, Tony turned, lifted the rocket launcher he had taken from the arsenal, and aimed it at the side of the building, the one he knew was furthest from the mansion’s only remaining occupant.

The explosion certainly wasn’t the *best* that Tony had managed to make, but it was definitely very *pretty*, and both he and Loki were smiling as the corner of the mansion suffered its descent into flame and smoke.

Once that was done, Tony removed his right repulsor, placed it in his pocket and took Loki’s hand in his, enjoying the smooth slide of skin even if Loki’s fingers remained a little sticky.

And then Loki stepped forward, and the world exploded into colour.

Loki's method of travel was... *interesting*. Tony could see why it was the skill that Loki was most proud of out of all of the amazing things he could do, and yet it also helped him understand how Loki was able to pull off the incredible feat of hopping across half the world without breaking a sweat. He pulled them through into the space between worlds on the power of his *will* alone, slipping into the colourful blur of *everything* and physically running between the very folds of the universe.

The first time Loki had skywalked with him, back at the house as a practice run, was the first time Tony understood what Loki meant when he talked about Yggdrasil– the world tree, the nexus of all things. The Bifröst was merely an extension of one of Yggdrasil's limbs, a pathway to the rest of the universe. Its multi-coloured hues were the result of seeing everything that was all at once, constantly moving and flowing between the boughs and branches of that mighty, metaphysical tree.

The way Loki described it, he didn't force or push his way inside– he gently coaxed the fabric of the universe until it *wanted* to help him, asking and manipulating rather than demanding. That was... just so *Loki*, and Tony could see exactly why this was something Loki had mastered at a young age while the rest of Asgard floundered to even understand how their own pathway worked.

Even on this third try the journey was more than enough to brighten Tony's smile and cause his mind to run in circles, and by the time they stepped out into their living room only a few minutes later, Tony was high on the adrenaline rush from everything that had just happened.

They had made their first move, their first step toward bringing an end to all of this mess, and it felt *good*.

“JARVIS,” Tony said, keeping hold of Loki's hand as he began to make his way toward their bedroom. “Keep an eye on the news, let us know when it breaks, will you?”

“Of course, Sir,” JARVIS said.

A shower was first on the order of business, and he and Loki took their turns as they always did, with the other waiting in the bathroom so that they did not need to go too far apart.

They did not talk of the fighting and death as they washed– instead, Tony asked Loki again about skywalking, wondering how he knew exactly where to step out and back into the world when everything in there looked the same. Loki's explanation of how he allowed Yggdrasil to guide him was more interesting again, and Tony enjoyed every moment of it, especially loving the way Loki made sure to tease out the larger concepts so that nothing went over Tony's head.

“I have wondered though,” Tony asked as he dried his hair, waiting for Loki to finish up in the shower himself. “I know that most of the Norse myths are shit, but why *did* the Vikings think that there's a giant squirrel living in the world tree?”

Loki's snort was audible even over the running water. “Because Thor told them so.”

“I feel like there’s more of a story there,” Tony said with a grin, perching on the edge of the bath.

“Well, Thor was always asking me to take him on trips, so that he did not have to use the Bifröst and let Heimdall know every time,” Loki explained, and Tony could hear the eye roll in his tone. But yeah, okay, typical teenage behaviour— Tony couldn’t begrudge Thor that, but he *could* see how it would be annoying. “Of course, Heimdall can see everything anyway, so that point was ridiculous, and I knew that truthfully, he was only jealous that I could do something he could not and wanted to make use of my skill as reparation,” Loki continued. “I did not want to be his glorified steed, so, I gave him reason to believe that skywalking was too terrifying a prospect to consider when the Bifröst remained a viable option.”

Tony was cackling by the time Loki had finished talking, being able to picture Thor’s face almost perfectly, despite not knowing the man well. “And the first thing you thought of was *giant vicious squirrel?*” he asked incredulously.

“Of course not,” Loki said, putting on a front. “I told him there was a dragon first, but that only made him want to fight it, so I had to come up with something he would actually be afraid of.” The water shut off then, and Loki held his hand out around the screen.

“Yeah, I can see that happening,” Tony said, still chuckling as he passed Loki his towel. “But, really. A squirrel?”

“Did I tell you about the time I got bored on a hunting trip and charmed Thor into thinking that all the squirrels in the forest were stalking him?”

“You definitely did not,” Tony said, leaning forward.

“It started with one, but by the end he was sure he had a whole army on his tail,” Loki replied. “Mother worked out what had happened of course and made me put a stop to it and apologise, but Thor has been paranoid about the creatures ever since.”

“Poor guy,” Tony sighed, though his grin was still wide. “I can’t imagine what it must have been like, spending an entire childhood with you dogging his every step.”

“He was blessed,” Loki drawled, a touch of sarcasm in his voice. “He could not have asked for a better brother.”

“No,” Tony said, his own voice far softer. “No, he couldn’t have.”

Loki stepped out of the shower then, his towel wrapped around his waist, his cheeks flushed from the hot water, and his hair a complete mess from what must have been vigorous drying. The sight made Tony’s throat go dry, and his gaze traced the planes of Loki’s chest, the smooth expanse of his stomach... and drifted to where the skin was covered by the towel that hung low on his hips. And of course, Tony had seen Loki in this state before, but it never failed to make his breath hitch and his limbs a little weak.

Tony heard Loki clear his throat, and he felt his cheeks flush with warmth as his gaze flicked up to meet Loki’s green eyes. Loki’s expression was... well, it was blank, the mask that

always made Tony feel like there was an itch under his skin firmly in place. Tony wished that he could reach out and smooth it away, but he forced his gaze from Loki entirely, looking down to his hands instead.

“I will go and get changed,” Loki said thickly, stepping past Tony and to the door that led to the bedroom, thankfully leaving the door open. “I shall be back in a moment.”

Tony put his head in his hands the moment that Loki was gone, a low groan pulling from his throat.

Loki was his *friend*, and Tony was more than happy with that. He *was*. Yet he’d gone and made Loki uncomfortable just by *looking*. It was... he should be able to control himself better than this. They had too many things on their mind, too many dangerous times ahead for Tony to risk becoming distracted. Plus, never mind all that they had just suffered. But still, the thought of having the chance to be with Loki that way just left him *yearning*.

Tony simply felt the way he did about Loki, and he knew that no matter what he tried, he wasn’t going to be able to just stop. If anything, it would probably just keep on getting worse— he was already addicted to the ache in his chest, so long as it meant that he was with Loki.

It was a painful thought, but it wasn’t something that Tony could change— and if he were being totally honest? He didn’t really want to.

Goddamn it.

Sparks of light amongst the dark

While waiting for the media to get a hold of what had just gone down in Miami, Tony and Loki sifted through the information they had taken from the mansion, using fresh unconnected laptops that they had bought on one of their many trips out to the city. It was not difficult to decipher, though it was a little daunting, proving that what they were up against truly was bigger than they had initially thought. That remained unsurprising however, considering they were dealing with SHIELD.

The information on the drive pointed toward a think tank called Advanced Idea Mechanics, or AIM. It was run by a person named Aldrich Killian, who... to be honest, Tony had never heard of before, which was actually quite strange. He had been to many science conferences over the years, and his memory meant that he usually remembered everyone interesting—unless, of course, he had met the guy at one of the conferences at which he'd been blind drunk.

But then, neither had Tony seen his name in any journals or articles. Clearly, this guy either liked to hide in the shadows, or he was biding his time. Tony wasn't sure which was worse.

Yet the new information was as damning as it was interesting, and Tony knew that they could not simply ignore it. There were plans for using the homegrown terrorist to rule the entire world, to manipulate the president until they could get him to do anything that they wished—possibly even gaining control of nuclear weapons.

That was the last thing Tony would want from an organisation like AIM. They were a perfectly legal scientific research group on the outside, but one only had to dig a little into what they were doing and—

Well, nothing, actually. Some kind of genius had put incredibly complex encryptions over everything in the system, locking it down tighter than Fort Knox. Tony probably would have been able to break through, of course, even with a shitty computer and from thousands of miles away. But for the finest results all round, he knew what would work the best.

“I think we need to deal with that, next,” Tony said, gesturing to the screen. They were sitting beside each other on the couch, the laptop in Tony's lap and Loki leaning close over his shoulder to see.

“That is neither SHIELD nor the Ten Rings,” Loki pointed out. “Will we be declaring war on the whole of Midgard soon?”

“No, look. I think it's all connected,” Tony said. He showed Loki what he meant, going through the trail of data he'd found that wasn't damning alone, but when connected to what they'd found in Turkey was enough to paint least a corner of a fairly interesting picture.

The Ten Rings were not one cog in a larger machine, as they had first thought— it seemed that somewhere along the way, the terrorists had turned into pawns, or maybe even puppets. Figureheads and fearful stories that could be used to manipulate people the way that the

heads of the whole thing wanted– like a werewolf in the forest to stop children from wandering off, or to earn money for the people who claimed to know how to kill the monsters.

The Ten Rings might have once been *something*, but they'd been overwhelmed by another that was somehow far worse.

“I *was* thinking,” Tony said, leaning into Loki's side and pushing the laptop away for a moment. “Didn't it seem like the first attack was far too easy?”

“I thought that same thing,” Loki agreed. “They had one of those rings, but they did not use it, not on us. They could have done far more damage if they had.”

“Maybe they didn't know how,” Tony wondered. “I mean...”

“What are you thinking?” Loki asked curiously.

Tony tilted his head, the beginning of an idea falling into place.

“Hey, JARVIS?” Tony said. “Is there any way we could get a clue of where these things are, if there are more of them?”

“I can certainly try, Sir.”

They fetched the rings from where they had stored them in the attic, bringing them down to the workshop where JARVIS' sensors were more advanced. Tony needed to do a bit of recalibration and Loki gave advice regarding the detection of magic, and together, they managed to come up with something they believed they could rely upon to be correct to a reasonable margin.

“I don't recognise the radiation that these rings are emitting,” JARVIS said. “It does not appear to be anything of this world.”

“*More* alien tech?” Tony complained, remembering the Chitauri gun that they'd seen in Turkey. “Come on, where are the Ten Rings getting all this from?”

“SHIELD, most likely,” JARVIS said.

“Rhetorical question, J.”

Because of course JARVIS was right– and the thought of SHIELD providing terrorist organisations with alien weapons was even more horrifying than when Tony had found out about the double dealing Obie had been doing at SI.

Those weapons could cause a hell of a lot of damage in the wrong hands, and he and Loki were currently the only ones who knew to do anything to stop it.

Honestly, what *had* the Avengers been doing?

When JARVIS pulled up the map, Tony sucked in a breath. He had been right— there *were* ten of them, scattered all over the globe like pieces of an insane scavenger hunt. Some were in cities, some in the middle of nowhere. One was moving rapidly over the Pacific Ocean— probably with someone on a plane, then — and there was a bright, merged marker with the two they had in Italy.

“I guess we have our next eight targets,” Tony said.

“These, and any other bases that we uncover along the way,” Loki said with a nod. “They could be useful tools in this fight.”

“And if they’re collecting them, then we’re just going to have to hoard the entire set,” Tony said firmly. “Right, which one do you want first? I vote we leave the one in LA until later, but the one in Germany is nice and close.” Too close for comfort, actually, which is why it was the first Tony had mentioned.

“Or that one,” Loki said, pointing to the dot not far to their west.

“We might have to do something about *that* first, though,” Tony said, gesturing to the two bright marks just below Florence. “They must know we have them, and if they know how to track them like this...” he trailed off, knowing that Loki would be able to catch the implication.

“I’ll add to the wards,” Loki said with a nod. “I should be able to mask the energy, especially if I use the power that the orange ring already has.”

Loki also then went on to explain that he might be able to use the pink ring to strengthen their protections even further, to use its ability to sway people’s minds in tandem with the perception filter— so that anyone who came close would not only think there was nothing to see, but would also have a sudden and inexplicable need to be somewhere else.

Tony thought it all sounded a bit *Harry Potter*, but if Loki said that it would work, then Tony had full faith in him.

The implications of it all were a bit worrying though, because... ten rings, each of them with a different power, was a prospect Tony had not expected to have to tackle when they began this venture.

One in LA, one currently in transit. The one in Germany, a couple in China, another in England. There was also one in Afghanistan, which made Tony shudder, and one in Singapore. And, of course, there were the two now in Italy.

Scattered across the globe, not close together and yet not equally spread, either.

“If they want them, then we just need to collect the whole set,” Tony said firmly. “We know where they are. If we get them all, then taking down everything else should be easy.”

It fit nicely into their existing plan, because they hadn’t been sure on how to find the location of the rest of the Ten Rings’ cells anyway. But here was a nice little map, showing them not

only the country, but marking exactly where they would need to go.

Once again, it... almost seemed like it was too easy.

There *had* to be something they were missing—

The thought, though, was interrupted as JARVIS directed their attention to the holographic screen he pulled up without warning.

“The news is breaking, Sirs,” JARVIS explained. “The world is about to learn the truth.”

The truth. Ha. That almost had Tony snorting, if not for the sudden serious atmosphere that descended down over them. But, he supposed it was at least true as far as the Mandarin was concerned.

Tony and Loki exchanged a loaded glance, and then they made their way to the couch in the corner of the workshop to settle in and watch.

The *Breaking News* banner was just stretching across the screen, and Tony couldn't help the smirk when the first image shown was that of the smoking Miami mansion.

“A terrible incident occurred earlier this morning in Miami,” the anchor-woman started. She went on to confirm the number of deaths— and that there was only one survivor left inside the house. “Authorities have not yet determined who is responsible, but we have been advised the majority of the casualties were members of the terrorist organisation known as the Ten Rings. The man known as the Mandarin has been apprehended by authorities. Although they have yet to release an official statement, we can show you some footage from the scene. Viewers should be advised that this may be distressing.”

The scene changed, and then Slattery was on a stretcher, being carried by paramedics and surrounded by a few men in sharp suits. His head was raised though, and his hands were gripping the sheet over him so tightly that his knuckles were beginning to turn white.

“I'm telling you the truth,” Slattery exclaimed. “You need to listen to me, you *need* to! It was Tony Stark! Tony Stark is alive, he's a demon, he's going to destroy everyone who ever wronged him! And he isn't, there's, it's, he's not *human*, there's something *else*—

A police uniform was suddenly visible in front of the camera, and then the footage cut off.

“Speculation is rife, though there is not yet confirmation that the Mandarin is in his right mind,” The anchor-woman continued. “His identity is also being questioned, as reports state that he is claiming to not be the leader of the Ten Rings, but instead a paid actor contracted to be a patsy. It would appear that there is more to this story than the authorities would have us believe.”

As the footage looped back, JARVIS jumped the channel without being asked, landing on a show with two hosts. They were discussing not the Mandarin himself, but his words.

“Yes, I imagine that the so-called Mandarin, just confirmed to be British national Trevor Slattery, is rather confused at this point,” one man said. “But what do you think of his claims

that it was Tony Stark who attacked the house? Do you think he's in his right mind?"

"I think that he must have seen something," the other said. "But that's impossible, isn't it?"

"Not entirely. As I'm sure you all know, Tony Stark was captured in the same Avengers' mission that resulted in the death of Iron Man last December. Extensive search and rescue operations did not recover any leads, and there has been no trace of him since. Is it possible that he has escaped, and is looking for revenge?"

JARVIS continued to move through the channels, giving Tony and Loki an idea of what was being said across the board.

"Perhaps he was being held captive there, and this was how he got out? We know his last escape was explosive—"

"Pepper Potts, CEO of Stark Industries, has been unavailable for comment. The Avengers have issued a statement claiming that if Stark is on American soil, they will do all that they can to remove him from the clutches of the Ten Rings."

"The Avengers are still refusing to comment on what Stark was doing on an active combat mission. They remain tight lipped, and Steve Rogers can be quoted today stating that his team need to discuss these new developments before they can decide upon their next move."

"Stark has a history of being where he shouldn't belong. And he has been captured by the Ten Rings before. Perhaps his desire for revenge blinded him to the risks?"

"He was once known as the Merchant of Death. Is it far-fetched to imagine that this might be possible?"

Tony couldn't help his flinch at the reminder, and he pressed further into Loki's side. The god's arm came around Tony's shoulders as he said—

"Turn it off, JARVIS. You can summarise anything important and send it to us later."

Tony understood that by 'summarise' Loki meant that JARVIS should not show them the segments that held only nastiness and nothing that they could actually use, and while Tony felt a little frustrated at practically being coddled, he still felt warm at the implied sentiment, and he let himself relax into Loki's hold.

"Of course, Mr Liesmith."

The screen darkened, and Loki turned to Tony.

"Are you all right?"

"Uh." Tony blinked, still working through the implications of all that had been said. It was a lot of information in one go, most of it exactly what they had been hoping for. But there was one thing that had stood out amongst all of the rest—

Because surely he hadn't just heard that they thought Iron Man was *gone*?

“This doesn’t make any sense,” Tony muttered, frowning.

“The plan worked. Slattery did what we wanted, he got the word out,” Loki said soothingly. “They know that you’re alive, and that you know what they tried to do. They’re going to be heading for us now, and they’re going to end up—”

“No, not that,” Tony cut in, taking Loki’s free hand and squeezing it gently to take the bite out of his interruption. “I know that all of that worked. But... I just...” He glanced up, catching Loki’s eye in confusion. “Did she just say that the world thinks I’m *dead*?”

“Not you, Sir,” JARVIS corrected. “Iron Man.”

“I *am* Iron Man,” Tony muttered. “Wait— are you saying that they still don’t know that? How haven’t they worked it out?”

“I believe they are under the impression that you... are not a hero, Sir,” JARVIS said. Tony knew that must have been watered down to spare his feelings, but he pushed the thought away.

“I can’t believe this,” Tony muttered. “I can’t believe that they think *Iron Man* is *dead*. Why do they... *how*?”

“It does make sense,” Loki said. “With you captured and they not knowing the truth, the suit would have appeared unresponsive. And if they could not feed him, or give him water, then their only feasible explanation would have been that Iron Man could not have survived.”

“And you didn’t just come up with some kind of excuse, JARVIS?” Tony asked.

“You put me in lockdown, Sir,” JARVIS said defensively. “I could not say a thing to any of them. Ms Potts and Colonel Rhodes agreed that it was for the best.”

Right, right, that was fair— Tony had been desperate to ensure that the Ten Rings would not be able to get into the suit and had locked it up tight when he had been originally captured, and the protocols for that equally ensured that Tony’s secret would not be discovered in the event of such a situation.

Then JARVIS added that— “I told them nothing, save the fact that Iron Man was gone.”

And Tony could understand why the Avengers made the assumption that they had. *Gone* meant physically not there, but it could also be interpreted to mean *passed away*. The Avengers must have thought JARVIS was giving them a death notice.

It was strange though, that they hadn’t realised *before* that— the video that the Ten Rings had shown him was still rather damning. How *had* Steve and Clint managed to explain away his being on that mission?

But, whatever. With everything that had just suddenly come to light, there were far more pressing matters to be taken into consideration.

Namely—

“If they thought Iron Man was dead, then where the hell is the suit now?” Tony asked. “I hope they left it in my workshop, Pepper probably would have sorted that out... so long as SHIELD didn’t get to her before she could.”

“Do you think she would have been influenced by them?” Loki asked curiously.

“Pepper has this bad habit of seeing the best in people,” Tony replied. “It worked well for me, because she was able to see through all the bullshit. But it also means that she has this habit of making friends with SHIELD agents. And yeah, Phil was okay, but now... anyway. Where’d she put it, J?”

“Sir...” JARVIS said hesitantly.

Tony narrowed his eyes in suspicion. “What is it?”

“When the Avengers were unable to open the suit, they knew that there would be no way to pry it open without damaging whatever remained inside.”

“And you didn’t help them, JARVIS?” Loki asked wryly, his lips curling into a smirk.

“I was on lockdown,” JARVIS said, his tone even more defensive than the first time, and Loki’s smile widened.

“JARVIS,” Tony growled. “*Where* is my suit?”

There was a pause, and then— “Iron Man needed a funeral,” JARVIS said quickly. “And for that, they needed a body.”

Tony’s stomach dropped. “No,” he said. “They *didn’t*.”

“I am sorry, Sir,” JARVIS said. “But I am rather afraid that they did.”

Tony groaned, and covered his face with his hands. “No,” he said, his voice muffled. “No, they didn’t. My poor suit, trapped in darkness.”

Loki patted Tony’s shoulder in sympathy.

“I’m gone for a couple of months, and they turn one suit into a show pony and bury another. What did I do to deserve this?”

“I think you decided to join a ‘boy band’ run by SHIELD, Sir.”

“Aw, JARVIS,” Tony said, looking up. “Uncalled for.”

“But true,” Loki said, his smile back in place. “Now, might we return to the matter at hand? Your suit has been buried—”

“Yeah it has, and you didn’t even think to tell me about this earlier, JARVIS?” Tony asked, and Loki threw his head back as if asking the heavens for patience. “J, buddy, this is the sort of thing you tell me. This is important—”

“The suit is safe enough,” JARVIS said. “It did not seem relevant to—”

“JARVIS,” Tony whined. “It’s my suit!”

“I apologise,” JARVIS said after a moment’s pause. “I should have told you.”

Tony nodded, accepting that. “Just. Try not to do it again, yeah? It’s... I just like to know where they all are.”

“I know, Sir.” He really did sound apologetic, and Tony felt something lodge in his throat. JARVIS was capable of so much feeling, it was... he shouldn’t be surprised anymore, but it warmed him every time nonetheless to see his AI— well. To see him growing up, Tony supposed.

“Maybe we can use this to our advantage,” Loki said thoughtfully, almost hesitant as if checking that they were done with their conversation. “If the world does not know who you are, then we could bring another player into this—”

“You want me to go back to being Iron Man?” Tony asked, frowning. He wasn’t... entirely sure how he felt about that, because on the one hand, Iron Man had been part of who he was for years now. But on the other, he was so far from the person he was when he was an Avenger that it didn’t seem... right, somehow, like being Iron Man was a far-off dream.

Thankfully, he didn’t have to make the choice, because—

“No,” Loki corrected. “I merely think that it might be useful for us to have an Avenger on our side. We would just have to decide how to go about bringing him back.”

“Iron Man was given a state funeral with honours, and it was televised globally,” JARVIS explained. “He died a hero, and the whole world mourned his loss. Bringing him back would be—”

“Hilarious,” Tony finished. “Can you imagine their faces when they realise what a mistake they’ve made?”

Loki looked... hesitant. “Anthony,” he asked slowly. “Are you... thinking of telling the world who you are?”

Tony shook his head. “Not right now,” he said. “I mean yeah, it would be a hell of a lot of fun, but I know that we could use that. Iron Man returning from the dead might be a big enough shock for everyone, although... the Ten Rings already know who I am, and so does Fury. Bringing Iron Man back will only confirm for them that—”

“That you are alive and coming for them,” Loki said, tilting his head toward the screen. “Was that not the purpose of this message?”

“You know it was.” Tony groaned, and rubbed his hands over his face, trying to clear his mind. “But, whatever. Either way, I can’t leave my suit buried underground where anyone could just walk over and steal it.”

“SHIELD assured Ms Potts that it would have the best possible security,” JARVIS said, and Tony pulled an unimpressed look.

“Really?” he asked. “JARVIS, I am entirely disappointed that those words even just came out of your mouth.”

“I merely intended to say that Ms Potts has approved—”

“Did she really?” Tony asked. “Did she know what SHIELD was when she agreed to that?”

JARVIS paused. “There was some reluctance. Though I believe that had more to do with the implications surrounding declaring Iron Man dead when she knew that *you* were still alive.”

“So you’re admitting that you’re wrong?” Tony asked gleefully. *That* was certainly a rare occurrence. “JARVIS, I hope you were recording, because—”

“I can delete the footage from my old files, Sir. No one else shall ever know.”

Tony had a *great* reply, but, unfortunately—

“As you said,” Loki interrupted them, though the smile gracing his lips was fond. “We will need to go and retrieve your suit.”

“Yes, of course,” JARVIS said. But when no more information was forthcoming, Tony narrowed his eyes once again.

“JARVIS,” he drawled, though his tone was more amused than anything else. “Don’t think I haven’t noticed that you still haven’t given us a specific location. Come on, where was he buried?”

“Iron Man was given a state funeral with honours,” JARVIS said again, and Tony only had to wonder for half a moment before he realised why the sassy shit was repeating himself, because—

Oh.

“Oh god,” Tony groaned, hoping that he had interpreted JARVIS’ hesitation wrong. “Don’t tell me we’re going to have to play grave robber in *Arlington*.”

“I’m afraid so, Sir,” JARVIS said grimly, though Tony could *hear* the amusement.

And, to be honest, maybe it *would* be fun. After all, the grave they would be digging up would be entirely empty, so they would not be disturbing – ah, anyone else. The security was no doubt higher than it would be at any other cemetery, which would add to the challenge—

And, of course, the drama when the world realised what had happened, that *someone* had stolen Iron Man, really would be hilarious to watch.

The thought pushed a rare drop of guilt down Tony’s spine, because... well. Pepper clearly cared enough to at least try and get proper care for Iron Man, even if she had gone about it

the wrong way. Finding out that someone had stolen the suit would probably be a blow that she didn't need after everything Tony had already put her through— Pepper *and* Rhodey, for that matter.

Even if he couldn't risk properly contacting them, maybe there was a way to get message so that they would know what was going on? Maybe JARVIS could do it?

Or maybe the incident would be enough of a message itself.

Tony almost voiced the thought, but squashed it down. He knew that Loki wouldn't stop him if he wanted to contact his old friends, but then he was also aware of the fact that making contact might be dangerous— for Pepper and Rhodey as well as for himself and Loki. At this point, now that they had declared their intentions, they couldn't risk SHIELD believing that they had possible allies.

“Right,” Tony sighed instead. “When shall we leave?”

“Whenever you are ready,” Loki said.

“It is mid-morning in Washington DC at the current time,” JARVIS said. “Might I suggest waiting until the sun has set?”

“That does sound wise,” Loki agreed, and Tony gave his assent as well.

Since their travel time was instantaneous, they had several hours before they would need to leave— which was good thing, since Tony knew that Loki would need the rest before another big jump. They were not anticipating trouble though, and so it was unlikely that they would need to prepare for a fight.

(They would be ready for one anyway, of course.)

They went back out again that afternoon, visiting Florence once more. This time, they didn't go to the tourist spots or whet their historical interests— they simply sat in a cafe, enjoying each other's company and talking about nonsensical things that had nothing to do with the mission they had just completed.

It was the smaller, sweeter moments like this that Tony lived for, that he liked to hold close to his chest to remind himself *why* they were doing what they were. The little sparks of light amongst the dark were what made it worth it, and when they returned home and decided to use their remaining hours by curling together on their bed for a well needed nap, Tony felt content in a way that was so calming it would have surprised him, if it hadn't been caused by being close to Loki.

—•—

The perfect feel of Loki wrapped all around him was something that Tony would never grow used to, would never stop enjoying. He was lost in it, floating and flying— because Loki was everywhere, his limbs wrapped around him, his voice in Tony's mind, his lips never leaving Tony's skin.

Loki worshipped his body with a delighted reverence that made Tony go weak and feel blindingly strong all at the same time, whispering and growling and *crooning* sweet promises as he showered Tony with the affection and desire he had wanted now for *weeks*. Loki was on top of him, pressing him down into the mattress, holding him still but not making him feel trapped in the slightest. Tony arched his neck as Loki sucked and bit, and as he dragged his teeth over Tony's jaw and claimed his lips as his own.

Tony kissed him desperately, pouring every piece of yearning he felt into it, begging, *pleading* for more with every slide and stroke. And Loki gave in to everything, putting his hands where Tony wanted, pulling him as close as was possible. Tony arched his back and their hips pressed flush together, making them both groan with need. Then one of Loki's hands dragged down over Tony's chest and brushed against his cock, the touch of bare skin enough for Tony's mind to skitter to a halt.

"Anthony," Loki whispered, his teeth grazing Tony's ear. '*Anthony.*'

Tony moaned, pressing his hips up into Loki's touch, wanting, *needing* more, taking everything that Loki was willing to give.

Loki's hands burned where they touched his skin, leaving a trail of fire and electricity, sparking over every nerve and awakening everything in his body. It was pure bliss, it was everything that Tony *ever* could have wanted. He felt like... almost like Loki wanted him as much as he wanted Loki, and he could have basked in that feeling forever.

"You're perfect, Anthony," Loki said, his voice deep and dripping with desire, the sound sending every bit of happiness spinning through Tony like a drug.

"Loki—" he gasped, his breath hitching as Loki's fingers gripped the base of Tony's cock, sliding up toward the tip as his thumb rubbed over the head. Tony gasped and moaned, muffling the sounds of his pleasure against Loki's lips.

"Anthony?"

The voice was familiar but it was too far away, and he took no notice of it, choosing instead to focus on the way their bodies slid together, on the way that Loki ducked his head and began to suck and bite at Tony's throat, on the way his fingers stroked in feather-light touches that weren't *enough*, that just left him gasping and trembling for *more*—

Then he heard a gasp— but of shock, not desire, and Tony finally pulled his eyes open and glanced over Loki's shoulder—

Only to see *Loki*, fully clothed and standing by the door, his eyes wide. The moment Tony's blissed-out brain recognised what that meant, the body pressing him to the mattress faded away and Tony was left staring in shock at Loki, the *real* Loki, who was staring back at him in complete and utter disbelief.

Oh, *fuck*—

Tony jolted awake with a heavy gasp, his heart beating much too fast, his back cracking painfully as he sat up far too quickly, scurrying away and hunching over his knees at the same time. His erection was already softening, reacting to his horror, though he knew that Loki must have noticed it already—

But then, Loki was in his *dream*, so he knew what Tony had been thinking about anyway—

Oh, god.

Tony's breaths were coming in quick pants, his chest heaving as he skittered to the other side of the bed, tearing himself from the hands that were still reaching for him, still trying to draw him closer.

Through the haze of pure dread that was clattering through his mind, Tony started to hear Loki's voice, soothing and calming and trying to make sure that Tony was all right.

And fuck, but that just hurt even more, reminding him that Loki was his *friend*, that Loki cared about him, that Loki did *not* want that kind of relationship.

“Anthony, breathe,” Loki was saying, the words aching familiar— and god, but what must Loki think now, that a simple dream — and not even a *nightmare* — could reduce him to such a messed up state?

But then, the dream had been anything but simple, hadn't it?

After all, it was complicated enough that it might just be about to ruin everything.

Perhaps Tony should have expected this to happen— they drifted in and out of each other's consciousness every night now, and Loki was a frequent visitor inside Tony's nightmares, pushing away the fear until only the comfort of a peaceful sleep remained.

Really, Tony just supposed he should be thankful that the dream had already started by the time Loki had arrived, and that he hadn't tried to jump the *real* Loki. That... probably would have been worse.

If it were possible to even *be* worse, that is, considering the fact that Loki's expression was one of burgeoning horror mixed in with concern.

Except, then—

“I apologise for intruding,” Loki said hoarsely. “You seemed distressed. I thought... that maybe, you wouldn't mind my company.”

Tony groaned, and curled in on himself even tighter. He *really* should have guessed that something like this would happen— even with so much on their minds, he had always had enough space amongst his thoughts for Loki. And after seeing Loki coming from the shower only hours ago, and the place that his thoughts had gone— it was only natural that he would have such a dream.

Natural.

Right.

He wasn't sure that Loki would believe that, when Loki had called them *brothers* just weeks before.

"Don't apologise," he said, his voice gruff. "That's... I should be the one saying—"

"You were calling my name," Loki cut in, not meeting Tony's eye. "I should have realised that it wasn't a nightmare."

"Loki, I'm so sorry," Tony said. "I... you shouldn't have seen that, I shouldn't have been *thinking* that—"

"There's no need for *you* to apologise," Loki said, his own voice a little stiff.

And Tony knew, of course he did, that Loki was feeling uncomfortable, that this was something he didn't want.

"This was my fault," Loki muttered, and while— yeah, okay, Loki probably could shoulder the blame for being so fucking perfect, but Tony got the feeling that wasn't what Loki was referring to. "This was... I have been in your head too much, I must have..." He stopped, and jerked his head oddly, as if he were trying to shove away a thought. Then, he pushed himself to standing with a suddenness and grace that should *not* be allowed when Tony's mind was spinning in crazed circles.

But, if there was one thing Tony was sure of—

"No," Tony gasped, half diving across the bed in his desperation to grab hold of Loki's wrist. "Loki, please, don't go."

"I just... I need some space," Loki said, prying Tony's fingers from his wrist and getting to his feet. "I need to... I need space." He looked so lost, and Tony scrambled to follow him, his legs getting twisted in the sheets in his hurry. He almost face planted on the ground as a result but Loki caught his shoulders, holding him steady— so of course Tony used the opportunity to grip his hands in Loki's shirt once more.

"Stay," Tony said. "Please, Loki don't... I can, it won't happen again, just, *please*."

Loki held him close, stroking his hair and making soft noises deep in his throat. He held him just as he always had, his desire to ensure that Tony was all right not seeming to be affected by the dream he had witnessed. But even as he offered comfort, not once did Loki speak with his mind.

It threw Tony back to the first time Loki had come into one of his dreams, when it *had* been a nightmare. Loki hadn't wanted to speak with his mind then, either, because he had been afraid that it would be unwelcome— or that he was unworthy of it, perhaps.

It just... it scared him. He knew that it was irrational, he knew that Loki should be free to come and go as he wanted. Tony didn't *mean* to seem so clingy or controlling, but his mind was a mess. He was caught in the panic of too much at once, between his own mortification,

his worry that it would make Loki uncomfortable, and his fear that Loki would want to go now that he knew what Tony wanted from him.

Tony would never *take* it, of course, because Loki's happiness was his highest priority.

And it was only with that thought that Tony realised Loki was shattering as well. His hands were trembling as he held Tony close, and with his head pressed to Loki's chest, he could hear the fast beat of his heart.

Tony wasn't the only one who was afraid by the thought of something coming between them— they needed each *other*.

"I can keep it hidden," Tony said, his voice soft and quiet. "I promise, you won't even notice."

Loki let out a heavy sigh, and buried his face in Tony's hair.

"You don't have to," Loki said. "I don't *want* you to hide this."

Tony's eyes snapped open, suddenly *understanding*. "Loki—"

"Shh," Loki hushed. *'It's okay, you're all right. I'm not going to leave, I'm not ever going to leave you.'*

They probably should have talked, but the return of their silent communication and the raw honesty in the words was enough for Tony to relax fully into Loki's arms, his hands clutching at Loki's shirt and holding on as tightly as he could. Loki's embrace felt warm and safe, grounding him in the moment, reminding Tony that they were *together* in this— in all of it.

Loki was wrapped in him just as much as he was wrapped in Loki, and finally, *finally*, Tony began to calm down. He knew that he was not imagining things when Loki pressed a relieved kiss to his hair, and he leaned into it with a smile.

They were standing on the edge of something here, Tony knew it. He still wasn't sure that he could completely decipher Loki's emotional state, but he knew that Loki cared for him— and that Loki was telling the truth when he said that he would not leave.

Despite his earlier worry about Loki rejecting him, there truly wasn't anything for him to be concerned over.

"Thanks, Loki," Tony said, turning his head just slightly to press a light kiss to the slip of Loki's collarbone that he could reach. It was light enough to be barely there, but Loki's whole body shuddered with it, drawing Tony in with a touch of relieved possessiveness that only made Tony curl in all the closer.

And maybe they could have confirmed then, what they were feeling for each other. Maybe they could have used words, or more intimate touches than those they had already shared.

But they knew what they meant to each other now, and everything else could take its time.

As long as we have this

Chapter Notes

Massive thanks to [Rabentochter](#), I can't even list all that she did but just know that if not for her this chapter would not be what it is (if I even could have finished it at all) ♥

When JARVIS let them know that it was a good time to begin getting ready to rescue Tony's suit from its dark fate, it was more difficult than Tony thought it would be to pull himself from Loki's arms. It was a little ridiculous— they had managed to do so every morning now for months, untangling themselves from where they had spent the night wrapped in each other's comfort. But, in that moment, Tony just couldn't bring himself to move— and the way that Loki pulled him ever so slightly closer seemed to suggest that he was thinking along the same lines.

Tony hadn't slept since his dream, and he knew that Loki hadn't, either. They had stayed quiet, simply breathing each other in, relishing in the closeness. Loki's fingers traced patterns over Tony's back and Tony's hand stroked gently over Loki's chest, reaffirming what they now knew and just... bathing in the knowledge of what they meant to each other. It was something that Tony had wanted for so very long but just hadn't realised was already within his grasp— hadn't realised that Loki cared for him just as much and in the same way as he cared for Loki.

It was strange, to think of this as something that he could trust, an actual *good thing* that he could know would stay with him. And yet, at the same time, it didn't feel strange at all— because it was *Loki*, and when they were together, Tony knew that there was very little that could go wrong which they would not be able to bear.

“Sir,” JARVIS prompted when it became clear that his first attempt had not worked. “Your armour.”

Tony groaned, curling in closer to Loki, his nose brushing against the skin at Loki's throat. Loki chuckled at that, and his fingers stopped their movements— but only so that he could curl them through Tony's shirt as he leaned his head against Tony's, his breath ruffling though Tony's hair.

Maybe that meant that they were going to stay for a little while longer— Tony certainly hoped that it did, anyway.

But, unfortunately, Loki seemed to have other ideas.

“We should get up,” he whispered— though Tony did notice that he wasn’t actually making any effort to do so. “You do not want to leave your suit within the reach of those who would wish to harm us.”

“A bit more time won’t hurt,” Tony replied. “And besides, they won’t be able to get *into* the suit if they get there before us.”

The moment was just... so soft, and Tony was loath to break it in any way. It was a rare thing these days, to find such peace— though he should have known that it wouldn’t be hard to grasp, while lying with Loki like this.

“It will be so much more difficult to take it back from them than it would be to take from a graveyard,” Loki pointed out, his fingers returning to their soft strokes.

“Them?” Tony asked. “Ha. I suppose it’s a little sad that there are so many people out to get us that we don’t even know which would get to the suit first?”

“Exactly,” Loki said. “So we should—”

“It’s been there for months already, right? A little more time won’t hurt.”

“And if we wait, only to find that we missed being able to take the suit by mere moments? What would you do then?”

Tony lifted his head, just enough so that Loki could see his glare. But when Loki responded only by arching a brow, Tony huffed and lay his head back on Loki’s shoulder.

“It’s almost like you *want* to move,” he muttered.

“Anthony, if I could, I would stay here with you forever.” There was no hesitation in Loki’s tone, nothing to indicate that it had been difficult for him to admit. It was just a simple fact laden with feeling, and it warmed Tony all the way through in a current that didn’t spark, but just felt *right*.

His response was instinctual, slipping out without his permission— but he knew that it was true nonetheless, and he didn’t regret it in the slightest.

‘I would stay here forever, as well.’

Loki didn’t say anything to that, but he didn’t need to. They might have taken a while to reach this point, but it felt like *finally* they understood each other well enough to simply know. They had come so far, pulled through so much— and now they were *here*, even despite the darkness that still remained behind the shadows, still waiting for them to slip up and make a mistake so the monsters could curl around them and drag them down to the depths. But despite the pain, and even if it did all go wrong— Tony knew, in his heart, that he would not choose to change a thing. Not if it meant that he and Loki got to have this.

‘I do not wish to let you go,’ Loki replied. *‘But you know that there is darkness to be faced.’*

'You don't have to let me go for that,' Tony said softly, and with all of the honesty he possessed. 'You'll never have to.'

'You mean that?' Loki asked, one hand gently coaxing Tony to lift his head again— and his voice was gentle enough that Tony realised Loki already knew, already *believed* the answer.

'Yeah,' Tony said simply. 'Yeah, I mean that.'

Their eyes met, and their breathing slowed. They were so close, every part of them touching that could with only their thin sleep clothes between them. And for a moment, Tony was almost half expecting Loki to kiss him properly. But then his lips touched Tony's cheek instead, and while it wasn't entirely what he had wanted, it was perfect nonetheless.

God, okay. Going slow was perhaps going to be a little harder than Tony had first thought.

But, unfortunately, Tony knew that even though they had promised to hold on to each other, they were going to have to *physically* let go at some point. Tony knew that Loki was right, that this really was something they couldn't put off— because having Iron Man on their side really *would* be an advantage, let alone Tony's own desire to pull his suit from its dark tomb.

It almost seemed *more* important, somehow, than it had the day before when JARVIS had first told them about Iron Man's 'death'.

And, look, Tony didn't actually think that losing Loki now would hurt *more* than before, because his own feelings had not changed from one moment to the next. He still cared for Loki more than anything or anyone else, and knowing that Loki felt the same way didn't lessen or strengthen that. And yet, somehow, it still felt like there was now so much more to lose, like he and Loki had pulled *closer*.

It really, *truly* was not something that Tony would be able to let go of. Loki was so deeply ingrained in his very being that to lose him would be too painful, too horrible to even begin to contemplate.

The sooner they gained their revenge, the sooner he and Loki would be safe. He knew that, he *had known* that the entire time, ever since they had first decided on this course of action. They were fighting not to further the violence, but to *stop* the fighting, so that they could finally reach a place where they could just relax and not have to be scared anymore.

It was cloying, the fear, the thought that at any moment, someone or something could come and tear them apart. So yeah, for now, they fought it— and that meant that they would need to go back and get the suit.

So, yeah. He really did want to get that suit back, because not only would it then be out of SHIELD's reach and not *buried*, but because it would also be something that he could *use*.

He was more than capable of creating what he needed, but a whole suit ready made? Even if it was a little damaged, that was a gold mine that Tony could not simply leave untouched.

After all, it would have been too risky to head to Malibu or New York to pick up one of his many other suits, because that was certainly something he couldn't pull off without at least *Pepper* noticing. As such, this was his current best chance, and it would be ridiculous to let it pass them by.

But he was still just so goddamn *comfortable* right where he was.

So.

“Five more minutes?” he bargained.

Loki chuckled again, the resultant vibrations tickling Tony's smile as he pressed his lips to Loki's skin in the kind of kiss that had suddenly become so beautifully normal. Loki relaxed fully into the touch, and Loki brushed another kiss over his forehead in response.

JARVIS dutifully allowed them their few extra minutes, and Tony enjoyed every one, closing his eyes again and pressing the length of his body against Loki's side as close as he could, a single thought echoing pleasurably through his mind.

I would be happy with years of this.

When the time was up and Tony grudgingly pulled away, he still lingered for as long as he could, his fingers brushing over Loki's skin— and he couldn't help but smile as he realised that Loki was doing the same, both of them trying to stretch the moment for as long as they possibly could. And then, as they dressed and collected everything that they would need, it was like there was a charge in the air, something between them that didn't separate, but held them more firmly together. And yet, somehow, it wasn't so much that things had *changed*. It was more like Tony had simply begun to *notice* everything, becoming more and more attuned to what was happening between them. They touched *all the time*, and now that the possibility of that turning into something beyond what they already had was within reach, Tony was just... hyperaware. Every brush of fingers against skin electrified every nerve, and every look meant something more, a whole conversation hidden amongst a tiny flicker of desire. But, yeah, that didn't mean that anything really had changed, because it didn't stop them from taking comfort from touch— it was just... that the touch held more *potential*.

And when Loki silently asked whether Tony was ready, his fingers brushing along the inside of Tony's wrist to send the words through their unbreakable connection, it coloured Tony's mind with a *need* that he was more than willing to latch on to, but at the same time... it made him realise that now, they *could* pull away without it hurting. They didn't *have* to be holding on physically to know that they would never let go, they could move apart and still be as close as ever— but they just didn't want to.

Why would they, when being close made them feel so content?

Tony's fingers curled around Loki's as they skywalked just as they had every other time. And as they walked through the space between worlds, as every piece of existence passed by them, Tony's attention was drawn not by the beautiful blur of everything, but instead by the delighted smile that stretched across Loki's lips.

So, yeah, okay, maybe there *was* something a little different, because on top of that, when they landed, Loki held Tony close for just a bit longer than he would have before— and the kiss that he pressed to the top of Tony’s head was certainly not something that he would have done earlier.

Tony leaned up into it, unable to stop himself from craving more of Loki’s touch. It was soft, but it still felt so very *them*— different, yes, but still not overly changed. Which, of course, was why falling into another embrace then was probably a mistake, because it was just as hard to pull away as it had been before. Tony just... Loki just fit so perfectly around him that he felt warm and safe, and stepping away from him was difficult. But, Tony did so without complaint, and Loki remained by his side as they pressed forward.

It felt odd, to be walking through Arlington National Cemetery with the intention of— well, not exactly of *desecrating* the place, because Tony had no plans to go anywhere near the graves of the actual fallen servicemen buried there. After all, it was one of the largest and most prestigious military cemeteries in the US, and the thought of going in there and...

Well.

They would just be careful, that’s all.

(And, besides. Tony would be lying if he said that he wasn’t looking forward to the extra media attention their actions would be gaining.)

As they walked between the lines of white gravestones, Tony couldn’t help but wonder what it must be like to love your country enough— to believe in something *so much* that you would be willing to give your life. There were soldiers here from every war that the United States had ever fought in, an echo of the past, like every white headstone was a reminder of the cost of becoming involved in conflict. And despite the way he felt about the situation as a whole, Tony couldn’t help but be touched by the fact that so many had believed Iron Man belonged *here*, among the hundreds of thousands of *heroes* who had fought and died for something that they believed in so strongly.

In a way... it would almost be a shame to dig him up.

But, of course, they were going to do it anyway.

Tony had been able to show Loki where they needed to go on a map, and the Arlington website was able to tell him exactly where Iron Man had found his not so final place of rest. They hadn’t landed far from where they needed to go, but everything around them looked exactly the same, all green grass, tall trees, and white headstones that stretched for miles. Thankfully, there were signs about that pointed toward well-known gravesites, such as JFK and the tomb of the unknown soldier, and they were accompanied by new, shiny signs that led toward Iron Man.

Of course, Iron Man would not have one of the same marble headstones that surrounded them now— after all, he was not military, and it was only due to a bit of a wiggle through the stringent rules that he had been permitted burial in the cemetery. There were some who had fought it, Tony had seen as much online, but the decision had been well enough supported by

both the government and the people who had seen worth in Iron Man's actions that he had been granted a place in one of the sections where the headstones were personalised, rather than the uniform white markers or crosses.

Unfortunately, despite the late hour, they weren't alone in the grounds. There were soldiers constantly standing vigil over their fallen comrades, as well as rangers who patrolled the grounds, keeping a sharp eye to ensure that the graves remained undisturbed from those who would want to disrespect them.

The graves which, unfortunately... all looked exactly the same, and therefore were almost *impossible* to navigate between, even with the signs pointing every which way.

"We've passed by here before," Tony said, ten minutes into their search.

Loki glanced around, his eyes narrowing. "Have we?"

"Yes. I recognise that headstone there."

"They all look the same—"

"I recognise the *name*—"

"There are thousands of headstones here, there are probably multiple belonging to someone with that name."

"No, I'm *sure* I've seen that marker before." Tony missed his StarkPhone. He could have just pulled up Google, and searched the website for the location of Iron Man's grave. *Then* he cursed himself for at least not bringing a camera or something, because then maybe JARVIS could have directed them. Or, hey, actually— "Maybe we should ask someone," he muttered, glancing around. Of course, they both looked a *little* suspicious right now, since they were wearing the black coats they had chosen exactly *because* they looked suspicious, not to mention their two different methods of concealing their face. But Loki could change that, right? A quick illusion and—

"There's no need," Loki said shortly. "*We* can do this. Come on."

They wandered for a few more minutes, until—

"Anthony," Loki said. "I believe that we're lost."

Tony, far from being annoyed, began to laugh— at least until a shout cut him off.

"Is someone there?"

"Oh, crap," Tony said, his eyes widening. A line of light was shining through the trees, coming closer— and soon it would be in their section of headstones.

Loki wasted no time— he grabbed Tony's shoulders and spun him around, pushing him behind a tree and holding him close. Tony felt the prickle of Loki's seiðr, which probably meant that Loki was shrouding them from view— but still, Loki did not move away. Their chests were

pressed together, their faces so close that Tony could feel Loki's cool breath dance over his cheek. Loki's eyes were darting past the tree, following the movement of the ranger, but Tony could not look away from Loki's focused expression— and when Loki's gaze finally met his own, it took Tony's breath away.

“Okay?” Tony whispered.

“She is gone,” Loki replied. “The way is clear.”

Yet still, they lingered, leaning close together and once again reluctant to move from this newfound intimacy that made every touch that much more.

Had Tony said before that nothing had changed?

Maybe... not on the surface, but Tony was sure that his heart hadn't beat this fast before, that his breath hadn't come so quick at the sight of Loki's bright green eyes staring at him like *that* as they were pressed so very, very close together.

Tony was thankful for the red scarf that covered the lower half of his face, because if it hadn't been there... he might not have had the strength to stop from tilting up his chin and bringing their lips together.

Even as Loki leaned back and away, his hands ran down from Tony's shoulders and over his chest— perhaps aiming for the pretence of smoothing Tony's black coat. Tony took the opportunity to grasp Loki's hand in his, and this time, their hands remained entwined as they continued to make their way through the rows of graves.

Thankfully, it was not long after that before Tony *finally* spotted what they were looking for.

“Look!” Tony exclaimed, pointing with his free hand. “There!”

Through the trees and the rows of white, he could just see the shape of an obelisk, which was certainly not the same uniform marker that they had been staring at since they had arrived. And as they got closer, Tony could make out more markers around the base of the obelisk, markers of every shape and varying sizes. Finally, they had found— well, at least one of the sections like the one that they were looking for. (Tony had read that there were, what, 13 sections with private markers? God, why did this place have to be so *big*?)

Thankfully, from there, Iron Man's grave was not hard to find— mostly due to its rather ostentatious design. It was made of the same white marble as the headstones they had seen before, which actually was rather surprising— but it was slightly taller and blockier, and where the others had been engraved, this had a bronze plaque affixed to the front. But the most striking feature was the bronze figure of Iron Man on top, his hands spread by his sides and his toes pointed as if he were just taking off, his helmet tilted up to the sky.

It was... well. Tony kind of liked it, at first, even if it did seem like it was a little bit *much*. And he wanted to see the rest of it. The area was too dark to read the inscription, so Tony took a step closer, wanting to look— but then Loki held him firm, tugging gently on his hand to keep him still.

'Be careful.'

Tony glanced about for a moment. He couldn't see any more rangers, and they were far enough from the tomb of the unknown soldier that they didn't have to worry about the soldiers on duty.

But, of course, that was not what Loki had been referring to.

"What was it JARVIS said?" Tony asked. "That SHIELD has used precautions, or something?"

"That is correct, Sir," JARVIS told them through their ear-pieces. "I am afraid that I do not know exactly what protections are on the suit, but they were enough to placate Ms Potts."

"Great." Tony exchanged a glance with Loki. "Can you reboot it, save us the trouble?"

There was a pause, before—

"No," JARVIS said. "The suit is cut off from my reach, even without taking the lockdown into account. There is interference. I believe that it might be encased in a heavy coffin."

Well, of course it wouldn't be so easy as digging Iron Man up, or even getting Iron Man to blast his way out from under the ground himself. *Shame*. But hey, this way they could have a little more *fun*.

Just, you know. They needed to be careful first.

"Okay," Tony said. "Slow and steady."

He started by picking a stick up off the ground and throwing it down hard at the foot of the grave, checking for pressure sensors. But nothing happened, so Tony dared to take a step forward.

Then he paused, and glanced to the man at his side.

"If this explodes, you'll save me, right?" Tony asked.

Loki pressed his lips together, as if he were hiding a smile. "I suppose shall *try*."

Somehow feeling reassured by that, Tony began to move closer— and Loki was right at his side, as always. Luckily, nothing exploded, and as they drew closer, Tony was able to read the inscription on the headstone.

It had *IRON MAN* engraved upon it in large block letters, and then a gap below, as if they had left room for a *real* name to be added, should someone ever come forward with the knowledge. There was no birthdate, of course, but the date of death read as that fateful day that Tony had been captured in Afghanistan. So they weren't pretending that someone had remained inside then, had starved to death or maybe had died of wounds while the Avengers failed to crack open the suit.

It was a horrible thought, even for Tony who *knew* that the suit was empty, and he pushed it away before reading the rest of the inscription. Below the date was a simple epitaph, and Tony couldn't help but stare at it, even reaching out to run his fingers over the lettering.

EARTH'S MIGHTIEST AVENGER

WE SHALL FOREVER OWE HIM OUR THANKS

Tony pulled down his mask as he stared and swallowed against the lump in his throat, not quite sure of how he was feeling.

“Anthony?” Loki asked hesitantly, his free hand curling around Tony's arm, just above the hand that he already held. *‘Are you all right?’*

Tony wanted to say that he was fine, that this was nothing, really. That seeing his own grave wasn't creepy, that it wasn't strange— wasn't any of those things that it probably should have been. He could have said plenty of reassuring things, because really, it *wasn't*, but what he actually said was—

“Can you imagine what the epitaph would say if this was *my* headstone?” His voice was weak, and he had to try and swallow again to sort it out.

“This... *is* your headstone,” Loki said gently. “Those words, this monument— it is for *you*.”

“No,” Tony said, shaking his head. “This is for *Iron Man*, the symbol and the *idea* that no one really managed to understand. If it was for me, it would probably say something like, ‘Here lies Tony Stark, he killed a lot of people. Good fucking riddance’.”

Loki's hands tensed, and for a moment, Tony thought he almost looked *angry*— yet when he spoke, his voice was warm but firm.

“Even if that were the case, it doesn't matter what anyone else says,” Loki told him. “You don't need to worry about anything like that, not anymore.”

“I know,” Tony said, his own voice softening as he turned to face his... Loki. “And if I ever forget, then I have you to remind me.”

“Yes,” Loki said. “You do. Always.”

“Always,” Tony breathed. His hand fell from the headstone and lifted to brush along Loki's cheek, and he watched reverently as Loki's eyes closed and he leaned into the touch.

Tony's thoughts from earlier re-entered his mind, and despite their surroundings, he couldn't help the soft smile that curved up his lips. Everything that they had been through, everything that they had done, everything that they had *felt*—

All of it had been leading them *here*.

Tony's eyes fell closed, and with one hand still cupping Loki's cheek, he began to lean forward, giving his partner time to back away. And Loki's arms came around Tony's shoulders as he met him halfway, their lips brushing together in the lightest and most perfect of touches. It was the softest kiss that Tony had ever been a part of, and yet it caused more feeling to flow through him than any others ever had. It only lasted a few seconds but Tony still lost himself in it, floating on the easy joy and the pure *happiness* it brought him, the rest of the world just melting away until it was only him and Loki, only the press of their lips and the warmth of Loki's skin. And when their lips broke apart they still remained close, resting their foreheads together as their breathing slowly calmed.

There was a stillness to the air, a warmth in their hearts, and Tony knew without a doubt that this was where he wanted to be more than anywhere else.

As long as we have this, then the rest of the world doesn't matter.

Well, at least not until—

“Hey!”

Tony's eyes snapped open, and he and Loki both turned their heads to see a ranger stalking toward them, his hands hovering at his belt.

“Don't you know where you are? This is a *cemetery*.”

“Oh, *crap*,” Tony said, hurriedly pulling his scarf back over his mouth. “Uh, Loki—”

“Yes, I know.” Loki let go of and shoved Tony behind him in the one single movement, working to both hide and protect Tony as Loki's power began to course through him.

Loki didn't seem to take any notice of the ranger— his hands were glowing green as he raised them into the air in a quick, sudden move, palms down and fingers curled menacingly. Then the ground cracked at his feet, tendrils of seiðr swirling down into the depths and reaching for what lay below.

“Oh my *god*,” The ranger said, backing away and fumbling with his radio. “What *are* you?”

The ground began to rumble, the whole area shaking as something began to rise from the grave. The ranger turned to *flee*— he dropped the radio in his hurry, and paused for half a second. But he glanced back just as Loki's seiðr was pulling a heavy metal coffin from the ground— and then the ranger simply *ran* as fast as he could.

The first thing out of the ground was a metal corner, and Loki seemed to strain as he pulled the rest of it free. Tony stepped closer and pressed a hand to the small of Loki's back— not enough to distract, just so that Loki could be sure that Tony was there, so that he knew Tony was offering comfort.

Loki's expression hardened with determination, and then he pulled back his hands and *shoved*

—

The coffin rolled sideways, pulling from the ground with a massive crash. Loki's seiðr was glowing stronger than ever, and he grit his teeth as a surge of power slammed into the overturned casket. But rather than breaking, the coffin started to... well, it was *screaming*. Really, there was no other way that Tony could describe it— perhaps other than loud, shrieking wails that echoed through the entire cemetery.

Unfortunately, sound carried well over the flat ground and between the monuments— which meant that as well as the alarm being impossible to miss, they also heard the cacophony of voices, the blowing of a whistle, the shouting of orders and the thundering of feet.

“Oh *crap*,” Tony said. “Loki, you set off the alarms—”

“Well, I did not see *you* doing anything to help!”

“Just, you deal with *that* guy, I'm going to try and sort this out.”

Loki went without questioning further, simply vanishing on the spot. It immediately made Tony feel like a part of his heart had been wrenched from his chest, like Loki had torn him in half and taken a bloody portion as a prize. But he forced down the panic, telling himself that it was fine, that Loki was *fine*, and he turned his attention to the coffin before him.

He knew that it wasn't going to be simple, that the alarm was probably going to contain some kind of trip. It would be easier, then, and safer, to focus instead on getting the damn thing open.

Hopefully.

He had brought a few things with him, anticipating this, and so he reached into the magically-expanded pockets of his dark coat and pulled out a small roll of tools and his repulsor. Just as he began poking at one of the hinges, Loki reappeared in a shimmer of green, the ranger's arm held tightly in his hand.

“You will tell them it was Iron Man,” Loki crooned, his seiðr working through his voice and making his words impossible to resist. “Tell them Iron Man is alive, and nothing else, do you understand?”

The ranger nodded frantically, and Loki let him go again.

Unfortunately, the hinge was too solid to dislodge just by hitting it, and Tony was wary of using the repulsor lest he trip something with it. There were no visible fastenings to work at, either— but that was fine, because Tony had another solution.

“Loki, come here for a minute,” Tony requested. “Would you mind icing this for me?”

Loki seemed slightly hesitant, but he did not pause as he lay his hand over the hinge that Tony indicated. His fingers paled and then sapphire bled over his skin. Frost covered the metal, and by the time that Loki pulled his hand away, the hinge was frozen entirely. After that, all it needed was a well aimed *whack*, and then the hinge shattered to pieces. The other one was just as easy, and then with their combined strength they pulled the lid up—

And promptly set off exactly what Tony had been trying to avoid. There was a faint *click* at first, and then the coffin began to grow hotter and hotter—

“Oh god,” Tony blanched, “I think it *is* going to explode—”

Loki turned back to Tony immediately, his seiðr reaching for him even before his no-longer-blue hands came to rest on Tony’s shoulder, the familiar prickle of protective magic running over Tony’s skin.

But Tony didn’t let himself lose focus— he worked with what he could reach, locating the explosive device quickly. Ironically, it was *very* similar to something that Tony had invented and sold before shutting down the weapons division of SI, and so it was easy enough to dismantle. It had been wired all through the casket, and would have been... rather *messy* when it went off.

Honestly, what *had* SHIELD been thinking, leaving such a thing in the middle of the country’s most well-loved military cemetery?

(Well, at least it would have prevented anyone from getting at Iron Man, Tony supposed. If he hadn’t been the one to have invented the bomb, even he might have had difficulty stopping it, given the short fuse.)

“Got it,” Tony said, and Loki sighed in relief. “But, uh. Maybe stay here anyway, just in case.”

When they pushed the lid off the rest of the way, there was, *thankfully*, no explosion. Tony was sure that the caretakers of the cemetery would be as equally pleased with that as he was—the explosion would have been just as bad for the grass as it would have been for what remained of Iron Man’s paint job.

And then— there he was. Iron Man in all his glory, red and gold and shining in the moonlight. Then, Tony only noticed the oddity because he had *just* been thinking about it— because Iron Man’s paint job was perfect, despite the fact that Tony distinctly remembered it suffering rather a lot of heat damage during his capture. Had they... painted him anew, believing there was a corpse inside?

Well.

That was slightly morbid.

And okay sure, funeral homes dressed dead people in their best suits, but that wasn’t exactly the same thing as painting a whole *armour*.

The more Tony thought about it, the more ludicrous and macabre it became, and he was slowly beginning to see exactly *why* Pepper had been against this entire spectacle.

Because, clearly, a *spectacle* was all it had been— something for the crowds to watch, to feel better about it all so that the people behind it could carefully continue their manipulations without notice.

Tony made a mental note for when he got back home to have a look at who had first suggested Iron Man receive a State Funeral and a burial in Arlington.

He'd put money on it being SHIELD.

"Anthony," Loki pressed, his hand squeezing Tony's shoulder. "We need to go."

"Right," Tony said, becoming aware once again of the approaching people. They were still a ways off, but the noise was getting louder with every passing moment.

"Get your suit ready," Loki said, standing straight. "I will prepare to deal with this, should you not be fast enough."

Well, that was as good a motivation as any, except—

"Okay, just, don't hurt them—"

"Anthony—"

"They haven't done anything to us, they're here to watch the graves. Just, don't hurt them. Please, Loki."

Loki seemed to grit his teeth, but he agreed nonetheless. "*Fine.*"

Thankfully, this time Loki didn't go far— he took up a position just a few yards from the coffin. But instead of summoning his usual knives, Loki drew a staff from nowhere and stood in a ready crouch.

They had a *few* moments before they were swarmed, but not long. If they didn't want to be seen, then Tony needed to *move*.

"JARVIS, how much power do we have?" Tony asked quickly.

"Not enough to fight, Sir," JARVIS said. Now that Iron Man was out of the heavy, probably lead-lined coffin, the AI was able to connect to it— and even as Tony watched, the armour's eyes lit up.

"Enough for sustained flight?"

There was a pause. "I believe so, Sir, yes. If the altitude is high enough, I should be able to keep Iron Man in the air for a day or so."

"Good," Tony said. "JARVIS, do it. Don't bring him to the house, not yet— I'm willing to bet SHIELD has a tracker on him. Just, keep him safe, okay?"

The repulsors spluttered a bit but they held steady enough, and then Iron Man was rising up toward the sky. Tony watched him go, and felt a laugh begin to bubble in his chest as JARVIS swooped down over the approaching soldiers and rangers — and, probably, SHIELD agents — causing them to shout out in surprise—

Actually—

The noise was getting louder, *louder*— Tony could see their flashlights now, could hear their warning shouts—

“Come on, Loki!” Tony called. “We have to go!”

Loki turned immediately, the staff disappearing from his hands as he reached for Tony, almost tacking him in his haste—

They charged through the leaves of Yggdrasil at breakneck speed and nearly fell into the living room, holding on to each other to keep their balance, but they *just* managed to prevent themselves from falling straight down onto the carpet.

The morning sunlight streaming through the windows was blinding after the darkness of DC, and Tony closed his eyes and pressed in closer to Loki. And as they swayed and regained their footing, Tony couldn't help but laugh again. They'd done it, they'd rescued Iron Man, they'd caused chaos— and at least now that Tony's heart rate was starting to go back down, he could admit that it had even been fun.

They were relaxed and happy, feeling like the top of the world—

But then, Loki froze, staring over Tony's shoulder.

“What is it?” Tony asked, warily, turning to look out of the window— but there didn't appear to be anything there.

“I thought I saw something,” Loki said, his eyes narrowing as he stared hard out amongst the trees. Then he glanced back down to Tony, and his expression softened with a mixture of confusion and doubt. “But... I may just be tired.”

“JARVIS, keep an eye on the perimeter, will you?” Tony said warily. It was unlikely that there was anything close, what with all of their protections, but if Loki said he saw something, then Tony wasn't about to dismiss it.

“Better to be safe,” Loki agreed, his eyes shining brightly now as he raised a hand to run it gently through Tony's hair.

“Yeah,” Tony said, not... really remembering what they were talking about, caught up in just how *close* they were.

Unable to resist, Tony leaned forward, a question in his eyes—

And then Loki bent down and touched their lips together once more. The kiss was just as light as the first, and just as perfect— or perhaps even more so, since they were not interrupted. It did not go any further than that gentle brush of lips, and when it ended, they simply held each other close, perfectly content.

“Come on,” Tony whispered after a long moment, untangling from Loki only so that they could move somewhere more comfortable. “I think we both could do with a rest.”

Loki smiled in agreement, and kept hold of Tony's hand as they made their way up to their bedroom for a well-deserved nap.

Maybe they had already spent a lot of time in bed that day, but neither of them really cared. They were both more than exhausted, and rather unwilling to do anything that didn't involve curling into each other's side.

No matter how busy, and no matter how stressed, Tony would always be able to find the time to hold Loki close, and simply enjoy the precious intimacy that he knew he would never trade for anything.

Hit where it hurts

Being who he is, Tony has had a lot of moments in the media over the course of his life. Some moments he could be proud of, while others... not so much, and to be honest, having his whole life broadcast to the world had always been something that he had never particularly been able to enjoy.

But there *were* a few shining moments that he could look back on with fondness, that he'd saved the footage or the newspaper clippings of, to look back upon later whenever he needed a reminder of some of the *good* things he had done. Of course, when he was younger, there had been more– the announcement about his success with DUM-E the most prominent, a single bright moment amongst reports of arrests for drug possession and public drunkenness that his father had not been quite fast enough to cover up. So, yeah. Most of what the media had documented wasn't exactly the stuff of decadent boasts.

But sitting on the couch and watching the media agonise over what had happened in Arlington? Oh, but that was just a *joy*.

JARVIS had woken the pair from their sleep as they had requested, letting them know that the story had broken with the morning news in the States. They'd grinned brightly at each other, and had stepped from the bed immediately– though they didn't part, not for a moment.

It was like Tony's need to be with Loki had been dialled to eleven– and now that he knew his touches weren't only welcome but *wanted* with the exact level of intensity he had always hoped they could mean, Tony found that he just couldn't stop.

And it still wasn't more or less than what they'd had before, because Loki always would have brushed his hand along the back of Tony's arm as he headed into the bathroom– but now, it meant that Tony could turn his hand and entwine their fingers, tugging Loki back toward him so that he could touch a chaste kiss to Loki's lips. It meant that he could match Loki's answering smile without worrying whether the god would see the affection in it, and it meant that when they sat together on the couch, Tony could curl into Loki's side and lay his head on his shoulder with both of them knowing it wasn't just for comfort, or for communication. Ever since closeness had become a necessity, they had always been so comfortable, so used to each other– but now comfort had turned into *want*, and it felt all the sweeter because of it.

Once they settled, JARVIS turned on the television, switching first to a news program so that they could get a general idea of what was being said.

It was clear that the cameras were being stopped from getting too close, and the reason for that was obvious with the people in suits milling about– several of which Tony was able to easily recognise as SHIELD agents. Thankfully, though, they were still able to get a decent shot, and as the cameras zoomed in to the remains of last night's escapades, Tony's lips began to curl into a smile.

The damage was even more extensive than Tony had realised in the dark– the hole in the ground was black and gaping, and proved that Iron Man had been buried far deeper than what

was normal, most likely as an extra level of protection. The coffin itself was damaged, the lid quite clearly having been pulled off with the hinges broken and the lock torn, lying on its side a couple of yards from the large hole in the ground. And, perhaps even more disturbingly, that headstone with the uplifting and yet somehow pitiful words had been cracked down the middle.

Honestly, Tony couldn't have arranged the scene more perfectly if he'd *tried*, and if it hadn't been for the rush they had left in, he might have suspected Loki of arranging it on purpose.

The newsreader was carefully level in her delivery of the story, doing an impressive job of relaying her line without worry or surprise. The ranger that was interviewed, however, was a completely different story.

"It was Iron Man," the ranger said, his words quick and panicked and not unlike how Trevor Slattery had spoken during his 15 minutes of fame. "It was Iron Man, the coffin came up and he tore from his grave. He swooped us, we thought he was going to attack— and then he flew away."

The newsreader confirmed that Iron Man *had* been spotted flying from the scene by multiple witnesses, so therefore, he had not simply been stolen by someone. They exchanged a few more words, though the ranger did not stray from his story— and when asked for any further comment, he only had one last, terrified thing to say.

"Iron Man has *risen*."

And, okay. Tony couldn't help the pleased chuckle. "Please tell me that's trending, J?" he asked.

JARVIS confirmed it, and to be honest— Tony was entirely unsurprised.

The newsreader kept her cool through it all, asking professional questions and ending her segment with the familiar suggestion that people stay tuned for more information.

JARVIS, though, like the rebel he was, did not stay tuned and changed the channel almost immediately, flicking over to a talk show rather than a more professional news story. Actually, it seemed that several of the morning talk shows had ditched their earlier schedules to report on what had happened— and the reason why became clear when Tony saw exactly who the show had managed to secure as a guest.

Steve sat on the couch with his back straight and his expression stony, setting Tony's teeth on edge. He was clearly there to speak about how *terrible* this was rather than to say anything positive or, you know, good for the Avengers' image.

It was a little strange to see him there, Tony had to admit. In the past, Iron Man was the one who had done all the media appearances, as Tony was more comfortable than any of the others when faced with a camera through the sheer force of practice, and was less likely to do something that would worsen the Avengers' public image even more than it already had over the past several years— years which had been littered with the destruction of property and loss of life.

And of course it made sense that they would need to pick *someone* to take the position, but... really? Steve? Honestly, if Tony'd had to pick between them all, he probably would have gone with *Thor*.

Steve might have been the literal poster boy for the US Army all during World War II, but he had never been a great actor. Tony had seen it with his own eyes— Steve was just so *honest* that anyone could see straight through him.

It was the only thing that made Tony wonder whether Steve actually *was* as trustworthy as Tony had always assumed him to be, whether he wasn't aware of the things that Tony and Loki had managed to uncover. But that only made him more certain that he *couldn't* trust him— because... if Steve didn't *know* about what was happening behind his back, and possibly among other members of his own team, then in a way... that only made everything all the worse.

Tony pushed thoughts of Steve away as the host of the show started with the usual greetings. When she asked Steve how things had been he did not respond with anything positive, or even a 'fine' as most people would. He merely offered her a sad smile that echoed through the hard determination in his gaze.

"It's been a difficult few months," he said in response to her question— a question that had clearly only been looking for a *quite well, thank you* as an answer.

The host looked torn between frustration at losing the bright atmosphere so quickly, and eagerness at getting a good story. "I can imagine," she said, her voice low and not quite disguising her curiosity. "You lost one of your teammates. That must have been hard."

"Of course."

"Would you mind telling us about it?"

"I'm sure your viewers have already heard the story," Steve replied, the skin around his eyes pinching tight.

The host smiled softly, her own eyes gleaming. "Remind us?"

Steve looked like it was the very *last* thing that he wanted to do, but he shrugged his shoulders and continued on anyway.

"Hawkeye, Iron Man, and myself were on a mission, the details of which I am not at liberty to disclose. We believed that we would be met with a much smaller force than we were, and we became overwhelmed. Iron Man was killed in the struggle, but Hawkeye and I were able to bring his body back home."

Listening to that, Tony's fingers clenched, his nails digging into the palms of his hands.

That wasn't what had happened, and Steve *knew it*— Tony could see the hesitation in his gaze, in the way he was beginning to consider saying something else and yet quite visibly holding

himself back. It was *obvious* that there was something he wasn't saying, and the host used it to go in for the throat.

“As I understand it, Tony Stark was kidnapped on that same mission. Why was a civilian consultant and benefactor on an active field mission, and why was the collection of Iron Man's body given greater priority than saving a civilian's life?”

Tony was distracted from the spike in his anger by the feel of fingers on his own. Although Loki's eyes remained on the screen, he gently smoothed Tony's right hand between both of his, running his palms over Tony's skin in a calming gesture that had his left hand uncurling as well.

Tony leaned into Loki's side gratefully, and turned his attention back to the TV in time to see Steve finally formulate an answer.

“When you're in combat, things are far more complicated than simple black and white decisions,” Steve said, his voice aching with emotion that he probably shouldn't be letting guide the words that the whole world would hear. “Hawkeye and I knew that we could get Iron Man to safety, but staying to try and recover Tony would have been a suicide mission. There was nothing we could have done without endangering not only ourselves, but Iron Man's as well.” Steve's gaze burned fiercely as he finished. “We believed that we still had a chance to save him.”

The host flashed a smile with far too many teeth— but, thankfully, she moved on. Tony recognised that instantly— Steve's answers had begun to move out of the bounds of the pre-agreed upon questions, and she couldn't risk pressing for more without shattering her reputation. But she was clearly happy with the response that Steve had already given.

Tony found it incredibly interesting as well, if only because of the way that even though he seemed to believe his own words, Steve looked like he regretted what had happened— though that was no doubt only due to the fact that Iron Man had already been ‘dead’.

Honestly... Tony was incredibly interested to see how Steve would respond if he ever learned the truth. It wouldn't be worth giving up on the secret though, not when he and Loki still had so very much at stake.

“Do you think Iron Man is still alive, after what happened last night?” The host asked next, her eyes remaining sharp despite the softening of her tone.

“I know that he was gone when we buried him,” Steve said firmly. “I know that I lost my friend that terrible day. But there is a chance...” Steve suddenly went pale, and he swallowed audibly as if trying to clear the nasty taste of bile from the back of his throat.

Oops. Yeah, okay, so maybe Tony should have thought a little more about how that would have looked. It would be, ah, a little *macabre* for people who still believed there was a corpse inside the suit to think about.

“There is a chance that someone more capable with technology than the Avengers managed to hack into the armour to get it to fly away. It was awful and disrespectful, and whoever did

it is going to face every consequence,” Steve snarled.

Tony was honestly *offended* that Steve thought one of his suits could be hacked just like that. *Ouch, Steve. Hit where it hurts, why don't you?*

“Iron Man was my friend,” Steve continued harshly. “And you have led me to what I came on here this morning to say.” Steve squared his shoulders, and spoke directly at the camera— and Tony felt those blue eyes boring into him like they were in the very same room. “Whoever you are, you will answer for what you have done. The Avengers protect their own, and we will not stop looking until we know who – and *where* – you are.”

“It would be interesting to see what they would do, if they discovered that Iron Man truly was stolen only by *Iron Man*,” Loki said amusedly, echoing Tony’s earlier thoughts. But Tony could do nothing more than stare at the screen, holding Loki’s hands tight enough that it probably would have hurt him, had Loki been a human.

It was a shame, really, wasn’t it? That Steve hadn’t cared this much about *Tony*.

Loki sighed then, and shifted one of his hands so that his arm was around Tony’s shoulders instead, holding him loosely but in a way that made Tony feel secure.

“Perhaps this is connected to the attack on Miami,” the host was saying. “Have the Avengers looked into Trevor Slattery’s claims that Tony Stark was on the scene there?”

“Tony Stark was kidnapped by terrorists,” Steve said firmly. “If he were free, he would come straight to us. He knows that we would help him.”

“No I bloody well don’t,” Tony muttered, and Loki ran a soothing hand down his arm.

“And what about the reports that Iron Man has been working with a... *demon*?” the host asked, her voice a little strained, now. “Reports from Arlington seem to match what Mr Trevor Slattery said he saw in the Miami attack. Multiple eye-witnesses saw a person surrounded by green light lift the coffin out of the ground and then vanish into nothing.”

“Ma’am,” Steve said flatly, his arms crossed and his very best Disapproving Frown™ etched across his face. “I think that if we start believing that Tony is stealing his own technology with a true demon of hell at his side, then we might as well start considering Santa Claus as a suspect as well.”

The interview ended there, after only a few more touches of small talk and the host awkwardly proclaiming that they had run out of time.

“Well, fuck,” Tony sighed as it trailed off, glancing up to see Loki still frowning at the screen. “That sucked.”

“It was certainly enlightening,” Loki said.

“That’s one way of putting it. They know that it wasn’t just Iron Man, that there was someone else there.”

“It might not be as bad as we think,” Loki replied, finally turning to offer Tony a smile.

“We can still work with this. They refuse to see the connection to *you*, but it is there enough that those who matter will see it.”

Tony groaned, and turned his head to bury his face in Loki’s shoulder. He knew exactly why this had happened, he could put his finger on the *exact* moment that their plan had gone to shit, but he really didn’t want to think on it.

He didn’t want to examine what it might mean, and what he might need to do about the issue.

“Sir,” JARVIS said, his voice gentle. “There is another broadcast that I believe you might want to see.”

Tony glanced up to Loki to check, and Loki’s lips pressed into a thin line.

“Put it on, JARVIS,” he said. “We will need all of the information we can get, if we wish to continue as we are.”

This time, Tony recognised the reporter– it was Christine Everhart, the woman that Tony would always feel indebted to for bringing Stane’s underhanded betrayal to his attention. Despite the way that she had always loved to go for Tony’s throat, Tony had a respect for her methods and her morals that he didn’t normally extend to parasitic members of the press.

But she was not the person that Tony’s eyes were drawn to on the screen– for sitting opposite Christine, wearing a sharp pant-suit and a polite smile, was none other than Pepper Potts herself.

She looked remarkably well put together, all things considered. Her eyes were bright and alert despite the slight crease between her brows, and her hair and make-up was as perfect and professional as it always had been since she had begun as CEO of SI. Her legs were tucked against her seat and crossed at the ankles, and her hands were clasped in her lap in a light hold that suggested complete and utter ease.

Compared to the picture Steve had made, she was far more pleasing to look at– but still, looking at her was like being punched in the stomach.

Seeing her so healthy, holding everything together far better than Tony ever would have been able to... well, he was proud, but... it was a reminder of the things that Tony had lost, a reminder of the friends he had been forced to leave behind when SHIELD had decided to fuck with his life.

Of course, it was equally as likely that she was falling apart, or – more likely still – that deep inside she was burning with an anger at what had happened, just waiting until she could somehow make a move. Pepper was a much better actor than Steve, after all, and more than capable of hiding her own thoughts. It was one of the reasons why she made such an incredible CEO.

“Ms Potts, it is an honour to speak with you today,” Christine said, and she honestly sounded like she meant it.

“It’s my pleasure,” Pepper said. “I know there are a lot of rumours flying at the moment, and there are a few things that need to be said. Thank you, for giving me the chance to say them.”

“You’re welcome,” Christine replied. “Now, Ms Potts, I’m afraid that I must ask— you were close with Tony Stark. Were you ever privy to his work with the Avengers?”

“Oh, I *am* close with Tony,” Pepper corrected. “And, not particularly. So much of what they do is classified, and of course, Iron Man’s identity is completely secret, in order to protect him and any possible associations or family that he may have.”

Christine did not comment on the second and supposedly more important part of her statement— at least, it would seem so to anyone not paying attention. “Are you saying that you’ve been in contact with him?”

“No,” Pepper said— and she hadn’t sounded at all surprised or at all thrown by that question. It was then that Tony realised that this must have been scripted— likely Pepper had specifically requested Christine, and the pair of them had worked out just what to say.

Tony couldn’t help the grin. *Clever, Pep.*

“Whatever it is that he is doing... if this *is* him, then I am sure that he has a good reason,” Pepper finished.

“And Iron Man?” Christine asked.

“What about him?”

“Well, obviously you have heard what happened last night in Arlington.”

“Yes, it was a terrible thing for someone to have done,” Pepper said, and Tony knew that he was only able to catch the glint in her eye because he knew her so well— and because he had been looking for it. “To destroy the final resting place of someone who gave *everything* for the good of others is a terrible thing.”

“Why do you think anyone *would* do such a thing?” Christine asked.

“The most likely explanation is that someone wished to steal the Iron Man technology,” Pepper said firmly. “With Mr Stark currently unavailable, that technology is private property under *my* purview. When the Iron Man suit has been recovered, then you can be assured that it will be placed back in the hands of its rightful owner.”

Tony’s eyes widened because— *wait.*

But Pepper wasn’t done.

“And whoever it was that stole Iron Man, know this. We are searching for you, and when we find you...” Pepper trailed off, and her smile turned sweet. “You will be given *exactly* the greeting that you deserve.”

Tony didn't hear the rest of the interview. His eyes were locked on the screen but even when Pepper looked away, all he could see was that sweet smile— seeming threatening, maybe, to anyone else, but... Tony knew better, he was sure of it.

She was talking to *him*, she *knew*, and oh—

“*Fuck*,” Tony said, rubbing his hands over his face, hardly noticing as JARVIS shut off the television. “This is *not* how this was supposed to go—”

“Calm down,” Loki said firmly. “We cannot fix this if we do not have clear heads. This is not your fault—”

“No, I fucked up,” Tony muttered. “I got distracted—”

“We both did.”

Tony glanced to Loki, and found that his expression was tight. Loki, of course, already knew exactly what Tony had been talking about, probably because he had been thinking exactly the same thing.

“We both allowed ourselves to become distracted by each other, and now we will have to suffer the consequences of that. And in the future, we shall merely have to learn to make sure that it will not affect us when we are in danger,” Loki said firmly. “We are lucky that this happened only while we were retrieving your suit, rather than when we were doing something far more perilous.”

Tony knew that Loki was right, but. Also.

“If it were something perilous, I don't think I would have been distracted,” he pointed out. “I'm not about to kiss you when SHIELD is firing on us—”

“That is not what I meant,” Loki said. He turned in his seat, sliding one knee onto the couch to face Tony properly as he slid a hand over Tony's shoulders to cup his cheek. “Anthony, know that...” He trailed off, his voice faltering.

“What is it?” Tony prompted softly. “Loki?”

Loki visibly steeled himself, drawing in a breath and gently stroking Tony's cheek before saying, “I would throw away every chance of revenge if it meant that I could keep you safe.”

“There's no point in destroying SHIELD if you're not there with me at the end,” Tony agreed. “I'd destroy the plan as well, if it was a choice between that and saving you.”

Loki's smile was soft, but worried. “We still must not let this become a weakness.”

“This is *not* a weakness,” Tony insisted. “Loki, you make me feel stronger than I have ever felt before. You make me feel like I could take on the whole world singlehandedly, but... you also make me *know* that I will never have to.”

Loki's expression slackened slightly, and Tony wondered if maybe he had said too much. After all, no matter how simple the thing between them felt, it was still *new*, and they were supposed to be taking it slow. They were still finding their footing, still working out where they could step— but so far they hadn't stepped wrong, and their explorations were as fun and as easy as they had always been. Because being together really was the easiest, most natural thing in the world.

And then Tony's worry melted away as Loki leaned in, and his lips brushed along the corner of Tony's mouth.

'You make me feel strong as well,' Loki said, his eyes still closed, his lips still lingering on Tony's skin.

"Then it's decided," Tony said, even as he leaned in closer. "We're not going to stop, and we're not going to let *us* become a problem, not ever. We'll just have to learn to trust in what we can do."

Loki smiled his agreement, and they lingered together for a little longer.

They *would* work it out, because together, Tony knew that they could do anything.



Retrieving Iron Man from the sky was not difficult.

Because, sure, the suit had a tracker on it, but all Tony needed to remove its influence was a Faraday cage. That was more than easy to set up— some wire, a few cable ties, a power source and then— voila.

JARVIS piloted the suit down to where Tony had set up the cage— in the middle of the Canadian Tundra, because why the hell not? And then, the moment the suit touched down, Tony closed up the top of the cage, activated its blocking capabilities, and then Loki took Tony in one hand and Iron Man in the other and transported them to the second Faraday cage Tony had set up back in their backyard in Italy.

Once the tracker had been removed, Loki asked Tony which country would cause SHIELD the most problems to visit. Then he drew a circle in the air with green sparks dancing between his fingers, and threw the tracker into it with a vicious grin curling his lips.

Tony got enough of a glimpse to see a few Russian flags through the portal before it closed, and he hoped that Loki had managed to land it somewhere government related. That would be fun. (Hopefully though, it, uh, wouldn't start a war or anything. Tony would feel a little guilty over that.)

Tracker dealt with, Tony finally lifted his hand and touched it to Iron Man's cheek, running his fingers over the freshly-painted helmet.

"Hello there, beautiful," he whispered. "Let's see what those terrible people did to you, huh?"

"Do you require a moment alone?" Loki asked.

Tony flashed a grin. “Aw, Lokes, you know I am totally grateful for your help in bringing him back to me.”

“Oh?” Loki asked. “Is that all?”

Tony’s grin widened as he stepped closer, and he tilted up his chin so that they were almost nose to nose. “Do you want me to show you how much I appreciate it?”

Loki smirked, and then their smiles were pressing together with tenderness at first. Then Tony thread his fingers through Loki’s hair and he deepened the kiss with an eagerness that spoke of too long a wait. It wasn’t their first or second kiss, nor even their tenth, but Tony knew that kissing Loki would be something that he could never get enough of.

It was several long moments later, when Loki’s head was resting on Tony’s shoulder and Tony was pressing his lips to Loki’s hair while they both caught their breath that they were reminded of what they were *supposed* to be doing.

“Do the two of *you* need a moment, Sirs?” JARVIS asked, and as he rolled his eyes Tony felt Loki’s soft laugh against his skin.

“Yeah, yeah,” Tony sighed, stepping away from Loki but entwining their fingers together to stay connected. “No need to sound so smug.”

“I am merely happy for you both, Sir.”

Despite the definite touch of *I told you so* in JARVIS’ tone, Tony still felt warmed by his words. It was a nice feeling, knowing that his AI not only approved, but was *happy* that Tony had chosen Loki to be with.

Once JARVIS had run diagnostics and confirmed that there was nothing wrong with the suit, Tony gingerly deactivated the Faraday cage. They waited a few moments, letting JARVIS work out whether any signals had started up again– and when they were sure it was safe *and* they had waited half an hour without any SHIELD agents charging down their driveway, JARVIS walked the suit inside the house and down to the workshop.

And then... Tony stared at it, somehow not entirely sure what to do.

He didn’t think that he could still *be* Iron Man, not right now, not with the way that the world was acting– not with the way that he felt so disconnected to everything that he used to be. Seeing Steve and Pepper had... it had changed things, but he didn’t feel the need to go running back to them, or to try and go back to his old life.

No, he couldn’t be *Iron Man*, but maybe he could let himself become something else.

The suit, of course, was too good not to use– but he didn’t have to keep it all. He tilted his head, considering, and still all too aware of Loki watching him carefully, still holding his hand. Well. Even if Tony changed the colour, he would be still so recognisable as Iron Man– after all, War Machine had proven that much.

The thought made Tony pause, and he glanced to the matte-grey gauntlets he had been using. They weren't the same colour as War Machine had once been, but there was something a little grating about it. He didn't quite feel *right* wearing Rhodey's colours, even if it were only a neutral grey.

He turned to glance at his partner in crime out of the corner of his eye, and when Loki caught his gaze... Tony knew he had his answer.

Perhaps it really was time for a change.



Since they had moved into the house, Tony had spent a lot of time in his workshop. Loki was always at his side these days, and whatever they created they created together. Sometimes, of course, they would be working on different projects, getting on with what they needed to do—but they always kept each other updated, always lending a hand—always fitting together like two pieces of a puzzle. But... sometimes, Tony would still feel like he was missing something. He had told Loki before that he felt like the workshop was too quiet, too still, and the feeling had only become worse.

Most of time he would be fine, but then he might ask to be handed something, and when Loki inevitably managed to place it into Tony's hand without knocking over five hundred different important items, Tony would just stare at the tool in his palm in shock. It was the same thing whenever he went to drink his coffee and he instinctively gave it a sniff before taking a sip to check it if it had received a complimentary shot of motor oil while he wasn't looking, or... like now, when he caught his finger on a sharp edge, and he wasn't suddenly assaulted with twenty-six different coloured band-aids being enthusiastically stuck to his forehead.

It was just the small moments like those that would give Tony pause, and his fingers would still for just a moment longer than necessary. And he stared at the tiny drop of blood welling on the tip of his left index finger, and for just that small moment... he *ached*.

"Are you all right?" Loki asked, and Tony glanced up from his chair to give Loki a small smile.

He didn't want to admit that he was missing DUM-E and U, that everything was almost happening too *perfectly* because even with a god of chaos in the room, there wasn't enough madness and mess to make his work feel as enjoyable as it always had.

But, he knew that he could cope. He knew that his bots were safe where they were, and he was *fine*. He had everything that he needed, but.

He still missed them.

Tony was still trying to think of the words to say when Loki's arms curled around his shoulders as the god leaned over him, his lips coming to brush at Tony's ear.

"Whatever you need, Anthony," Loki said. "I'm here."

Tony turned his head, letting his own lips touch to Loki's cheek. "I know."

Loki leaned down and took Tony's hand, rubbing his fingers over the small cut, and Tony's skin itched a little. By the time Loki pulled his hand away, Tony's finger was healed.

"You didn't have to do that," Tony said.

"I know," Loki said again. "But there is..." he trailed off for a moment, clearly thinking—until his green eyes brightened with the light of an idea. "I do not wish for you to get blood on your clothes," he said.

Tony frowned. "Uh." He glanced down at his shirt— he thought it might have once been a light grey, but it was blackened and greasy from disassembling Iron Man. "Loki, I think my clothes are beyond saving."

Loki's eyes narrowed, and then a blast of seiðr later and Tony was dressed in a green—

"*Loki*," Tony said sternly, trying really, *really* hard not to laugh.

"I think the dress suits your figure," Loki said thoughtfully. And when Tony's glare intensified, Loki sighed and reached out with his magic once again, replacing the emerald floor-length dress with clean shorts and a fresh, still green shirt. "There," Loki said begrudgingly, though his eyes betrayed the laugh that was bubbling to the surface.

Tony smiled in return. "Thank you," he said, knowing that Loki would understand he didn't mean the change in wardrobe.

"You can thank me by hurrying up," Loki said, taking Tony's hand and pulling him from the workshop. "There is... something that I would like to learn, and something that I want to see."

And even though Loki was pulling him away from something that he really needed to finish, he knew that in that moment, Tony would be more than willing to follow Loki wherever he wanted go.

Two pieces of cracked glass

Chapter Notes

First of all I'd just like to apologise to everyone whose comments I haven't replied to yet on the last chapter. I was sprinting all week with **STARSdidathing** and **Rabentochter** (and I'm doing Camp NaNo as well), and the friendly competition got a *little* heated. So... I haven't done anything other than write madly since last Sunday. Things should be a bit calmer now though, and I can get back to normal.

When Tony realised that Loki was leading him to the garage, he was expecting to be given directions. Loki was being a little secretive so he wasn't thinking he was going to get a *destination* but, being the only one between the two of them who knew how to drive, he figured that he would be the one to do the actual driving.

So, when Loki went and opened the driver's side door, it *was* a bit odd. But then, Loki could be a little old fashioned in his actions sometimes, the result of being raised a prince in a quasi-medieval realm— but at the same time he generally wasn't overly *nice*, and chivalry just... wasn't really his thing.

Never before had Loki held open a door for him.

So, you know— on the one hand, it made a hell of a lot more sense when Loki slid into the driver's seat himself, but on the other—

It made no fucking sense at all.

“Uh, Lokes?” Tony asked. “What are you doing?”

“I am driving,” Loki said. “Or, well. I shall be, once you have taught me how.”

Tony blinked. “*Why?*”

“It seems to be an important skill in this realm,” Loki said with a shrug. “I think that I would like to learn.”

Tony stared for a moment, and then blinked again, just to be *sure* that his mind hadn't made this up.

Loki did not appear impressed with his hesitation.

“Do you think that I cannot do it?” he asked, arching a brow in a challenge.

“*Of course* I think that you can *do* it,” Tony said. And while he could understand why Loki might want to learn, there was just one thing that made it seem a little unnecessary. “But you can teleport,” he pointed out.

“I am aware,” Loki replied, rolling his eyes.

“I just mean, why do you need to learn how to drive when you can just appear wherever you want?”

There was a moment where Tony was sure he was going to get a snarky answer, something along the lines of his powers being taken for granted, or making Tony walk the next time they wanted to hop across the Atlantic. But instead of the expected sarcasm, Loki’s expression was soft.

“You always appear to be enjoying yourself while you’re driving,” Loki said. “You have this smile that... well, I think I would like to see how that feels.”

And... how could Tony argue with that?

Well, he was a little stunned actually, because... the awe, the fondness in Loki’s tone was almost overwhelming. And the fact that Loki wanted to learn something he didn’t *need* to know how to do, just because it was something he could see Tony enjoyed...

Tony found himself staring at Loki once again in a mixture of confusion and affection, his mind stalling out just a little bit.

Loki rolled his eyes, though the smile playing along the edges of his lips was more fond than impatient as he said, “Hurry up, Stark, I told you there’s something else that I want to do, somewhere that we need to go. Are you going to get in, or shall I just go without you?”

Even though he was unsure as to whether his haste was at the thought of being left behind or of Loki learning to drive unsupervised Tony jumped into action, hurrying around to the other side of the car and climbing into the passenger seat. It had been a long time since anyone had driven him anywhere, and Tony found himself feeling a little nervous as he explained what Loki needed to do to operate the gearstick and the clutch.

(Because, okay, Tony *did* have complete and utter trust in Loki, but being in a car with someone who was driving one for literally *the first time* was always going to be a little nerve-racking, right?)

But it turned out that all of Tony’s worries were unfounded, as Loki picked up driving remarkably quickly, moving along the long winding driveway with ease. And once he pulled out onto the asphalt, he remained confident and at a steady speed despite the treacherous twists that are typical of mountain roads.

“You’re enjoying this,” Tony realised, watching Loki fondly.

“It’s not so different from flying,” Loki said, his smile bright.

“Flying?” Tony asked curiously.

“In Asgard, we often move around using longboats that fly,” Loki explained. “Some are steered with a rudder, but others have wheels like this. I’ve always enjoyed the freedom of it.”

Well, that made sense— because of course Asgard had proper transport. It wouldn’t be very practical to use horses all the time after all, even if they were more enjoyable, so he should have guessed that Loki had done something like this before. The thought made him wish that he could see Asgard, with its flying boats and golden spires— made him wish that he could see all the things that Loki had grown up with. Because even though the people there had treated Loki horribly, it was clear that he had some good memories relating to the place.

Tony wondered whether Loki missed it.

Loki leaned the road rules on the go, which probably *hadn’t* been Tony’s best idea, but Loki had refused anything else. He was adamant that they needed to get somewhere else, that the drive actually did have a purpose. Tony didn’t argue— Loki still hadn’t told him *where* they were going, but he seemed so excited, so full of innocent glee in a way that Tony so rarely saw that he wasn’t about to ask to ruin the surprise and lose some of Loki’s enjoyment.

When they reached the city, Loki parked the car with a look of concentration which Tony thought was actually rather adorable. At first, Tony considered offering to do it for him — because being noticed because they had scratched up someone else’s car was about the last thing that they needed right now — but he knew that Loki wouldn’t appreciate it. And indeed, Loki parked like a pro, sliding into a spot perfectly straight on the first go. Tony was both in awe and little jealous, though he supposed that having flown spaceships around for the past millennia or so had been more than enough experience for Loki to be able to parallel park.

Once the engine was turned off, Loki looked to Tony with a triumphant smirk.

“I said I knew you could do it from the beginning,” Tony pointed out with a light huff. “I never said anything otherwise.”

Loki waited for Tony to exit the car before going anywhere, and he took Tony’s hand as he led him through the streets.

It was a simple thing that Tony knew he would never be able to get enough of. The warmth of Loki’s fingers curled around his own was grounding, but in a way that was deeper than simply letting him know that Loki was there, that he was not alone. It was a reminder that they had decided to choose each other— not because they were the only choice, but because of the way that they fit together like two pieces of cracked glass, because of the way that they made each other feel.

Once again, Tony ached with the fact that they couldn’t do this as themselves, because while they could see each other’s faces, the rest of the world only saw a blonde man and a dark-haired woman. It would be nice, to be able to be themselves and be *together* out in the open without a care.

Tony pushed the feeling away, knowing that it wasn’t important. After all, it wasn’t safe for them now to show their faces openly— and the important thing was that *they* knew what this

meant. Nameless strangers didn't matter compared to that.

They went past several of the locations that they had been to before, but Loki's destination appeared to be somewhere specific, because he didn't pause his long strides or consider going any down any street that he wasn't sure that they needed to use. The single-minded determination was a little amusing, and in a way it was a little unlike Loki— because usually, he would be perfectly happy to just meander a little, to do what struck their fancy. But Tony didn't mind. He just enjoyed watching Loki's concentration, his lips moving as he muttered to himself under his breath.

Tony realised that Loki must have looked up directions, or perhaps asked JARVIS to provide him with some. This was not just a spontaneous outing to cheer Tony up— this had been planned in advance, and Loki had merely used Tony's need for a break as a perfect opportunity.

After perhaps a quarter hour or so of walking, Loki paused outside a building that they had not gone by during their previous visits into the city. Tony was confused for half a second, because it wasn't a restaurant or anything that he would have expected Loki to be interested in going to— but then he saw what was written upon the sign above the door, and he drew in a sharp breath.

Museo Leonardo da Vinci.

“You remembered,” Tony said, surprised and more than a little flattered.

“Of course I did,” Loki replied, his smile bright. “You sounded excited about it, so I thought that it would be a good place to visit, especially with everything that has happened these past few days.”

And, okay. Tony knew that Loki's memory was more than excellent, that he was capable of remembering things from centuries ago with perfect clarity. But on the other hand, Tony had honestly only talked about this museum the once, that first time that they had visited Florence. He hadn't been in a *rush* to come, because it wasn't like the museum was going to disappear, and it certainly wasn't like there weren't other things on his mind. And yet... Loki had *remembered*, had stored that information away just because Tony had mentioned that he wanted to visit.

A surge of affection moved through Tony's chest, and without another moment's thought, Tony turned from the museum, thread his fingers through Loki's hair and pulled him down for a kiss.

“Thank you,” he said, the words whispered against Loki's lips.

“You're welcome, Anthony.”

Unfortunately, the time of year meant that they did need to wait a while in the queue, but Tony was completely convinced that it was going to be worth it. He was glad that he and Loki had their method of silent communication, because he was sure that he would have

annoyed all of the other visitors with his constant stream of chatter about the things that da Vinci did.

When they finally reached the front, the girl at the ticket desk seemed thrilled as Tony greeted her in fluent Italian— he imagined that she was more than used to tourists, and happy to speak in her first language for a while. Despite that, Tony was happier still when Loki spoke to her, because hearing Loki speak to the locals in Italy was... fascinating. Tony had wondered about Allspeak before, when Thor had tried to explain it to him, but actually seeing it in action like this was something else entirely.

You see, normally whenever Loki spoke, Tony heard his words in perfect English, since that was his first language. But of course he could hear the girl at the desk responding to Loki in Italian, and if he concentrated, he could hear Loki's words as the same— a musical undertone beneath the words that he could switch between with enough of a focus.

It was weird but so, so fascinating, and Tony itched to ask Loki all about it. He especially wondered what Asgardian actually *sounded* like, or whether they even had a language anymore at all. Questions for another day, perhaps.

When they entered the museum proper, Tony was almost bouncing on the balls of his feet. da Vinci had been a bit of an idol of his since he was younger, for both obvious reasons and more subtle admirations. Of course, the structures inside were not built by da Vinci's hands, but they were of his *mind*, created from his drawings and plans.

Tony paused in the doorway and simply stared for a moment, his smile widening before he rushed forward toward something in the middle of the room.

“Loki, look!” he exclaimed, dragging Loki by the hand over to a large structure that he had spotted and recognised right away. “It's an armoured tank, just look at all of these gears!”

It really was impressive— to have thought of such a thing with animals as inspiration rather than the work of others, to be able to put all of it together through notes and drawings... it was mind blowing. Everything in the room was just so *interesting* to look at. The helicopter, the bombard, the propellers— hell, for the first time ever, Tony found himself getting excited about a *lawn mower*.

They probably would have made better time if they had started on the one side of the museum and then worked their way through methodically, but neither Tony nor Loki were one for doing things in a logical manner. And Loki didn't seem to mind as Tony darted from one thing to the next— because he followed right along, his grip on Tony's hand never faltering, his smile never once falling from his face.

From the moment they arrived, Tony had been half predicting that Loki would get bored. Oh, he didn't think Loki would say anything, not after he'd gone to the trouble of getting them there. But he was expecting for feet to drag and for eyes to glaze over as Tony spoke again and again about the kinds of mechanisms that were used. But Loki never did, seeming to hang on to Tony's every word, interjecting every now and then with a question or an observation of his own that would only make Tony's excitement soar higher.

There was just so much to see, so much to be astounded by. Tony paused before some of the structures for longer than others— those that were more complicated he mapped out in his mind, cataloguing it all. The flying machine hanging from the ceiling was especially impressive, and it was there that Tony found himself lingering the longest.

“Can you imagine?” Tony asked, staring up at the machine and probably causing a traffic jam from all the other visitors trying to move past— but he was so engrossed that he couldn’t really bring himself to care. “He created this over 400 years before humans finally managed sustained flight. Can you imagine what he’d be capable of if he were alive today?”

“I think I can,” Loki replied, and when Tony turned to him to ask what sort of things he imagined that Da Vinci would be able to create, he found that Loki wasn’t looking at the flying machine at all.

He was staring at Tony with the kind of amazement that Tony wasn’t used to seeing— because it was so very different from the *oh my god it’s Tony Stark* look, and nor was it the look that scientists got when he started talking about something revolutionary.

It wasn’t just that Loki was amazed by the things that Tony was saying, it was that he was amazed by Tony himself.

“The things that you have made are so very far from what anyone else could even begin to imagine,” Loki said, confirming Tony’s thoughts.

“I *have* been called ‘the da Vinci of our time’ before,” Tony said amusedly, his smile starting to grow.

“And I would say that’s accurate,” Loki agreed.

Of course, whenever it had been thrown at him by reporters he had dismissed it with a wave and a joke, because having such an interest in a historical figure would not match the reputation he had gained and took pains to uphold— because it was always easier to live his life the way he wanted, when there were no expectations.

(And it only proved how right he had been back then, at least about that— because the moment he became an Avenger and he was expected to be *good*, his life just became a whole lot harder.)

But even though he had never let anyone see it, he’d always felt a little spark of pride at the comparisons— though sometimes, he felt as though he didn’t deserve it.

Loki, though... the way Loki was looking at him made Tony begin to believe that maybe he *did*.

“The things you see,” Loki said, tilting his head. “I’ve watched you turn pieces of metal into something beautiful, and I know that you are even capable of creating something that’s almost alive.” He raised his hand, and brought it to Tony’s cheek for a moment. *‘You’re more amazing than I think you know. You make connections that no one else could notice. There must be so much locked inside your head that no one else could possibly comprehend.’*

It was the combination of the method of communication and the topic of discussion that gave Tony the idea— and the moment he had it, he knew that he could not let it go.

“Can I try something?” Tony asked, pulling Loki a little closer to him so that he could hold Loki’s hand in both of his own, curling their fingers together tightly. Then, for a moment, Tony closed his eyes, and focused on the familiar feel of Loki’s mind brushing against his own.

He had never really tried anything like this before— it was easy after so much practice to gently press against Loki’s mind and project his thoughts, but opening himself up? Well, that was an entirely different matter— at least, it should have been, right? Logically, letting someone *in* should be hard, since your survival instincts are generally screaming to do the exact opposite.

But, instead... when Tony felt the familiar tenor of Loki’s mind, he allowed his consciousness to slide along it, inviting Loki *in*, drawing him as close as he could until they were wrapped up in each other. It felt electric, exhilarating and comforting all at once. A sensation that was just so very *Loki* danced over every nerve ending, and something that felt very much like Loki’s seiðr curled around Tony warmly like a large fluffy blanket. And when Tony opened his eyes, it was almost a surprise to find that Loki’s arms were not around him tightly, that he was not wrapped physically in Loki’s hold as well.

Loki’s eyes remained closed, but Tony could *feel* Loki’s joy, his wonder at being able to take a look inside Tony’s mind. And as Loki’s happiness fed his own, both of them simply began to *radiate* with it. Tony could have stared at Loki’s enraptured expression forever— but that was not *why* he had wanted to do this.

So he turned and looked back to the flying machine hanging from the ceiling, and he allowed his eyes to run over every detail. In just a short glance he was able to analyse how the pieces fit together, the way that it would move if it was given the chance, the way that it could be *improved*. He pictured what he would have done differently, and how he could upgrade it with his own ideas and new technology. He imagined how it would feel to build, mentally stripping the machine down to the basics and then building it up again, piece by piece, unable to help himself and adding enhancements as he did so.

The picture in his mind’s eye was flowing from one to the next, taking it apart and putting it back together again, and the rest of the world was falling away as he focused in on this *project*—

They were jostled by the crowd trying to get past them, and Tony lost his grip on Loki’s hand. He shot the person a glare for it but, to be fair— they *had* been standing still in the middle of the museum for quite some time, staring up at one of the more popular exhibits.

Loki’s eyes were open wide by the time Tony glanced back across to him, staring at the flying machine as if he had never seen it before. And when he turned back to Tony, his eyes were gleaming bright.

“Your mind is incredible,” Loki whispered.

“So is yours,” Tony pointed out.

And even though they *were* still in the thoroughfare, Tony couldn’t help but lean in close. Their lips touched again, just a light brush of skin that shot warmth through Tony’s body. He felt like he could have stayed in that moment forever—

Provided, of course, that it were a little less *crowded*.

The moment was broken by a voice sounding from behind them, low but clear.

“Tony Stark.”

Tony turned instinctively, forgetting that he was supposed to look like someone else when Loki had been looking at him like he was Loki’s everything. And by the time Loki’s fingers clenched in warning, Tony had almost already turned all the way—

And when he saw who had spoken, Tony realised immediately that something was very, *very* wrong.

Visitors had already begun to scatter— not yelling, not *yet*, but decidedly unnerved and worried by the man who had somehow managed to get inside looking like an extra from *The Terminator*.

Even Tony thought that he looked completely and utterly terrifying. The lower half of his face was covered with a black mask that he managed to pull off a lot more convincingly than Tony had his own red one, and above it the skin around his eyes was smeared with dark makeup. His hair was brown and semi-long, only just brushing to his shoulders, and it was wild and unrestrained. But perhaps the most disconcerting of all was that his left arm appeared to be made entirely of shining silver metal, the shoulder decorated with a red star.

“Hey Peter Criss, I think you’re in the wrong place,” Tony tried. “The concert’s probably back in Milan.”

There was no response to the jest— and the guy hardly even reacted to being spoken to.

“Target identified,” he said, his voice flat and almost mechanical.

“Okay,” Tony said, glancing to Loki while trying to keep the other guy in his sights. “Something gives me the feeling that this is *not* going to end well.”

The assassin — for what else could he be? — didn’t appear to be carrying any weapons at first, but as he drew a thin blade from a wide black sheath pressed close to his vest, Tony noticed that he had quite a few on him— they were just hidden by the uniform black of all his clothes.

Loki’s armour shimmered into place as he pulled a dagger of his own from the air with a twist of his fingers, and he took a protective stance in front of Tony. Tony tried to step beside him, but Loki merely touched his free hand to Tony’s chest— then Tony’s green shirt was shimmering just as Loki’s armour had, transforming into his black, rune-etched coat.

The assassin was approaching with a kind of feral grace, his whole body shifting as one lethal weapon. Tony wasn't exactly happy that Loki was right in his path, but he knew that the god could defend himself— and he also knew that this was likely to get bloody.

“Everyone, get out!” Tony yelled, and while it probably was not as effective as he remembered it being when he was an Avenger and wearing a suit, it still did the trick. They couldn't see Loki's armour but they *could* see the blades— thus the yelling began and the crowd surged toward the door. Some were already tapping at their phones, and Tony hoped that they would be able to get away before the police showed up. Thankfully, the civilians gave the hostile group of three a wide berth, and they weren't anywhere near when the assassin suddenly quickened his pace and darted forward as fast as a snake.

The knife moved so quickly that Tony only saw a silver flash, but Loki was quicker— he leapt to the side and swung out with his own blade. The assassin tried to catch it on his metal arm but Loki anticipated the move, dropping the dagger to let it fall into his left hand and then using his now empty right to catch the metal fist in his hand.

The sound of metal hitting flesh sounded painful, but Loki didn't hesitate as he used his grip to twist the arm around the assassin's back, forcing him to his knees and then jamming the hilt of his dagger into the assassin's throat in a single, fluid movement. The man choked behind his mask and Loki flipped the weapon around so that the blade was pressed to soft skin.

“Who *are* you?” Loki snarled, his eyes blazing. “Who do you work for?”

Tony couldn't see the assassin's mouth, but he could hear a growl and knew that the man was bearing his teeth. Then, with a violent cry, the man yanked on his metal arm in a way that would not have been possible with one made of flesh and bone, pulling Loki down and *over*, and slamming his back into the ground.

Loki drew in a gasping breath, and the assassin was standing right over him, knife at the ready—

“Hey, asshole,” Tony yelled, holding up his hand palm forward. “Did you forget that he's not alone?”

It was days like these Tony was grateful for his own paranoia— he never went anywhere without a repulsor in his pocket.

The assassin dived to the side but Tony still managed to catch him in the legs with a blast, sending him tumbling to the ground. Tony dashed forward in concern but Loki was already up, shooting Tony a reassuring glance.

The assassin had rolled with his fall and was back on his feet as well, and there was a moment where the three stared each other down.

“Who sent you?” Tony asked, making use of the moment of silence that he wouldn't last to echo Loki's question. It was also something of a play for time, his hand which was free from a gauntlet brushing against the back of Loki's for a moment.

“They want me to kill you,” the assassin replied simply, adjusting his grip on his knife. “That’s all that matters.”

Loki was already snarling as the other man sprinted at them again, not seeming to care when his hair flicked in his eyes, just *charging* as if he wanted nothing more than to gut Tony open as violently and as quickly as possible.

Tony raised his hand and fired, forcing the assassin to roll away before making his dive for Loki. It was clearly that the assassin had categorised Loki as the larger threat, going for him first before making his move on his actual target.

Well, that was probably a mistake— it made him easy to predict.

Tony ran to the right, watching while the assassin thrust his knife forward as his body slammed— *through* Loki, the illusion flickering and vanishing to nothing. To his credit, the assassin didn’t fall, but he didn’t quite manage to regain his equilibrium either before Tony was firing on him. The assassin purposefully allowed his legs to swing to the floor, and then used his residual velocity to slide across the ground and behind one of the exhibits.

Tony dashed after him, pausing only when he reached the carriage that the man had gone behind, pressing his back against the side of it and holding his repulsor at the ready. He was expecting for the assassin to jump out from around the corner— but instead he leapt down from *above*, having been on the roof of the carriage. His boots slammed into the ground an inch from Tony’s own feet, and his eyes gleamed just as wickedly as the blade of the knife that was half a moment from being thrust into Tony’s flesh.

Tony stared at it anxiously, starting to worry—

Any second now, Lokes.

A dagger whistled through the air out of nowhere, and the assassin turned on the spot to snatch it before it could land in the back of his neck—

Which meant his back was turned as Tony raised his hand and shot him point blank in the gut before hurrying out of his cornered position. The assassin bent over his injury with a loud groan, incapacitated at least for a moment— and Loki appeared directly behind him.

Dagger raised, Loki stepped to the man’s right—

But the assassin had been playing possum— his metal arm snapped out the moment Loki was within reach, shoving *hard* at Loki’s chest, visibly knocking the wind from his lungs and sending him sailing through the air. Loki landed with a crash on top of one of the exhibits, shattering it to splinters. Tony felt his heart clench, although he knew that Loki would be all right— it would take a lot more than that to give him a serious injury.

“That was one of da Vinci’s tanks, you bastard,” Tony snarled, drawing the assassin’s attention again before he could get too close to Loki. Loki’s dagger was on the ground near the carriage, and it was in Tony’s sights as he made his way forward.

It seemed like the assassin *was* in pain— after all, Tony had managed to get him point blank. There was the sickly smell of burnt flesh in the air, but the assassin’s eyes were glaring viciously now, not the blank they had been before, as if *now* he was personally angry.

Good.

What followed was a mess, littered with explosive blasts and the clash of steel. Loki flew out of the splintered wreck of the tank to collide with the assassin, the both of them falling through a glass cabinet. That gave Tony the chance to grab the dagger off the floor, and by the time he reached the struggling pair they were back on their feet and the assassin was swiping and stabbing at Loki with vicious attacks. Loki blocked them all with his vambraces, but there was not enough pause in between for him to retrieve another weapon of his own. Tony fired his repulsor at the assassin’s feet, not wanting to risk hurting Loki when they were moving so fast—

“Hey, Reindeer Games, heads up!”

Loki caught his dagger by the hilt, and didn’t bother to slow its movement as he followed the arc and buried it in the assassin’s shoulder. The assassin responded by slashing out with his own knife, but the damaged shoulder slowed his movement and Loki avoided it easily.

The assassin was only the one guy, but it was ridiculous how difficult it was to beat him. Maybe it was the arm that was throwing Tony off— maybe he really was part machine. He certainly had the resilience of one, though he moved with the ferocity of a hungry apex predator stalking its prey.

Loki and Tony were tag-teaming— Loki flashing in and out, leaving illusions behind that would either serve as a distraction or bait. The illusions were always slightly different from the real Loki, with just a small change in the engraving on his pauldrons. Loki could have made them exactly the same as himself, but in order for he and Tony to be able work together seamlessly, Tony needed to be able to differentiate. This way, whenever Tony glanced to Loki’s shoulders, he knew that he could fire without prejudice, and the assassin was hit a few more times *through* one of Loki’s doubles. Of course, that meant that the exhibits were smashed to bits in minutes— Tony himself accidentally blasted the helicopter with a missed shot, but he tried not to let it bother him, focusing on the fight that had quickly turned brutal.

They managed to push him into an alcove, cornering him into the small space where the smashed remains of the helicopter littered the floor and crunched beneath their feet. The assassin was breathing heavily, bleeding in at least two places and very clearly struggling to keep his footing firm.

But that angry determination was still present in his gaze, and Tony realised— this guy was going to keep going until he actually physically *couldn’t*. They would have to cut the tendons in his legs before he stopped trying to get back up, and they would need to still his heart before he stopped trying to kill them.

(Tony wondered what his contractors had threatened him with, if the job was not done.)

So Tony charged his repulsors, steadied his breathing, and readied himself for the continuation of one *hell* of a fight.

Fighting hand to hand was almost impossible in such a small space. Elbows jostled and shoulders pushed together, and then the assassin pushed them back out of the alcove—

And then, they had the space to move— and oh, did they move. The assassin's hands were flying so fast that Tony was struggling to keep up. He knew that he wouldn't have stood a chance by himself, but with Loki there as well the assassin's attention was divided— he was outnumbered, and they were pressing the advantage.

Tony and Loki were able to anticipate the other's movements well enough that they never got in each other's way, stepping around attacks and covering when an advantage could be gained. When the assassin tried to bring his knife up to plunge it into the underside of Loki's chin, Tony shoved his hand forward and slammed the palm of his gauntlet into the knife, sending the weapon clattering to the ground and forcing the assassin to retrieve another from the sheath on his back— which gave Loki the time to kick the knife away and aim his own dagger at the assassin's shoulder. The assassin ducked and aimed a slash at Tony's gut, but it was redirected by a golden vambrace— which left Tony free to grab at the man's prosthetic shoulder.

Tony wrapped his fingers around the metal arm and fired and fired and *fired* again—

Green seiðr curled around Tony's grey gauntlet, and then he fired one last, *powerful* blast—

The arm was blown to pieces—

And the hilt of Loki's dagger came down *hard* on the assassin's skull.

For a moment, the assassin merely swayed— but then his eyes rolled back into his head, and he dropped like a sack of bricks.

They stood over him with their chests heaving, and Loki's eyes were almost glowing with triumph and the violent glee of a battle won. Tony touched the fingers of his bare hand to Loki's wrist.

'*We can't kill him,*' Tony said.

Loki shot him a glance. '*I know.*'

'*And we still don't know who sent him.*'

Taking a step forward, Tony nudged at the assassin's foot, wanting to make sure that he wasn't playing possum again. Then, just to be safe, he pulled all of the knives out of the sheaths that seemed to decorate the assassin's bullet-proof vest, throwing them far out of the man's reach. That done, he began to search for pockets, just looking for a clue, for something that could provide them with just that little bit more information. Another piece of the puzzle perhaps, to help them put together the truth of all that had been tormenting them.

But... Tony found nothing. It was incredibly frustrating, and just stacked the pile of bad news far too high. It was maddening and angering and... well, it was another fucking reason why they needed to keep the assassin alive.

At least, Tony thought bitterly, this one didn't use cyanide first.

There was *something* that could be revealed though, and so, almost out of spite, Tony reached for the assassin's mask and tore it from his face—

And then he froze, sure that he must be mistaken— because, there was no way that was...

“Okay, I'm going to come right out and say it,” Tony said, staring down at a face that he recognised from old news reels— a face that belonged to a man who, by all accounts, had fallen to his death in an icy ravine over 70 years ago. “This is probably *not* a good thing.”

Don't invite the fox

Standing on top of the world was the perfect place to go and think.

Natasha had always liked high places— somewhere that gave her a good vantage point, somewhere shrouded in shadows and difficult to reach. Since she was young she had always relished when she was able to hide from everyone else, and if she could feel the freedom of the wind through her hair as she did so – a sensation that was incredibly coveted in that place where they were trapped inside for far too many hours of the day – then the height was made all the sweeter.

Sometimes, she would often come to her favourite place on the roof of Avengers Tower to find that Clint was already there— and then she would silently head back inside, knowing that he too also found comfort in the sanctuary. She knew that he did that sometimes for her as well, she had heard his quiet footsteps retreating— but neither of them ever mentioned it by a silent agreement and an understanding of what they had each been through. They both knew what it was to need a little bit of space.

Today, though, she was on the roof for another reason— but that didn't mean that standing there with her face raised to the clear sky, her hair whipping comfortably in the breeze didn't help her begin to think through all that had occurred in recent days.

They had gone so long without anything, with not a single lead, and now all of a sudden it was like they were being overwhelmed. It was nothing *overt*, nothing that screamed out with clues galore— in fact, everything that had happened had only brought more questions.

The events in Miami likely would not have even pinged on their radar if Tony Stark had not been mentioned by name. It had seemed— well, not like an *accident*, but like an attack by a rival terrorist group perhaps, for surely the Ten Rings and the Mandarin had plenty of enemies that would have gladly taken the shot.

But then the Mandarin – or rather, *Trevor Slattery* – had claimed that the person who had attacked him was Tony Stark, and that he was working with a demon.

Steve had wanted to dismiss it, just as the media and the court of public opinion had done. After all, it was madness to believe that a green, magic wielding demon had risen from the pits of hell to aid Tony in a mission of revenge. That was entirely ridiculous... wasn't it?

Tony was supposed to be imprisoned. It was an awful thought, but it was the one that Natasha had chosen to firmly believe for a long time— because if he weren't, then he was likely to be dead instead. However... She knew that Tony *was* more than capable of making an escape, because he had done it before. He was just a civilian, but he had grown up creating brutal weapons and outthinking everyone who underestimated him due to his age, and then as he had grown older, he had become only all the more efficient when it came to dealing with people he did not like. She knew that there was a chance he could already have escaped, and she also knew that Steve was naïve for believing that Tony would come to the Avengers when he did.

The first time Steve had voiced the thought, he had been met by a snort and a derisive laugh from the one among them who knew Tony best.

“To you?” Rhodes had asked incredulously. “Why would he come to you? You’re the one who *left him there*.”

To be entirely honest, Natasha found herself agreeing with Rhodes. If she were Tony, she knew that she wouldn’t know where to go, either. Being trapped for so long can do a lot to a person’s mind – she would know, after all – and to a suspicious person like Tony, who had already been betrayed far more times than he deserved? Going to the people who were one of the reasons why he had been caught in the first place would probably seem like a suicide run.

If Tony had somehow escaped in the bloodbath that occurred in that mansion, then he was likely hiding under the radar, using every trick he knew to keep himself from being noticed– and, despite his flamboyant personality and his propensity to stand in the spotlight, Tony Stark knew an awful lot of tricks.

However– if Tony was free, then it wouldn’t make sense for him to be behind the theft of Iron Man. Tony could head straight to his home in Malibu and collect a suit which would be far easier to get his hands on than one buried under the ground. Or, he could have simply made a new one. And while Natasha sometimes thought a lot of things about Tony Stark that were not entirely flattering, she knew that he would not be the sort of person to brutally dig up his friend’s bones and then send them hurtling through the sky. No, they had ruled Tony out as a suspect fairly early on in the investigation, which had left them with exactly nothing at all, save the ramblings of one of the rangers.

That would mean that the two incidents were unrelated– except for the reported presence of the same kind of otherworldly being as in Miami, with similar descriptions given by all those who had arrived on the scene just in time to see the thieves leave in a flash of green.

They just didn’t have enough information to come to a proper conclusion. SHIELD had been aware of the robbery while it had still been in progress. The thieves had unwittingly set off all the alarms, and even though they had *somehow* managed to deactivate the explosive device that had been in place as a last resort, there was nothing left at the scene that gave any clue as to how they had managed any of it. Oh, the Avengers had rushed to cemetery the moment SHIELD alerted them to what was happening, but they had not been fast enough.

The robbery was impossible. It looked like the casket had risen from the grave itself, the ground having been broken from below with no evidence of digging having occurred from the surface. The inconsolable ranger had not been able to say anything other than the fact that Iron Man had come back to life, clearly traumatised by whatever it was that he had seen. But then... perhaps, if the rumours of the ‘demon’ were based in fact– well, that would bring all of the pieces together rather nicely. They had seen people with magic before, after all. It wasn’t something that they could truly rule out, not anymore.

When they arrived and saw the mess that had been left behind, Natasha had simply been surprised, but not overly so. After all, Iron Man was not only a dangerous weapon– the suit would be worth more than a fortune, if someone knew the right place to sell it. She had

thought that SHIELD's protection would be efficient, though clearly that was far from the being the case.

Steve, on the other hand, had been in shock at first, going a deathly quiet that Natasha had at first thought was grief— but then she quickly realised that it was, in fact, complete and utter rage.

It was an interesting thing, to see Steve Rogers angry. He didn't yell, and he didn't shout. He spoke with a deathly calm that rang with something dangerous, because Steve knew who he was, and he knew what he was capable of. There was no need for an outburst when Steve was going to redirect all of that anger toward the person who was responsible for it.

Natasha knew that Steve and Iron Man had been friends, but she hadn't realised that the bond ran *quite* this deep. But when Steve had suggested the epitaph for Iron Man's headstone, a lot of his reaction made sense. Because she realised that a lot of what he had done since they had accepted Iron Man's death stemmed not only from grief, but from guilt as well.

Steve's emotions made him volatile, and she and Clint agreed that it would be best to try and *use* that emotion to their advantage. So they subtly convinced him to be interviewed, to give his statement on television to the world about *why* the Avengers deserved to be in on the fight to save their teammate. It hadn't... gone as well as they'd hoped, but it hadn't gone as badly as it could have, either. It wasn't enough to convince the Pentagon, but it hadn't made anyone angry, either.

But then, everything changed. It was just one more attack somewhere in the world, another tragedy among the hundreds of thousands that occurred every day. It was something that was seemingly completely unrelated to the other events, save for one thing—

The name Tony Stark had once again been mentioned, even though the inventor himself was nowhere in sight.

Once again, it was difficult to find a connection, though Natasha's gut feeling was telling her that there was one *somewhere*. The previous attacks had taken place first in Miami, and then in DC. Opposite ends of America, yes, but at least they were still in the same country. This third incident, though, had occurred in *Italy*, and it was completely different from any of the others.

In the other two incidents, it was clear that they had occurred because the perpetrators *wanted* something. This one, through? It had happened in a museum full of tourists, and it didn't seem like anything could have been gained by it— other than the result of the fight itself. So, either the scuffle had been the result of two enemies running into each other at an inconvenient time, or... someone had been tracked— one side of the fight had followed the other, and attacked them the moment they caught up with them, uncaring of the public setting.

The moment Natasha saw the footage from the museum's security cameras, watching in Fury's office with Clint by her side, she had known immediately that it was the latter option.

“There’s a chance that this is bigger than anyone else realises,” she said, her voice quiet, her eyes glued to the screen. “I know who that is, and I also know that *he* would not be hired out to a terrorist organisation.” She exchanged a loaded glance with Fury. “There has to be something larger at work.”

“I agree,” Fury said. It was enough of a surprise to hear those words from Fury’s lips that both she and Clint remained quiet as the director zoomed in on the video and gestured to the two who had been fighting the Winter Soldier. “Those people are on our database,” he said.

“I don’t recognise them,” Natasha replied with a frown.

“I do.” Clint’s eyes were narrowed, and his frown betrayed deep thought. “They’re Thor’s friends. Asgardians. I recognise them from New Mexico.”

“Facial recognition is a match,” Fury confirmed. “We have no idea why two Asgardians were fighting in an Italian museum, and...” He shot a glance at Natasha. “If that *is* the Winter Soldier—”

“It is, Sir,” Natasha confirmed. “I would never forget what he looks like.”

It was testament to how well they knew her and how much they respected her skills that neither of them pointed out that the assassin was wearing a mask throughout the footage, and that his eyes were covered with dark makeup. And it was clear that the Asgardians had removed the man’s mask at the end of the fight, but they were both standing between his face and the camera, so there was not a good shot of his face on the footage. But they knew she was able to recognise someone through far more than that.

“Then you’re right, Agent Romanoff,” Fury finished. “There likely *is* more to this than we originally thought. And we cannot discount the possibility that Stark is involved in this somehow, and we need to make it our priority to recover him if he is.”

Natasha nodded, but Clint had another question.

“So, do we have permission to begin working on *this* mission, Sir?” Clint asked, his terse tone betraying his frustration at having been left out of the hunt for Tony thus far. Because of course, Steve was not the only one of them who felt guilty over what had occurred.

“I just need you to bring Thor back to Earth for questioning. I know that you have a way to do it,” Fury replied. “For now, that is all that is required.” He levelled them with a heavy stare. “Is that understood?”

They both nodded, easily catching the implication.

They were not to do anything other than get Thor down to Earth... for *now*.



Clint did most of the explaining when they returned to Avengers Tower, and Natasha showed those who were present – Steve, Bruce, and Rhodes – the footage on a SHIELD-issued, heavily encrypted tablet. They were all grim-faced as they watched, and Natasha knew that

their thoughts were along a similar line to what hers had been. They all knew that they still had so very little to go on, that in terms of what this meant for Tony, the connection was incredibly flimsy so as to almost not be there at all—

Save for that shimmer of green magic that flowed from one of the Asgardians, enhancing his fighting and destroying the Winter Soldier's metal arm... and the blasts from the other Asgardian's hands that somehow looked all too much like repulsors.

There was *one* explanation that Natasha could think of, but she didn't like to consider it, save for keeping it in the back of her mind as a possibility that could not be dismissed— because if Tony had given in to torture as he hadn't before, and had been forced to make weapons for terrorists against his will, then SHIELD and the Avengers were in for a lot more trouble than any of them had realised in the past.

No, the only links were so loose that it could be explained as a result of their overreactive and desperate imaginations, making connections where there weren't any to make. They didn't have the information, but... this was their *only* lead. It was tentative at best, but since they had *nothing* else, Natasha knew that it was worth a try.

That only left them with the question of who would go up to call Thor back to Earth, like lighting up a godly bat signal.

Steve had been voted out immediately, as had Clint, and Bruce had looked away from all of them during the discussion with that classroom 'please don't pick me' aura around him, so Natasha had merely stood up with a sigh and made her way to the roof. The elevator was as silent as always when she stepped in, but it still took her where she needed to go after a simple polite request. It was a little unsettling, knowing that JARVIS was there but just refusing to acknowledge them all— knowing that, with all he had control over, it would be an easy thing for him to turn on them and make their lives hell.

She had never worried about it before, knowing that Tony would never do such a thing. But perhaps, with Tony either gone, in hiding, or still locked away— with JARVIS apparently taking far more liberties than any AI ever should... perhaps there was something to be worried about.

But, for now, she had a task to complete, and the moment she had stepped onto the roof she tilted back her head and shouted to the sky, just as she had seen Thor do before.

“Heimdall!” she called. “We need Thor's help. We would like to politely request that he joins us as soon as he can!”

It felt more than ridiculous, yelling at the sky, but she would just have to hope that the message would get through. It was what Thor had told them do should they ever need him, after all.

That left her waiting, her mind wandering, just enjoying the not-quite-fresh air and the cold breeze from the top of the Tower. She was able to look out over almost the entire city, feeling more than a little like she was on the top of the world. She stood rather close to the edge, wanting to leave more than enough space for Thor to come down on the Bifröst— close

enough to feel the beginnings of vertigo, but not so close that she risked tumbling over the edge.

Her musings were broken by the sudden rush of colour, the crack of the universe smashing into the concrete roof of the Tower. She didn't want to cover her eyes – she had been hoping that she would be able to see the Bifröst itself – but it was so bright that she was forced to look away. And by the time she turned back, Thor was already striding toward her over the smouldering burn mark that the Bifröst always left behind.

“Hello, Thor,” she greeted. “It's been a long time.”

“Agent Romanoff,” Thor replied gruffly, and she supposed that she should just be glad that Thor had remembered enough about her not to call her *Lady*. “What has happened? Why did you need to call for me?”

“Come down and see the others,” she said, not keen on going through the whole thing herself– not when there was the chance that she might be able to get someone else to do it for her.

And sure enough, the moment the elevator doors opened to let the two of them into the living room, Clint was already on his feet and talking.

“Where have you been?” Clint asked. “It's been a year!”

“In the time after Loki broke the rainbow bridge, the Nine Realms fell into chaos without Asgard able to keep the peace,” Thor explained. “So, from the time that Odin repaired it with the Tesseract, I have been leading the excursions to return the Nine to peace and prosperity.”

“Is it just me?” Bruce said, his voice a stage whisper clear enough for Natasha to hear, even though he was leaning toward Rhodes on the other side of the room. “Or does that all sound incredibly and violently imperialistic?”

“It's not just you,” Rhodes replied, his voice at least a little bit quieter though no less unimpressed.

Thor, thankfully, didn't seem to notice, or perhaps he simply chose to ignore what they were talking about.

“What is it that I have missed while I've been away?” he asked again. “What news is there?”

Thor's expression fell as they rotated through explaining all that had happened since he had left– Tony's capture, Iron Man's death, the new restrictions over their actions, and all of the events of the past few days. His eyes filled with tears that were first of grief and then of enough anger to match Steve's, burning bright and fierce.

“So, you have called me to help you fight the people who have taken Stark,” Thor summarised.

“Yes,” Steve replied, just as Natasha said–

“Not quite.”

Thor glanced between them, but when Steve looked down at his hands, Thor narrowed his gaze on her.

“There was an incident yesterday in Italy,” she said. “It was dealt with by the local police, not something that we would usually worry about— but it hit our radar because two of the people involved were in our files as persons of interest.”

Thor frowned. “And why do you need *my* help for that?” It wasn’t said in a way that was arrogant or dismissive— he seemed genuinely interested in how the situation was worse than it looked.

“Here,” Natasha said, picking up the tablet that sat on the coffee table and walking over to Thor. “Look at this, and tell us if you see anyone you know.”

Thor stared down at the security footage with a crease between his brows. The beginning just showed the tourists mingling through the museum, busy due to the time of year and its location in a city that bustled with tourism. There seemed to be a bit of congestion in the middle of the room, two people that were stopped in the way of everyone else— and that made it terribly easy to notice when people began rapidly moving away from someone approaching from the back of the museum. His gait was distinctly predatory, and his militaristic dress coupled with the mask and the metal arm was more than enough to have the tourists running in the opposite direction.

The security footage had no sound, and the man’s mask prevented lip-reading. But a recording from one of the tourists who had deemed it more important to video than to call the police, as well as multiple witness statements, confirmed what had been said.

“Tony Stark.”

The woman that was half of the couple in the middle of the room turned to face the Winter Soldier, her expression one of recognition. The assassin drew his weapon first, followed by the blonde man who seemed to pull a dagger from nothing before taking a protective stance in front of the dark-haired woman. Then the woman gestured for the tourists to leave while the two men engaged in a vicious exchange of flashing blades.

“I do know them. Sif and Fandral,” Thor said as they watched the ensuing fight, his frown deepening. “That is impossible. I only just returned home from fighting beside them upon Vanaheim, they could not have been here.”

“That’s why we asked for your help,” Natasha replied, trying not to show her surprise. She wasn’t sure if she entirely trusted Thor on his word alone – not after how strongly he had attempted to defend Loki during the invasion – but he did appear to be honestly befuddled. And if they were not Thor’s friends, then... who were they? “We don’t know what’s going on here, but there has to be more than it seems.”

“Perhaps...” Thor frowned, watching the way that the blonde man fought— and then, at the first flash of green magic, Thor’s eyes widened. “That’s impossible.”

“What is?” Steve asked curiously.

“That,” Thor said. “That magic. It is exactly the same colour as my brother’s.”

Natasha felt her breath catch.

No.

“Fuck,” Clint said, his whole body going tense. “Thor, please tell me you have more than one brother.”

“I’m afraid not,” Thor replied. “But as I said, it should be impossible. Because—”

“Because Loki is supposed to have been locked in a deep, dark pit second only to the deep, dark pit that the key was thrown into?” Bruce asked weakly.

“Yes,” Thor replied, though his expression was still confused—Natasha wondered if Allspeak had translated that strangely. “Of course, he should not have his magic, but the colour of that *seiðr*, combined with the way that he is fighting with a dagger—especially the way that he threw it... Fandral is a swordsman, and as such he would never throw his weapon. But I have seen Loki execute that movement many times before.”

There was a terrible silence for a moment while everyone processed that, putting the pieces together, noting that if Loki really was behind the green magic then... chances were that he had been at all *three* of the scenes, forging that connection they so desperately needed to find. If Natasha had not been processing it herself, then she easily could have predicted that Clint would be the one to speak up first.

“Of course this situation only had to get worse,” he groaned. “Yeah, sure, let’s throw in the guy with the mind control powers, the one that tried to enslave the entire planet. Because why not?”

“It would explain how they managed to get Tony to make weapons for the girl,” Steve said, and Natasha felt a little glad that she hadn’t been the only one with that thought.

“She has likely been disguised by Loki as well,” Thor commented. “He is a master illusionist. Making a person appear to be another is one of his favoured tricks.”

“Then we still don’t know who she is,” Bruce started— but the thought was disrupted as Clint asked—

“What I want to know is, why the hell did Asgard let him go? We almost killed ourselves catching him, and for *what?*”

Thor’s eyes narrowed. “Be careful how you speak of my people, Agent Barton,” he warned. “Our system of punishment may seem strange to you, but I assure you that the Allfather’s word is just.” Then he paused. “However, there does appear to have been a mistake. Loki’s powers should have been stripped when he was exiled.”

“Exiled?” Natasha asked sharply. “We were led to believe that he would be *imprisoned* on Asgard.”

“No, my father informed me that Loki’s punishment was to be sent back to Midgard,” Thor told them. “I assumed that his exile would be as mine was, turned into a mortal and forced to live here on your Earth until he learned the error of his ways.”

There was a moment of silence before—

“Are you saying Odin treats Earth like a naughty corner for his kids to work off their anger in?” Clint demanded. “What the hell did we do to deserve that?”

“It is a fitting punishment,” Thor tried, but before he could say anything else, Steve decided to take the opportunity to offer his own opinion.

“You really think it’s fitting to send him down to Earth, to the planet that he invaded, just so that he could attempt to invade us *again*?” Steve asked incredulously. “Where is the logic in that? You don’t invite the fox *into* the henhouse.”

“It is the way things have always been done,” Thor said. “The Allfather’s word is—”

“Yeah, well, maybe it shouldn’t be,” Clint snapped. “This is our home, not a rehab centre for psychopaths!”

It was starting to look like a fight was about to break out, and Natasha was just preparing herself to take a deep breath and pull Clint out of the way of a lightning bolt when Rhodes cleared his throat loudly.

“Not that watching you guys squabble like a pack of hungry geese isn’t fun, but if it’s Loki, then I’m leaving,” Rhodes said, standing from his seat and smoothing down his jacket.

“Where you going?” Steve asked.

“The Pentagon,” Rhodes replied. His gaze flashed to Natasha. “You said Fury told you that if these are all connected to Tony, then you’re going to have permission to work outside the States, right?”

“He *implied* it, but no confirmation,” Clint muttered, shooting Thor a glare before moving to sit back down.

“He will most likely allow us a looser rein soon,” Natasha added. “Nothing set in stone, but I believe it’s more likely than not.”

“Then I am going to go and inform the Pentagon that the Avengers are back on active duty, and that I am willing to act as liaison in this matter,” Rhodes said firmly.

“Sorry to interrupt, Colonel Rhodes but, is that wise?” Bruce asked. “We haven’t been given an official go ahead or anything—”

“You will,” Rhodes cut in. “The theft of Iron Man’s armour and the attack in Miami took place on US soil, so the Avengers would have been within their bounds to respond then—which, I guess you did, at least for the second thing. We have a related incident now in Italy, which means that this has gone international—”

“It will be difficult to prove that it’s related,” Natasha cut in. “The only connection we have is Loki, and even that is only on—”

“But it’s enough to warrant investigation, and given the size of what the Ten Rings have already managed to do, along with the publicity surrounding Iron Man and Tony at the moment, I know that I’m going to be able to swing it.”

Steve rose from his chair, his expression open and raw. “You mean that we’re going to be able to get back in the game?”

“I mean that I’m going to make sure that the Avengers are granted permission to join the hunt,” Rhodes said. “So suit up, everyone. We’re going to work out what the hell is going on, and we’re going to bring Tony back.”

Natasha doubted that it would be that easy, but she had seen the look on Fury’s face, and she knew the fallout that had followed the robbing of Iron Man’s gravesite. This was growing larger by the moment, and it was getting to the point where SHIELD *and* the Pentagon were going to want to use every resource they had to begin cleaning things up, regardless of the additional mess that would form and need to be swept under the rug later.

But for the others, none of that mattered. Steve’s gaze was determined, and Clint looked like he was already mentally choosing which type of arrow he would use to destroy the people who had taken Tony. Bruce didn’t look particularly pleased with the proceedings, but there was a fire in his eyes that proved he was ready to help. Thor hadn’t been there for any of it, but he was still reeling from only *just* having learned of the death of someone he had probably come to think of as a friend. And even though Thor hadn’t known Tony well, the thought of Loki somehow being involved seemed to be more than enough for Thor to throw his full power behind helping them. Despite their lack of information, they were all ready to go.

They still didn’t know *where* Tony was, but they had *something*— and finally, the Avengers were going to be allowed to give all that they had to bring him home.

Natasha just hoped that everything they didn’t yet know wouldn’t end up blowing back in their faces.

One foot on his pyre

The sound of the sirens was deafening. It was coming from close enough that they should have been able to hear them for a while, but they had been so focused on the fight that it was only once it was over that they became aware of the approaching problem.

With all the blaring noise it was difficult to think, but Tony did know one thing.

“We can’t leave him here,” he said, glancing up from the prone figure on the floor to look at Loki, echoing their words from before. “And we can’t kill him.”

“We’re going to have to take him with us,” Loki muttered.

“We can’t do that, either,” Tony pointed out. “Out of all the people who are after us, I wouldn’t put it past any of them to have put a tracker on him.”

“I do not believe that we have a choice,” Loki replied, his eyes flashing, his voice fast. “Do you not wish to know *how* this happened?”

“Of course I do,” Tony snapped. “Loki, he found us. I don’t know how, and I don’t know *why* —”

“The why should be obvious,” Loki replied— though his expression was curious, not dismissive. “You know something else about this, don’t you?”

Tony’s eyes flicked to the door, knowing they didn’t have a lot of time— he could see the reflection of the blue flashing lights coming through from the reception. They only had *moments*.

So, Tony spoke quickly. “His name is Bucky Barnes. He fought in World War II with Cap, some seventy years ago. He’s supposed to be dead.”

It only took Loki a moment to process that— a testament to how insane their lives had become, Tony supposed. Although, perhaps, as a prince of a far-off realm and a practitioner of magic, Loki was used to that sort of thing.

“Then we really do need to bring him with us,” Loki insisted. And Tony was about to point out that, uh, that still probably wasn’t the best idea, when Loki spoke again. “Anthony, do you have another safe house? Somewhere else that no one knows about?”

“I have a few, but none that Rhodey and Pep aren’t aware of, and there’s a chance that Pepper is checking them,” Tony replied. The news broadcast had at least suggested that Pepper knew to look for him, at any rate. “And I haven’t checked any of the others. We’d either have to leave him somewhere to be cautious, or we’d have to go in blind.”

Given what had just happened, Tony knew that neither of them were particularly keen on running any risks. But they both knew that they needed to make a decision, and fast—

something that was only proven further when they heard a tinny voice from outside, speaking Italian through a megaphone.

“You inside the museum, you are surrounded! Leave your weapons and exit with your hands raised, or we will come inside and arrest you by force!”

Tony gripped Loki’s arm. “We need to go *now*—”

“Where?” Loki asked. “We cannot just go anywhere—”

“We might as well go back home,” Tony said. “It might be compromised already, but at least there we know what protections we have, and if more come then we’ll be in a solid position.”

Loki nodded, though despite taking Barnes with them being Loki’s idea, he still appeared to be equally hesitant about bringing an enemy into their own home. But they could hear the door opening, the movement of too many feet—

“Are you okay to take the both of us?” Tony asked frantically.

“I shall have to be.”

Tony didn’t like that Loki had to lift Barnes over his shoulder, but at least the metal arm had been destroyed, making it less likely that Barnes would be able to do any damage without a weapon.

And honestly, Tony was kicking himself. He should have known that something like this could happen, he should have had a backup plan in place, somewhere for them to go if they were found. That he hadn’t was a terrible oversight that they were now suffering the consequences of— and if it turned out that Barnes had already told someone else where they were, or if he had a tracker, then they likely would be suffering those consequences for quite some time.

The thought of a tracker gave Tony an idea, and as he took Loki’s hand in his bare one, he let Loki know silently—

Loki’s seiðr cut them through to Yggdrasil, and he led the way home. They landed right in the middle of the Faraday cage, which still remained out the front of their house. It seemed that at least in this case, Tony’s laziness in regard to cleaning up had actually done them some good.

It sliced away the fears of Barnes being planted with a tracking device, and it meant that there was no reason to worry about him transmitting their location some other way— though there was, of course, the chance that he had done so already. It was something that they needed to find out as soon as they could, and while it wasn’t going to be pretty... Tony was sure they would be able to get the information out of him effectively.

There was nothing left inside the cage – Tony had, at least, collected the tools he had used to examine Iron Man – so Loki simply allowed Barnes to fall to the floor, tendrils of green seiðr curling around his wrists and ankles so that he would not be able to move.

“How long do you think he’ll be out for?” Tony asked.

“How am I supposed to know?” Loki replied.

“Oh, I just thought that since you were the one who hit him, you might have some idea of how hard you did it,” Tony teased.

“I know very little about Midgardian anatomy,” Loki replied dryly.

A tacky response along the lines of *well, I could teach you all about the human body if you want* was right on the tip of Tony’s tongue, but he held it in. As much as it would be meant as a joke, it wouldn’t be entirely without weight, and Tony didn’t wish to move things toward the awkward.

So, instead, he moved a little closer and examined Barnes’ shoulder, his fingers hesitant at first but then more sure as he pushed back the material of his half-jacket. The metal was fractured at the break, the ends of wiring and sharp material were singed where the arm had been completely destroyed by a combination of tech and magic. It looked painful– the seam where the arm connected to flesh wasn’t smooth, the line raised and jagged, as if the metal had somehow been soldered to the skin. Tony knew what it was to have something foreign attached to his body– instinctively, his hand raised to his chest, rubbing over the hard and familiar lines of the arc reactor.

“I don’t know enough about medicine to even make this comfortable for him,” Tony said gruffly, leaning away. “What a shame.”

“If the pain is too much for him to be able to speak with us, then I should be able to relieve some of it,” Loki said. “Somehow, however, I doubt that will be the case.”

Tony was about to ask whether it would be possible to wake Barnes with magic instead when Loki moved up to stand beside him, one hand brushing lightly over Tony’s waist while the other reached up to press over the hand on his chest.

“I wish there was something I could do about this,” he whispered.

Tony’s lips quirked. “Don’t worry. I’m more than used to it.”

A small crease formed between Loki’s brows, and his eyes remained soft for a moment. But he didn’t say anything else, and reached forward to press the fingers of one hand to Barnes’ temple, the other curling around Tony’s and squeezing for a moment before falling back his side.

Barnes woke with a sudden gasp, his head snapping up and his eyes flying open. His gaze flicked around with the immediate alertness of someone who was used to being in dangerous situations, and then narrowed in on Tony and Loki, assessing and yet somehow empty at the same time.

“James Buchanan Barnes,” Tony said slowly, crossing his arms over his chest. “Back from the dead.”

Barnes did not react, and he did not move. His expression remained entirely blank, staring straight forward with dead eyes that seemed to hold nothing at all.

Tony bared his teeth, and leaned forward. “How did you find us?” he asked.

Nothing.

“Who sent you?”

Tony knew that no level of intimidation was going to work, not on a man like Barnes. He could see it in the blankness of his eyes, in the way that he held himself despite his missing arm, despite the wound in his side.

Speaking of that wound, it certainly didn't look pretty— Tony knew what a repulsor could do, even one that was not quite as powerful as those in his suit. It looked like it would really *hurt* if Tony pressed against it, and for a half a moment, he considered what that might be like.

He imagined the gruesome power, yet, the difficulty of how it must feel. The sensations of purposefully hurting someone who was restrained, to see the pain in their eyes, the *hatred*, and to know that the only way to draw out the information that they needed was to make that pain *worse*. To make it so incredibly unbearable that even the hardest of men would beg for it to come to an end.

Tony knew that he could do it. He knew he was more than capable— Barnes was already wounded, both there on his side and also due to the remains of his shattered arm. It would not be hard to bend around the broken ends of the wires, to cause an electric kind of pain that would singe the ends of every nerve for a very long time to come. To program the pieces that were left so that Barnes was always suffering, without a respite, constantly charging and changing without any chance to grow accustomed to the way things were, leaving him in an excruciating state that would never allow an inch of respite. Oh yes, Tony most certainly *could*, and if it were their only option, Tony knew that he *would*.

But as things stood at the moment, there was another choice that sat in the back of his mind, one that was marginally more palatable. Although, he was still loath to ask, because he remembered the look on Loki's face as he had gone into Trevor Slattery's mind. He remembered the fear in Loki's tone back when he had described what had happened to him during the attack on New York, and the panic every time Loki thought he had invaded Tony's dreams without permission. He didn't want to put Loki through any of that again, but...

'I know you don't like doing it,' Tony said, his fingers brushing the back of Loki's hand, his tone gentle and apologetic. *'And I wouldn't ask, but... Loki, we need to know.'*

Loki did not complain— he did not even flinch. His expression was hard as he stepped around Tony once more, and despite his obvious reluctance, there was no hesitation as he bent down and pressed the palm of his hand to Barnes' forehead.

Barnes flinched backward, baring his teeth, but the seiðr binding him held firm, not letting him retreat nor reach up to try and attack Loki in return. And Tony didn't want to be a

distraction, but he knew that this was something Loki truly struggled with, so he stood close behind Loki all the same, offering support with a light touch to the small of Loki's back.

At first, nothing happened beyond Loki's expression of utter concentration and Barnes' attempts to break free— but then Barnes froze entirely. His eyes widened under Loki's hand, his whole body tensing and going completely rigid—

Then Barnes let out a horrible, ear-splitting *scream*, and Loki tore his hand away and stumbled backward as if he had been burned.

“What happened?” Tony asked instantly, positioning himself instinctively between Loki and Barnes, despite not having a single clue as to what the fuck had just happened. Barnes had stopped screaming the instant Loki removed his hand, but he was still breathing heavily, his chest heaving, his eyes squeezed so tightly shut that the veins in his temples were visible below the skin.

“There's something in his mind,” Loki rasped, his eyes dark. “Some kind of block that I can't break through, not without shattering whatever remains of who he is.”

Tony frowned, then his eyes widened in realisation. “Whatever remains... Loki, are you saying he's been controlled?”

“No,” Loki replied. “At least, not in the manner you are thinking. He is not under constant watch, and there is no one pulling his strings. But he has been forced to think in a certain way, his memories hidden, everything that makes him who he is stripped away until all that remains is the desire to complete his mission as instructed.”

So, he had been brainwashed then. Tony grimaced, and glanced back down to Barnes.

“I know that he was ordered to kill,” Loki continued. “But that is all I can see. He is so focused that I cannot even see how he managed to find us.”

“That's not your fault,” Tony said immediately.

“I know,” Loki said, his voice softening a little. Then he held out his hand his front of him and closed his fist, his smile turning down into something focused and determined. “Do not worry. I will still be able to make him talk.” His fist glowed green for a moment, and when Loki opened his fingers, sitting in the palm of his hand was the pink ring they had acquired in Miami.

“You're going to use *that*?” Tony asked, the idea not quite settling right.

“We used the other one to our advantage before,” Loki replied. “How is this any different?”

Because we're not desperate.

Using the orange ring to hide themselves during their flight from Turkey had been their only option, but to use this one now when... Well, in a way, this was their only option as well, wasn't it? After all, their safety could be compromised— they needed to know whether they

could expect more people to come after them. But using that... *thing* so directly on another person... it just felt wrong.

But when Tony looked up at Loki, he was struck with the sudden realisation of what could happen if they *didn't*. Looking at Loki in that moment, at those bright green eyes and the full cheeks, he remembered what Loki had looked like in the cell, gaunt and pale like he already had one foot on his pyre. Loki's body still had not recovered entirely— he was still terribly thin, and he still ate in portions that were far smaller than they should be, preferring to snack and graze throughout the day rather than being able to sit through a full meal. Sometimes, he still flinched if he wasn't paying attention when Tony placed some food in front of him. Even with all the time they'd had to recover, there was still a long road ahead, and every moment was a reminder of what they had been through.

Tony would give almost all that he had to get revenge for what those people had done, and he would give all that he *was* make sure Loki never had to suffer through anything like that again. And if keeping them both safe meant using the ring on Barnes, then... well, the price could go a lot higher, and Tony knew that he would still be willing to pay it. Even if it left a terribly bitter taste in his mouth.

“Okay,” he breathed. “Tell me how this is going to work. Are you going to fix him?”

Loki's gaze flickered to Barnes, and he took Tony's hand with his spare one so that the assassin would not be able to hear what they were saying.

'The ring isn't powerful enough to fix the damage entirely,' Loki explained. *'I will merely encourage him to break his silence for now. I could add more compulsions on top of what is already there, but that would only make the situation worse. In order to fix his mind, he is going to have to work toward it himself.'*

'I doubt that he's going to want to,' Tony muttered. If Barnes *was* all Steve said he was, and if there truly was still something of that man left deep inside, then he likely was going to hate all that he had done while not in his right mind.

Although, Tony had to admit— he was sceptical. Was there a way to fix something which was *that* broken?

Well, he supposed they had to try— at least insofar as reaching the information that they needed, at any rate.

Loki drew in a deep breath, and Tony shifted a little closer as Loki slid the ring onto his finger.

“Okay?” Tony asked.

“It feels... heavy,” Loki said. “Nothing like the Mind Stone. This feels more forced.”

He didn't say any more, and Tony stood beside him to offer support as Loki raised his hand. His wrist was bent back, his palm forward as if he were firing a repulsor, and the ring began to glow as Loki drew on its power.

“Speak,” Loki said, the word laced with the authority of command.

“Mission report,” Barnes whispered, his eyes glassy now. “Tony Stark. Target located. Mission, elimination. Status, interrupted.”

Loki’s teeth clacked together. “Anything else?”

“Loki of Asgard,” Barnes continued, and Tony leaned forward slightly. “Orders, engage only if necessary. Target to be taken alive.”

Huh. Clearly, *Tony* was too much of a nuisance to run the risk of letting him live, but they still considered Loki too precious a commodity to kill outright. Maybe they thought that killing Tony would be enough to bring Loki to his knees.

Well, looking at the fire that was currently blazing in Loki’s eyes, Tony knew that if that were the case, then they were very, *very* wrong. And the very thought of *why* they wanted Loki alive was more than enough to push Tony over the edge as well, and he glared down at Barnes angrily.

“How did you find us?” he snapped. “Did you tell anyone else where we are?”

“Two known Asgardians spotted in Florence, Italy, days after the destruction of the İzmir facility, and then on multiple occasions after,” Barnes stated. “Investigation was deemed necessary. The Asgardian’s vehicle was tracked to a final location, but the location itself proved impossible to reach from any angle of approach. The next time the Asgardians were seen, they were tracked. One showed recognition to the name of Tony Stark, and was in possession of Iron Man technology.”

Tony knew that Barnes was probably talking about the gauntlets, but he couldn’t help but press one hand to his chest once again.

“Risk calculated,” Barnes finished, his voice impossibly robotic. “Mission proceeded.”

“And did you *tell* anyone?” Loki reiterated, angling himself so that he was once again between Tony and the near mechanical figure on the ground.

“Mission incomplete,” Barnes stated. “Report has not yet been made.”

Tony felt his breath leave him in a gush, and he closed his eyes for half a second.

Thank god.

If Barnes had not told anyone, then for now, they were safe. *For now*. However, if Barnes had been able to track them through Loki’s disguises, then there was a chance that someone else would be able to as well. From now on, they were going to have to be a lot more careful.

And there was one more question that Barnes had yet to answer.

Tony stared down at him, still brimming with anger.

“Who sent you?” he asked, thinking that he already knew the answer, but wanting to hear it nonetheless. “Who ordered you to attack us?”

Barnes actually looked up then, his gaze sharpening and dark eyes sparking with something that was almost *alive*. His lips twisted with the words, enunciating every syllable with a terrible, drawling snarl, and the sound of it cut straight down to Tony’s bones.

“*Hail HYDRA.*”

Bitten by the sharp teeth of terror

Chapter Notes

So, I wrote 8K of this today. And I'm going to be brutally honest— while I would be perfectly happy posting an 8K chapter, I couldn't be bothered editing that much, so I split it in half. (Apologies to certain people who I told about certain things that were happening, it will be in the next chapter instead. Uh, oops?) On the plus side, it means I can flesh out some of the stuff happening in the next chapter, which should be fun.

I hope you enjoy!

That night, Tony couldn't sleep.

No matter how hard he tried, lying there in their bed with Loki at his back and strong arms around his waist, he could not calm his mind.

There was a threat not only on the horizon, but *inside* their house. Every time he closed his eyes, he felt like he was back in their cell, with that blinding white light and the knowledge that anyone could come barging in at any moment. It was more than enough to keep him in a constant state of alertness, making sleep impossible.

It meant that he was constantly turning over every thought, reanalysing everything they had done not only that day, but since the beginning.

The most frequent visitor into his mind, however, was James freaking Barnes. They hadn't been able to get anything more out of him— he would talk to them whenever they asked, spilling the truth as he knew it, but nothing else that was new.

It had left them with the same problem that they'd had back at the museum, because they *knew* that there was more hidden away in that head, hidden behind the shroud that HYDRA had placed there. HYDRA, a fucking long dead organisation that was supposed to be the incarnation of evil. Great.

It hurt his head to even think about.

And speaking of the brainwashing... if Barnes wasn't entirely in his right mind, then Tony wasn't too keen on doing any more harm than they had to.

The hope was a long shot, but... he just couldn't shake it.

So, they weren't going to kill him, that option had long since expired, had never really been a choice in the first place. But... they didn't exactly have anywhere to put him, either.

The house was meant to be a place to hide, not a base of operations. There were no holding cells, nowhere that was strong enough to contain someone of Barnes' calibre. They could lock him in a room, but... well, there would be nothing to stop him from just punching his way through the door, or even through a wall. Even without the metal arm, Tony wasn't willing to underestimate him. He'd spent the better part of the past year dealing with people too powerful for their own good, after all.

Then Loki suggested using the orange ring, and that felt almost worse than when they had decided to use the pink one— because the thought of that orange energy dancing over a locked door actually made Tony feel sick.

“No,” Tony snapped. “We’re not going to turn into *them*.”

“It is an asset at our disposal,” Loki argued. “I would be foolish not to use it—”

“We *are* using it,” Tony pointed out. “But to use it in that way just makes me feel like... like we’re not any better. Like in trying to rid ourselves of these monsters, we’ve just become the monsters ourselves.”

“He tried to kill us,” Loki said firmly. “I cannot allow even the slightest chance of his escape to remain. Anthony I can’t...” He paused on that, swallowing thickly. Loki raised his hand to brush the back of it over Tony’s cheek, something vulnerable in his eyes that Tony had been seeing more and more often. “I do not want to see you hurt,” Loki continued, his voice raw. “Not ever again.”

“We’re a right pair,” Tony sighed. He wanted nothing more in that moment than to reach out, to draw Loki into his arms and to comfortingly run a hand over Loki’s hair, but that wouldn’t really do anything to help.

They both knew that what they were doing held risks, but they also both knew that they couldn’t stop. In order to keep each other safe they had to step into harm’s way, and Tony realised with a sudden jolt that it was affecting Loki just as much as it had been affecting him.

But with Barnes right there, they didn’t have the *time* for comfort. That could come later—right now, they needed to decide where on Earth they were going to put him.

And for them to be safe, and to keep Barnes both close and contained, there really was only the one option.

“Okay, we’ll use the ring,” Tony said. “But *only* until I can come up with a better solution—”

“If it is truly bothering you, then I could ward the room with my seiðr,” Loki said, his hand falling to his side, his eyes skittering away from Tony’s gaze. “I will be able to stop him from leaving—”

“No,” Tony said again, shaking his head. “You’ll exhaust yourself—”

Loki frowned. “I am stronger than you think—”

“Really?” Tony’s lips curled up into a smile. “Then I’ve got no idea *how* you haven’t already taken over the planet, sweetheart, because I already think that you’re pretty fucking strong.”

Loki seemed thrown by the sudden shift in the argument, the tiniest flush of pink staining his cheeks, almost unnoticeable save for how well Tony knew him.

“Very well,” Loki said. “I merely do not wish to see you upset—”

“And I want you to *conserve* your strength,” Tony added, running a frustrated hand through his hair. “You’re right. There is no point in wasting energy when we have something we can use. I just...” He stared down at the ring again, and his expression twisted in difficult disgust.

“I know,” Loki sighed. “But it will not be for long.” He gave Tony a smile. “I know you’ll be able to think of something better in no time at all.”

Loki’s faith in him had flooded Tony’s insides with warmth, but it hadn’t entirely fixed the problem. Loki had knocked Barnes out and transported him to one of the spare bedrooms—one with an en suite, even, so that he would be considerably more comfortable than they had been during their capture. Then Tony watched as Loki focused on the ring, the stone glowing as he weaved orange power and green seiðr together to ward the whole room, so that Barnes would not be able to get out.

Seeing that orange shimmer over the door before it settled back down to something invisible had probably been another catalyst for Tony’s inability to sleep, now that he thought about it.

He knew that even if he did manage to fall into rest, he would only end up dreaming of their escape, of the blood dripping down the walls, of Loki lying prone and still on the ground. He would remember the way it had felt to plunge a knife into a living person’s flesh, and to raise his repulsor to a scared face and *know* what it would mean to fire— and be glad about it.

Every moment, every dream. Everything running through his mind was reminder of *how* he had reached this point, and while he wouldn’t change a damn thing about what he had done... the pain that *they* had been through was too much.

Sometimes, he would see the Chitauri weapon fire, Thing 1 and Thing 2 laughing in the background as Tony’s screams echoed through the cell, as Loki’s eyes turned as empty as polished glass. Sometimes, he would see Loki turn blue only to fall with the flash of a blade, with the sharp crack of a gun—

Other times, he would be asleep and wake up to find that Loki had wasted away, that he had starved to nothing but skin and bones and ash. He would lie cold in Tony’s arms, quiet and unresponsive, and Tony would be left to hold him tight until the living breathing *real* Loki could pull him out of his nightmarish hell.

No, he couldn’t sleep. It was easier to just lie awake, to smooth his thumb over Loki’s wrist, feeling his pulse, listening to his breathing.

It was soothing in a way that nothing else ever could be, knowing that Loki was safe, that he was peaceful. Tony wondered if this was normal— if this was what it meant to care for

someone that much. He'd never felt this way about anyone else, not even Pepper— when they had been together, he had enjoyed lying together, had felt safe and comfortable with her pressed against him. But he'd never felt this desperate itch, this flutter all through his body that gave him the heavy sense that something was wrong, that something *could be wrong* every moment he didn't have Loki in his line of sight.

Oh, he knew that wasn't entirely *healthy*, but he couldn't help it— and he didn't entirely mind. He and Loki were better together. What reason would they ever have to be apart? And so long as they remained close, then he would always have that reassurance. He would always *know*.

The thought brought a soft smile to Tony's lips, and he turned one of Loki's hands over in his fingers, smoothing down over the lines and just enjoying the feel of skin on skin. He lifted it to his mouth and brushed a soft kiss over the inside of Loki's wrist, then to his palm. Loki didn't stir. Tony knew the god was normally a rather light sleeper — they both were, a result of the way they were interrupted at random during their captivity — but these days, Loki seemed to know he was safe when Tony was in his arms.

Normally, it would be enough to soothe him to sleep as well— but not tonight, not with his mind a mess, his nerves all shot, an assassin down the hallway, and every inch of his body alert and tense.

It meant that there was no way he was ever going to be able to sleep— but it also meant that he noticed *immediately* when Loki's slumber began to change, when his hands gripped tightly at Tony's shirt, when his breaths turned to pants and his heartbeat felt much too fast.

Loki never screamed or made any kind of loud noise in his sleep. It seemed that there was something in his past that had taught him to be silent, although whether that had been the cell or something from before, Tony did not know. It could have been either, it could have been both— Tony only knew that Loki had been through far too much, far more than he deserved.

The moment Tony realised what was happening, he turned in Loki's arms so he could wrap one of his own around Loki's waist, the other coming up to smooth gently over Loki's hair.

"It's okay, Lokes," he said, hoping that Loki would be able to hear him. "It's okay."

Usually, that would be enough.

But on that dark night, it didn't seem to help— Loki was shaking now, his whole body trembling against Tony's. So Tony slipped his hand under Loki's shirt, stroking the bare skin just above Loki's hip.

'It's okay,' he said again. 'I'm here. You're safe.'

Loki whimpered near silently, his eyes still closed, not waking.

Tony knew that he could just wait, that he could just hold Loki close and rock him through the rest of the nightmare. But the thought of leaving Loki to deal with the shadowed corners of his mind by himself wasn't something Tony could cope with.

No. Loki always pulled Tony from his nightmares, and if this one was bad enough that it wasn't releasing Loki from its grasp, then Tony was going to take the plunge and help him pull free. He wouldn't ever leave Loki to deal with something like that alone.

Tony leaned up slightly, shifting on the pillow. They were already so close, so entangled that it didn't take much to get where he needed to be, and then he pressed their foreheads together with a gentle firmness, his eyes falling closed.

It was easy to reach out for Loki, easy to fall all the way into his mind even though this was the first time that Tony had tried to do so himself.

It was an odd sensation, because he was still aware of his body— he could feel the press of Loki in his arms, the feel of Loki's breath against his cheek, Loki's skin under his hand. Yet he was also standing in the middle of their destroyed living room, amongst the wreckage of what had once been their furniture, staring at the dark-clad figures in the centre of it all.

Barnes should not have been there, and it was only through reminding himself that this was *Loki's* dream that Tony was able to keep from panicking himself. Barnes looked just as he had in the museum, his dark clothing undamaged, his silver arm shining brightly, his metal fingers fisted tightly in Tony's hair.

And a few feet away, on his knees and staring up at Barnes as if he were *begging*, was Loki.

Tony's double was staring at Loki pleadingly, a streak of blood running down his temple. He was wearing the same as Tony was— the clothes that Tony had fallen asleep in that very night, as if Barnes had plucked him right from their bed.

Right from Loki's *arms*.

"I'm sorry," Loki was saying. "I'm sorry, I know I shouldn't have. Let me— hurt *me*, please, let him go. He hasn't done anything to you!"

Barnes' only response was to pull a wicked knife from its sheath, and then he brought the blade to Tony's neck.

"No," Loki groaned— and it looked like he was trying to get up, but was frozen in place by an unseen force. "No, it's me you want, let him *go*—"

The knife dragged over skin, Tony's expression twisting horrifically as a line of bright red was slashed across his throat. It was more than deep enough to be fatal, the blood immediately beginning to spurt from the sliced artery. A horrible cry tore through Loki like a vicious storm, his whole body shuddering, lurching forward.

"Lokes!" Tony shouted. "Loki, it's not real!" He felt like he was running through quicksand, which was ridiculous because it wasn't even his dream. Fuck magic. It looked like it was difficult for Loki to draw his gaze away from the scene in front of him, but he managed— and then the moment he saw Tony, Barnes and the bloody corpse disappeared, and Tony's feet stumbled over the ground, freed from whatever had held him back.

Tony made it the rest of the way in a heartbeat, falling to his knees in front of Loki, making soothing sounds in the back of his throat and reaching for Loki almost desperately. Despite the fact that this was a dream, that they weren't really there— that Tony could feel himself clutching at Loki outside, out in the real world—

Well, this was real as well, wasn't it? It was more than real *enough*, and as he drew Loki against his chest, it felt hardly different to if they had done it outside of Loki's mind, as if they really were embracing. There was an added current between them, something that felt akin to the way their minds pressed together whenever they engaged in one of their silent conversations.

It was the same and yet a little different to the way that Loki pulled Tony from his dreams— maybe all the sensations felt more muted, because when they were in Tony's mind it was everything he lived with all the time, but here... Well. Everything was shiny and new and so, so Loki— and yet, all of it was tinged with the scent of fear.

“Loki, this isn't real,” Tony said. “I'm right here, and I need you to wake up, okay? I need *you*.”

Loki's breathing was heavy, and he was clutching at Tony like he didn't want to let go. Tony realised that Loki was *afraid*— they had never stayed this long in one of Tony's nightmares after his fear had been dispelled, but Loki was holding on to this one because he was worried about what he might find when he woke up.

Tony was so completely out of his comfort zone. He wasn't used to being in Loki's mind, his every experience of this had been the other way around, but... well. He might not be used to mind magic, or whatever the fuck this was, but comforting Loki? *That* was something he knew how to do.

So he held Loki close, running his hands over every part of him that he could reach, letting that spark continue to surge between them, drawing them together and calming Loki down.

“Can you follow me?” Tony asked, his voice a whisper.

“I will always follow you,” Loki replied, the words a little muddled, as if he had said them without thinking. His hands were clutching the back of Tony's shirt like he was afraid Tony was about to disappear, and Tony knew that Loki wasn't going to let go any time soon.

“Okay then,” Tony said. He wasn't entirely sure *how* to get out of this, because... well, he'd never had to do it before, had he? He had the feeling that if Loki just woke up it would solve the whole problem, but it wasn't like he could force Loki to do so.

Well, in that case, he'd just have to work it out himself. That, at least, was something he was more than familiar with.

So he closed his eyes, buried his face in Loki's hair and breathed him in, focusing on that electric feel, on how everything was *different*. Because he wasn't breathing in Loki's hair, their foreheads were pressed together— and they weren't kneeling on the ground, they were lying together on their bed.

As he began to move himself back toward his own body, as the physical sensations became stronger, it felt... as if Loki wanted him to stay, but like he wasn't going to be forced. The feel of Loki's mind all around him was comforting, not sticky, not drawing him back. And as he finally returned to himself, he felt it as a gentle yearning.

Then Tony opened his eyes, and he met Loki's terrified gaze with a soft smile.

"Hey there, snowflake," he said, leaning back to touch his lips to Loki's head instead, his fingers resuming their strokes over Loki's waist and hair.

"Anthony," Loki whimpered. His hands were shaking as he raised them to Tony's cheeks, smoothing them first over every inch of Tony's face before sliding down and pressing against his chest, either side of the reactor. "*Anthony.*"

"Shh," Tony calmed. He shifted so that he was sitting up, and then he tugged Loki close again, pulling him into his lap so he could hold him against his chest, rocking him back and forth. "It's just a dream, you're all right. I'm here, you're safe."

It took a few minutes for Loki's breathing to calm, and through it all, his hands remained clenched into Tony's shirt, clinging as if to let go would hurt. He had his ear pressed to the front of Tony's left shoulder, and he knew that Loki was listening to his heartbeat.

Tony hummed gently and held him close, knowing that the best thing he could do in that moment was just to *be* there, to let Loki reassure himself that all was well.

And as Loki finally began to relax, Tony felt his own breathing begin to even out in response, as though they were caught together in a tangled web, as though he couldn't be one hundred percent unless Loki was all right, as well.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Tony asked, and Loki shook his head, keeping it pressed to Tony's chest. They remained quiet for a few more moments, just holding each other, listening, calming, breathing, reassuring.

"You are getting better at this," Loki said, his voice a little hoarse but lacking the pain from before.

"I should hope so," Tony whispered, running a hand through Loki's hair. "I've had a lot of practice."

"No, I mean..." Loki sighed and leaned into Tony's hand, his eyes falling closed again even as he began to explain. "You were able to enter my mind, and to leave it without any difficulty, and without any mess."

"It *was* easy," Tony said, frowning even as he continued his soothing strokes, the gesture comforting him just as much as it was Loki. "And I... don't think that was just me."

"Our minds are connected more often than not," Loki said. "I believe... we have become familiar with each other, and that has lowered our natural mental defences."

"Isn't that dangerous?"

“No,” Loki replied. “The mind is not like a door— once open, not everyone can pass through. The connection has been forged between us, not anyone else.”

“A connection?” Tony asked, confused.

“It’s nothing permanent,” Loki assured, opening his eyes again and offering Tony a smile that was a little wobbly, but good to see nonetheless. It seemed that conversation was helping to get his mind away from what he had seen during the dream. “It is more that... as we grow more used to each other, as we continue to reach out, it becomes easier. Anthony... I *like* having you in my mind. It’s...” he trailed off, his lips pressing together. Tony doubted that Loki was unable to find the words— it was far more likely that he felt nervous saying them.

There was a time when Tony wouldn’t have just shied away from the idea of his mind being connected with someone else’s— he would have *flinched* from it, thrown something heavy at it, yelled and shouted and forced the idea away until it could no longer touch him. He had always hated the thought of messing with minds, because to him, his mind was his most precious asset, the part of himself that he was most proud of.

He had fought hard to keep his intellectual property his own for much too long, had kept away the sharks and still had too many of his inventions stolen and repurposed, used to hurt other people or used to hurt *him*. The thought of having someone look around at where he kept those ideas hidden should have scared him, but... when it was Loki, all Tony could do was think about how nice it was to have someone he could trust in that much.

“I liked it too,” he said quietly. “Not the nightmare, obviously, fuck. But just... the closeness.”

“Yes,” Loki agreed.

Tony had the feeling that there was likely more to this, that there was something Loki wasn’t saying— or perhaps something Loki didn’t know. He wondered whether this had happened for Loki before, or whether he was flying just as blind as Tony was.

He... wasn’t sure which option he liked better.

Not that it mattered.

Things were the way they were, and in that moment, the only thing that Tony wanted to do was make sure that they were both all right. Thankfully, the conversation really had seemed to be enough to calm Loki down— his head had migrated to Tony’s shoulder, his hand under Tony’s shirt and caressing the skin at his waist, much like Tony had been doing to him earlier in the night.

Tony knew it was unlikely that either of them were going to be able to get any more sleep — or any sleep at all, in his case, unless the time he had spent in Loki’s mind counted — not after what had happened, not after the day that they’d had. Any rest would be bitten by the sharp teeth of terror, and the nightmares only tended to make Tony feel worse than he did when he had no sleep at all.

But just sitting there and listening to their dark thoughts would not do them any good, either. That late, that tired— all they could focus on was what could go wrong.

As if to prove the point, Loki curled a little closer in that moment, turning his head to the side and pressing harder into Tony's shoulder, his hand shifting to splay over the arc reactor. The way his fingers covered the light cast strange shadows over what Tony could see of Loki's face, making it difficult to read his expression.

“Hey,” Tony whispered, leaning down to press a kiss to the top of Loki's head. “You know I'm all right, yeah?”

Loki didn't reply— didn't even shift. He continued to stare at the blue light, the shape that Tony usually kept covered, that he had never let another living soul even set eyes on — at least, not since Obadiah. It didn't matter, though— Loki's silence was answer enough, and Tony sighed heavily, causing Loki's hand to rise and fall.

It went back to Tony's earlier thoughts, didn't it? They both knew all too well what *might* happen, what could happen at any given moment without warning. They were living from one moment to the next, and they *knew* they needed to hold on to every good one they had, because it could be snatched away in an instant.

And, well... yeah, sitting around and moping about it was certainly not helping.

So Tony leaned down again, this time using the tips of his fingers along Loki's jaw to tilt up his head. When he touched his lips to Loki's, Loki kissed him back, his own hand coming up to cup the side of Tony's face. They kissed slowly, gently— a reassurance and a promise more than a statement of desire. And by the time they drew away from each other, they were almost smiling again.

Almost.

“Okay,” Tony sighed, stroking Loki's cheek for a moment before letting his hands fall to Loki's shoulder's instead. “I need to head down to the workshop,” he said. “Will you come with me?”

Loki nodded firmly, and reached out to take Tony's hand in his. “Always.”

Outline of a round cut diamond

Chapter Notes

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

Loki's hand in his kept Tony stable as they moved out of the bedroom, having broken contact only long enough to get dressed. Tony would have been fine, because even though the nightmare had thrown him it hadn't been *his*— but he couldn't help but glance at the door to Barnes' room as they passed, and the sight of it almost made him miss a step. There was no outward indication that there was anything different with it, but Tony knew that if he were to press his hand to the white surface, he would see the familiar ripple of orange energy.

It was more than enough to remind him of what he was trying not to think about, of the new and old enemy that had been lurking in the shadows for who knew how long.

HYDRA.

Barnes had not given them any details, and Tony grit his teeth at the memory of the way the assassin had curled in on himself, as if his programming was trying to fight what Loki was doing with the pink ring. It was almost impossible to believe, and when that *Hail HYDRA* had left Barnes' lips, Tony's first instinct had been to deny its plausibility. But he trusted Loki when he said that Barnes was telling the truth. HYDRA had returned, or perhaps had somehow managed to survive all this time.

It was an awful thought, and god, but if Steve knew that his best friend was not only alive and kicking but had been made to work for his first real enemy...

Whatever. Steve might have been a willing and even valuable ally against HYDRA, but he wouldn't be against SHIELD. Two steps forward, one step back— it was a hit, because they were already dealing with so many enemies, but... he already knew that trusting anyone other than Loki and JARVIS would be a mistake. It was already them against the world— this was just one more creature in the shadows that needed to be accounted for.

Tony forced the thought from his mind, offered Loki a short smile to ease the concern he could see in those green eyes, and then he led the way down— knowing exactly where he needed to be in that moment.

After all, the workshop was where Tony always felt like he was in his element, and having Loki there only made it easier to think. They split apart as soon as they stepped through the door— Loki going to his own desk on the other side of the room, while Tony headed straight to his planning table.

With enemies pouring against them from all sides, the only thing they could do was prepare themselves for the inevitable onslaught.

Tony had thought long and hard on how he wanted to fight with Loki from now on— because while he was perfectly capable of holding his own with his gauntlets as he had in Miami, he

did miss the extensive arsenal he had always carried as Iron Man, the flexibility and adaptability that the suit had given him. He'd been continuously updating it, improving after every fight, adding and fixing and bettering to make himself stronger and stronger.

The suit they had retrieved from Arlington was the newest model, but even now as he skimmed his eyes over the pieces he had already pulled apart and put back together again, he could think of so *many* more upgrades, so many things he could do to make it even more impressive.

"Hey, JARVIS?" he asked, causing Loki to look up from where he was considering the pink ring, poking at it with his seiðr in an attempt to find a way to get through to Barnes.

"Yes, Sir?" JARVIS asked.

"The Iron Legion." Tony frowned, thinking hard.

"What about it?"

"Well... how are they, J? SHIELD didn't sink their claws into them, did they?"

"I believe I have already told you that Ms Potts has kept all of your assets safe and untouched, Sir, save for this one suit," JARVIS said.

"And War Machine," Tony pointed out. "Don't think I'm going to let any of you forget that any time soon."

"Of course not."

Tony pushed away from his seat so that he could move around, being on his feet helping him think. He slapped the screwdriver he held in his right hand against his other palm, the quick fidget settling his mind a little.

"Okay, JARVIS. I'm assuming you already initiated Protocol Batcave. That means that we can't get them out, not from here. Can I use the emergency override?"

"You can," JARVIS said. "But forty suits flying from the mansion is going to draw some attention."

Yeah, that was true— and it was why Tony had decided against it in the first place.

"Okay," he said, flicking the screwdriver again, feeling the sharp sting on his hand when one hit was a little harder than the others. "*Okay*. So we can't get at those, at least— not right now. I can't get them out altogether, but maybe one at a time, in darkness."

Tony stored the Iron Legion in the space below his workshop, and there was an exit through the cliffs. In the cover of darkness, so long as the house was not being watched *too* closely, he should be able to get them out one at a time. He could use one of those to go through with their plan of properly resurrecting Iron Man, and use the suit he had to fight alongside Loki.

But that left him with the problem of *how* to make it different, because even if he drastically recoloured it, the shape was still so iconically Iron Man that it would be difficult *not* to make the connection.

As he thought on it, his gaze slipped back over to Loki for a moment, and the corners of his mouth turned up as he watched him. The god looked so focused on his task, hardly noticing that his hair was falling into his face.

Despite the fact that their trips to Florence and the surrounding towns had meant that Loki could pick up his own clothes, he had still taken to wearing Tony's older stuff around the house. He was wearing a pair of black sweats that he had resized to fit properly – to fit *really well*, in Tony's opinion, way better than sweats ever should on a person – and a shirt that he clearly had not resized at all, for it hung too big on his thin frame. It had once been black as well, though it was rather faded, and bore the silver logo of one of Tony's favourite bands.

Hmm.

Feeling inspired, Tony turned back to his holograms, flicking things into place and making notes on the new suit. The colour scheme was definitely better than the grey he'd had before – this was both practical and intimidating, and with that added touch of shine...

The problem was still the *shape* though. He could hide the arc reactor with a thick chest plate, but that didn't change the helmet. He could alter the shape of the faceplate, but that didn't change the unique sound of the repulsors.

Tony rubbed his hands over his face with a groan. Clearly, this was going to take a bit more creativity.

"Sir," JARVIS said suddenly. Tony knew that tone, and his hands paused as his head snapped up.

"What is it?" he asked.

"The Avengers are currently having a discussion that concerns you in Stark Tower," he said. "You, *and* Mr Liesmith."

"Lokes," Tony called, pushing out his chair immediately. "You might want to come and watch this."

As they watched the footage, they remained entirely quiet, both of them taking in what was being said, what Tony's former teammates were planning on doing. They stood close but not touching, Loki leaning forward with both hands pressed into the edge of the table, Tony turning the screwdriver over in his hands again, his frown etching hard lines into his face.

Loki hissed when he heard what Odin had told Thor, his lips twisting with hatred. Tony didn't even say anything then, but dropped the screwdriver to the bench and gently touched his hand to Loki's arm, just reminding him that he didn't have to deal with this alone. Not anymore.

And when it was done, Tony turned to Loki with a concerned frown.

“Are you all right?”

“I will be.” Loki pushed up from the bench, and turned to face Tony properly. “What did you think?”

“I think they know more than they’re letting on,” Tony said, pressing his lips tightly together. “Did you see Natasha?”

“That one is smart,” Loki said immediately.

“And she’s with SHIELD,” Tony pointed out. “I’ve never been sure who she would pick, if it came down to it. I think it would depend on who Clint picked, but then I’ve never been entirely sure about him, either.”

“Barton would go with the side he thinks is *right*,” Loki said, “Though his own compass is... not directed the same way that you might expect.”

Tony inclined his head curiously, and Loki’s gaze darkened a little.

“Do not forget, Anthony,” Loki said. “I know Barton better than you ever could.”

Tony nodded, not willing to argue that point.

“Besides, it is not *them* that we should worry about,” Loki said. “They maybe be clever, but they are no match for us— and they are *mortal*. But *Thor*,” he hissed, his lips twisting into a snarl. “My brother, who knew where I was and left me here to *rot*—”

“Hey, hey,” Tony said, stepping into his space. Loki wrapped his arms around Tony despite the way that he remained tense. “We’re going to be fine.”

“He will fight us,” Loki said. “He will fight *me*, he always does, he never listens. And he will try to take you away from me, I know it.”

“He can try,” Tony said. “But I know I’m sure as hell not going to let him succeed. What about you?”

“You already know the answer to that,” Loki muttered.

“Well, there you go,” Tony said. “Thor’s pretty strong, yeah, but you’ve almost beaten him loads of times. And one of those was when he had me on his side— *and* when you weren’t even trying. What’s he going to be able to do now that we’ve joined forces?”

“Be realistic,” Loki said. “He’s...”

“A pain in the ass?”

Loki snorted, and Tony leaned away with a grin.

“Listen, I’m not trying to underestimate him. I just... don’t think we should see this as the end, either. We can *use* this.”

When Loki arched a brow in obvious question, Tony responded by tugging at his hand, pulling him over to where he had been working on his plans for the suit.

“Don’t you see?” Tony said. “They think that you stole Iron Man. That means that we can put Iron Man on your side, and they still won’t link it to me. It changes things, but not *too much*—we can hold on to the original plan.”

“The Ten Rings will know what we’re doing,” Loki said shrewdly, though his eyes were gleaming as if he were already coming around to the idea. “SHIELD, and that HYDRA. They will know what we are up to—”

“Yes,” Tony said. “And if we’re controlling what they know, then we can predict their reactions. I’m telling you, this is definitely something we can use.”

Loki’s eyes narrowed, as if he still did not yet see how, but was in the process of puzzling it through himself. Tony knew that they had both planned on the Avengers being out of the loop for just a little longer, on Thor remaining up on Asgard as he had ever since the Battle of New York— but that didn’t mean that they couldn’t adapt. Them realising that Loki was involved in all of this was a setback, but it wasn’t necessarily a *bad* thing.

“Come on,” Tony said, squeezing Loki’s hand before letting go so that he could focus back on what he had been doing before JARVIS had interrupted with the news about the Avengers. “There’s something that I want to show you. There’s just...” he turned his head, glancing back to where JARVIS had dispelled the screen. “There’s just one adjustment that I’d like to make first.”

“What are you planning?” Loki asked curiously, standing over Tony’s shoulder as he flicked his finger across the hologram, making a single small change.

“Well, we knew that having Iron Man on our side will be useful,” Tony said. “But they think that you stole him, so whenever he shows up again, he’s just going to be treated with suspicion, right?”

“Right,” Loki said, his frown still in place. “So, will you disguise him?”

“Kind of,” Tony said. “You know I was planning on changing my colour scheme anyway. I did have a plan, but... I just had a great idea of what to change it to, something better than what I had before.”

Loki moved a little closer, curious—

And Tony threw out his hands, pulling up a life-sized and coloured hologram of what Iron Man would soon look like, exact to the last detail.

Loki’s eyes widened immediately, his lips parting. “You’re going to wear *that*?” he whispered.

“I *was* just going to use the black and silver,” Tony said, pulling up a much smaller image of the original design. “But... I realised, if the Avengers think you’ve stolen Iron Man then we might as well play into it. If they think this is you, then there’s a chance that they still won’t link it to me— and we can bring Iron Man back using one of the other suits, or more than one, when I manage to get my hands back on them without arising suspicion.”

Loki looked like he was hardly listening— he had raised his hand to the hologram, as if he wanted to run his hands over the smooth black metal, the matte colour both better for stealth and a little frightening. Tony watched with bated breath as Loki’s fingers hovered over the faceplate, which was black as well but retained that iconic Iron Man shape. Tony was, admittedly, still a little hesitant over that because he didn’t *feel* like he should be Iron Man anymore— but the change of colour felt like enough of a difference, and the knowledge that this was the best plan made it easier to swallow. Then Loki’s gaze was following the thin silver lines that ran like veins down the arms, over the chest, and spider-webbed toward the arc reactor in the centre.

The reactor was no longer circular, but nor was it the triangle shape he had worn when he had first met Loki— it was closer to a heart hardened with too many sharp edges, or perhaps the simple outline of a round cut diamond. But Tony knew that it was not the shape of it that had caught Loki’s gaze, that had him reaching out as if he wanted to trace the coloured light with the tips of his fingers.

“What do you think?” Tony asked, reaching out to brush his own fingers over Loki’s wrist, the gesture a familiar comfort.

“I like it,” Loki breathed. He stared at the green reactor for a few moments longer before turning without warning, his hands curling around Tony’s hips to pull him closer as he crashed their lips together. Tony gasped, but he didn’t hesitate in returning the embrace, kissing Loki back with everything he had. His hands sunk into Loki’s hair, and Loki pressed him back against the table, pushing him through the hologram to do so. JARVIS must have dismissed it because then it was just them— it was just *Loki*, his hands sliding over Tony’s back, under his shirt, then further down to the curve of his ass as he pulled them together closer still.

Even when Tony leaned away, gasping for air, Loki didn’t stop— he moved his mouth to Tony’s throat instead, sucking and nipping at the skin, pulling blood to the surface and no doubt leaving a mark. Tony arched his neck for a few moments, trying to catch his breath with heavy pants—

And then Loki was kissing him again, and Tony lost sense of where Loki’s hands were, because they felt like they were everywhere, tracking blazing trails of heat wherever they touched. His own were at Loki’s hips, his fingers slipping under the waistband of his sweatpants, stalling when he realised that in the few quick moments they had used to change out of their pyjamas Loki hadn’t bothered to put on any underwear. The thought was more than enough to make Tony groan, and he tugged Loki closer, pulling their hips, their arousals flush together.

Loki muffled his own response into Tony’s shoulder, his arms around Tony’s waist now, just holding them close together, their bodies touching everywhere that was possible.

In that moment, there was nothing Tony wanted more than to *move*, to find that desired friction, to take this exactly where they both so clearly *wanted* it to go. But... they had agreed to take this slow, and they knew they weren't in the best state of mind. And yet...

“Do you need longer to work on your armour?” Loki asked, his voice hoarse.

“No,” Tony replied. It came out as little more than a rasp, and he cleared his throat before trying again. “Uh. The suit itself is ready, I fixed it up the other day. JARVIS just needs to paint it.”

Loki didn't give a verbal response. Tony felt his seiðr curl around them, and he pressed his face into the curve of Loki's neck, not wanting or needing to see the bright array of colours, even if it was only for half a moment.

They arrived back in their bedroom, still in each other's arms. Loki hadn't brought them to stand directly by the bed, and for that Tony was grateful— it gave him a moment to think, or, well. At least to *try* to.

Loki leaned down to kiss him again, and this time he seemed almost... hesitant, though not in a way that suggested nervousness.

“Lokes,” Tony said, thinking that he knew the problem. “Whatever you want, okay? Only what we both want.”

It seemed to do the trick— Loki relaxed, his full body melting against Tony's.

Their next kiss was slow, but still heated— and it built back up again with strokes of their tongues, with the grazing of teeth over already swollen lips. One of Loki's hands slid down Tony's chest, over his stomach— and then Loki swallowed down Tony's gasp as his hand cupped the aching bulge between Tony's legs.

‘Is this okay?’ Loki's voice whispered, still nipping at Tony's lips, his thumb stroking over denim and causing Tony's thighs to shudder.

‘God yes, Lokes,’ Tony said, thanking whoever was listening that they could talk this way, because he didn't think he'd be able to manage anything other than a moan, otherwise. *‘Fuck, please don't stop.’*

To make his own desire abundantly clear, Tony slipped his hand back into Loki's sweatpants, dragging down to the inside of Loki's thigh.

A low growl sounded deep in Loki's throat, and then he backed Tony toward the bed, pressing him into the mattress with a hand on his chest, breaking their kiss only long enough for them to find a comfortable position. They'd had to move their hands to do so, and Tony used the opportunity to shove at Loki's shirt — at *Tony's* shirt that Loki was wearing, and fuck but that was suddenly hotter than it had been half an hour ago — but Loki, it seemed, was impatient. Tony felt the familiar prickle of seiðr, and then their clothes were gone.

Tony ran his eyes over Loki, and he knew that Loki was doing the same. He couldn't help but reach out and touch, to run his hands over the plane of Loki's chest, and then lower, brushing *just* either side of the swollen cock that curved up over Loki's stomach. Loki's breath hitched and then he pulled Tony closer, his hands sliding down over Tony's body—

And fuck, the feel of *so much skin* against his own, *oh*, Tony knew that he was never going to be able to get enough of it.

'In the drawer,' Tony said, unable to think particularly coherently either now, just trying to impress upon Loki the *image* of what he wanted— and then he felt that familiar touch of magic again, and his hand was suddenly slick. Deciding not to question it and preferring not to waste any more time, Tony curled his hand around the base of Loki's cock and then stroked up toward the head, swiping his thumb over that sensitive tip before pumping back down. He could hear Loki's gasps and moans in his ears but his mind was full of something else, full of promises and whispers and vows and declarations and, he knew that Loki must be hearing the same because all Tony could think as Loki's hand began to stroke Tony's cock was how fucking much he wanted this, not just this one time, but always. It was a mess of heat and emotion and everything that had been building up for what felt like forever, and Tony moaned into every touch.

Their mouths were occupied with kisses that grew ever sloppier until their lips were just sliding against cheeks, until Tony pressed his face into Loki's shoulder instead muffling his cries but still wanting as much contact as was possible. And as they both stroked each other to the edge of ecstasy, all Tony knew was the heat of Loki's body, the whispering pants of his breath, the taste of his skin, the sound of his voice, the feel of their minds pressing together.

Tony came first with a shuddering cry, and Loki followed almost immediately after, the two of them holding each other through the waves of pleasure, knowing without a doubt that they were both equally lost.

It didn't make a whole lot of sense, because it had only been a handjob but Tony'd had sex in the past that didn't feel this good. Maybe it was the connection Loki had talked about, or maybe it was just that he'd never felt as strongly about any of his other partners as he did Loki. But whatever it was, Tony let the sensation wash over him as he leaned into Loki's chest, feeling like he didn't want to move for at least a week.

Loki cleaned them up with his *seiðr* – honestly, Tony was loving Loki's magic more and more with every passing moment – and they just lay entwined, their breathing slowing, fingers trailing lazily over sweaty skin, holding on to that connection for just a little longer.

“So,” Tony said, his voice still sounding a little low. “I guess you really did like the new armour, huh?”

Loki's fingers stilled for a half a moment. “I... yes,” he said thickly. Then Loki swallowed. “You... it's in my colour.”

“Yeah,” Tony said, wearing a pleased smile. “I thought that it would help make everyone think you enchanted the suit or something and... well. I guess it makes us look a little more like a team, right? Like we're together.”

Loki made a strangled noise, his eyes blown wide.

“This is something more to you,” Tony realised. “This... Loki, what?”

There was a moment where all Loki did was stare at Tony with shock, as if he couldn't believe that this was something Tony wanted. He parted his lips as if he were going to speak, but then, as if he didn't trust his voice, Loki began to talk with his mind instead. *'In Asgard,'* he said, *'In a wedding ceremony, those who are to be bound will exchange their cloaks, a symbol of acceptance, protection, and love. And so, when a person wears another's insignia, or their colours, it is seen as a declaration. Not necessarily of a betrothal, but certainly one of loyalty and... devotion.'*

Loki's eyes were bright and nervous, and with a rush of warm realisation, Tony thought back to the sweatpants Loki had stolen, to the T-shirt that he hadn't even resized— and then, well, he couldn't really help it. Tony turned his head and drew Loki into a kiss, slow and sweet and aching with that single emotion that he didn't want to name just yet, even though every fibre of his being already knew what it was.

They didn't go further than a kiss, already satisfied and more than content to just stay close together. And when their lips parted, Tony just leaned back down against Loki's chest, curling into him with a sigh.

“Do you think you'll be able to sleep?” Tony whispered.

“Yes,” Loki replied, his voice equally soft. “I don't think I'll have a problem with that again, tonight.”

Tony smiled into Loki's skin, and splayed his hand over the centre of Loki's chest, just as Loki had done to him earlier. Loki placed a hand on top, and then Tony turned his own so that their fingers were entwined, curled together and resting over Loki's heart. Loki's other arm was snug around Tony's waist, and he felt so completely calm that even as his eyes began to slip closed, his mind remained calm and quiet.

'Sleep, Anthony,' Loki whispered. *'I have you.'*

Tony tightened his grip on Loki's fingers.

'I've got you, too,' he said.

And as they drifted their minds pulled together, mixing their dreams in a soft comfort that they never would have been able to find alone.

Chapter End Notes

If you're curious about Tony's new suit, **Rabentochter** has drawn some beautiful art of it. You can find it on tumblr [here](#).

Cutting down scurrying ants

Germany was colder than Italy. It was the first thing Tony noticed as they stepped out of the folds of Yggdrasil and out into the salty breeze.

They had considered attacking somewhere else, perhaps going to the ring that was in the UK— since people had noticed that they were hanging around Florence it might have been smart to try and shift attention somewhere further away. But the benefit of removing a threat so close outweighed the risks, and the moment Tony's suit was ready to be put to the test, he was climbing into it and letting Loki pull him through the web of the world and into the cold, fishy air of Kiel.

Tony knew it was probably in his mind, because he couldn't feel that biting wind through the suit, except for the crisp feel of it on his cheeks. But he *could* hear the sound of the waves lapping against the dock, the rush of the ocean against the breakwater— and that was more than enough to set his teeth on edge and send a tremor quivering through his bones.

He told himself that he was fine, and that he needed to focus on the mission. The water couldn't harm him— he had roamed beneath the waves in his suit before after all, such as when he pulled Stark Tower off the main power grid, or when he had been thrown into the Hudson in a particularly gnarly Avengers' fight.

He knew that he was *fine*.

So he pulled himself together, tried to push the sound of the waves aside — the sound that pounded in his head like the beating of a drum — and he considered the building in front of him with every ounce of concentration he could muster.

The building was fairly tall, not the tallest in the area but still towering over the warehouses that were scattered along the length of the port. Offices, it looked like, masquerading as the paper-pushing sections of a shipping company.

When he'd seen on the map that this ring was near a port, Tony had expected the set-up be similar to what they had seen in Turkey— but it was anything but. Rather than a dingy warehouse, the building almost looked... nice.

Tony supposed that the location did make sense. After all, an organisation like the Ten Rings which was so clearly larger and more international than Tony had initially thought would need good access to transport, some way to move their weapons and other... assets.

Yeah. The hidden entrance to the basement of the building through a tunnel underneath the dock that they noticed through their initial reconnaissance would be perfect for smuggling in any item they needed that was a little on the shady side.

Any item... including, maybe, people.

The sight of that tunnel only made Tony all the more eager to tear the whole place to shreds, and his and Loki's surveillance did not last much longer than it took Tony to reach his conclusion as to what exactly that tunnel was likely used for.

After Tony had flown a few laps around the place, they had perched atop a neighbouring building, Tony using his suit to help JARVIS hack his way into the security systems while Loki searched for the ring's signature with his seiðr. Despite the late hour, there were still a fair amount of people inside, though they had hoped that by targeting their attack during the night no ordinary workers that may have been employed to hold up the front of such a large building would be present. They should be free from the worry of attacking innocents, and *hopefully*, they would be in and out fairly quickly.

They were still expecting a fight, of course, which was why they had waited to make their next move until Tony's armour was ready. Tony had been a bit worried about leaving Barnes alone in the house, but Loki had made sure that the wards were going to hold, and had given the brainwashed soldier more food before they left. Barnes had been eating well, but he hadn't done much else, and while his silence had worried Tony almost more than resistance would have, as if he were constantly waiting for the other shoe to drop—there wasn't much that they could do about it. They didn't have anywhere else to hold Barnes, and until they came up with a solution for the brainwashing there wasn't anything else they could do. They couldn't put everything on hold while they waited, so.

It was still worrying, though, and Tony was more than keen to get this next ring and what information they could sooner rather than later.

"JARVIS is in," Tony said, swiping away the holographic screen he had been working on and turning to glance at Loki. "He can turn off the lights as soon as we give him the signal. Are you ready?"

"Yes." Loki gave a firm nod. "They do not have any shielding like we encountered in Turkey, and there does not appear to be another magical signature here. Just the ring."

"Good."

They both pushed to their feet, and Tony was about to let his helmet encase his head when Loki stopped him with a gentle hand to the side of his neck.

"Anthony," Loki said. His eyes were searching, and although Tony couldn't tell what Loki was looking for, he met his lover's gaze with a small smile. And before Tony could give voice to either a question or a reassurance, Loki was leaning forward and catching his lips in a kiss, heated and searing and more than enough to make Tony grip him closer, one hand sliding under Loki's black hood and threading through Loki's hair, the other running down over Loki's back. The touch of the leather against his skin was a reminder of what they were about to do, and only caused Tony to kiss Loki a little harder.

"Be careful," Loki whispered as they parted, the words brushing over Tony's lips like a prayer.

“I will,” Tony promised. “And you, too.” He leaned in to kiss Loki again, not wanting to lose the moment, the reality of what was about to happen crashing down on him all too suddenly. Because, yeah, this was the first real fight they were going to engage in since the shift in their relationship, and Tony realised that while they were both itching for some action, to gain some more *revenge*, they were both also a little nervous about jumping into the fray.

But, like the sound of the waves and the sting of the breeze, it was just something else that they were going to overcome.

Loki pressed his hand over the green of the reactor glowing in Tony’s chest as their gazes met, caressing it with his fingers for a moment before pulling away.

“This should not take long,” Loki said firmly, echoing Tony’s earlier thoughts. “Let us get it done.”

“Let’s go and kick some terrorist ass,” Tony said.

“I’ll meet you on the roof,” Loki replied, gathering his seiðr.

Tony grinned viciously, and then leapt into the air, his black helmet clicking into place as he did so.

Strategically, it might have been better to split up, for Loki to hop inside the walls perhaps while Tony attacked from the outside. But that was not an option that either of them had voiced, had even *considered*. They knew that if they were going to win, then they were going to do it together.

It felt amazing to fly again, to soar into the sky and feel like there was nothing holding him up save his own body, save the armour that was just an extension of himself. He curved through the air in a graceful arc— and as he came to the roof of the building, it was to find that the fight had already begun.

There were two bodies on the ground, their forms dark and unmoving as Loki spun above them, one of his daggers slicing through the throat of a third just as Tony approached. Tony raised a hand as he landed, and took out a fourth that was aiming at Loki’s back, his weapon primed. The blast from the repulsor sent the man tumbling over the edge of the roof with a scream.

They didn’t pause to speak, then. They didn’t need to. Tony fired a blast at the door to take it out, and then they headed down and into the building, side by side.

They hadn’t gathered enough information about the place to know exactly what they were walking into, so they both knew that they needed to be vigilant. It *had* been mentioned in a few emails they had found in the data from Turkey and the information they had gathered in Miami, and it seemed that Kiel was something of a halfway house, a storage point for items that they shipped and resources they stole. There was administration here too, making use of their location, but other than that they couldn’t discern exactly what the Ten Rings did here other than use it to keep their paperwork looking pretty. Tony, of course, made a few of his own deductions during their observation.

Regardless, it was Tony's hope that if this was one of the shipping nexuses for the Ten Rings' resources, then not only would they be able to cripple the organisation's ability to supply itself, but also be able to glean some more information from this cell than they had from any of the others. And for that, they would need to get onto a computer that wasn't squeaky clean, one connected to the network that the people working here no doubt preferred to keep well hidden.

The inside of the building was nothing like what they had found at the other cells. It looked like your typical, generic office— almost too perfect, as if someone had watched a tv show or looked in a catalogue and recreated what they thought an office *should* look like. And as JARVIS cut the lights and all the power, it was almost a little unsettling.

The top floor was quiet, pristine, and with not a soul in sight.

“They must have heard us on the roof,” Tony whispered.

Loki adjusted his grip on his daggers. “Then they’ll be waiting.”

They paused at the stairwell, having decided that the elevator would be too risky.

“J?” Tony asked.

The AI's answer was as short as it was informative. “Six.”

Loki's lip curled, then he smashed open the door with a single, powerful kick, throwing himself through it with Tony following right behind. They were met with a torrent of bullets that did not stay strong for long, for with Loki in their midst the terrorists that had been lying in wait did not stand a chance.

Loki fought the men on the stairs while Tony threw himself over the railing, freefalling for a second before catching himself and flying straight through the next door, splinters spilling through the air in his wake.

He flew out into the new corridor to find a line of terrorists with their weapons at the ready, their expressions dark. The moment he was in their view they began their attack, firing at a rapid pace that would have cut flesh to ribbons in mere seconds. But Tony stood firm, unmoving as the bullets all bounced straight off his suit.

“Okay,” Tony said, feeling a sense of déjà vu as he raised his palms up at them and spoke in a harsh tone that was perhaps a little too satisfied to be considered sane. “My turn.”

His repulsors tore through them, slamming them back against the far wall, cracking bones and burning flesh. He was glad for the air filters on the suit, for as he stepped closer to their broken remains, he could see the way that their skin was smouldering and bubbling.

Oh yes, this new suit certainly was his most powerful yet.

Tony considered pressing forward for only a moment before he turned back to check on the stairwell, waiting for his partner before they could move on together. It almost felt like there was a rope tethered between them, like to move too far away cut off Tony's ability to breathe.

He could hear footsteps further along and knew there were more targets, that he could catch them as they scattered, before they could regroup again into a more considerable force, but... he couldn't leave Loki.

Once they were together again, they made their way through the upper floors, cutting down anyone in their path and searching every room for a computer they could use, and for the ring that they knew had to be here *somewhere*.

It was easy, just like it had been back in Miami, the pair of them working together to break through the lines of their enemies and forcing their way on a bloody path through the building. Part of that ease, though, could probably be assigned to the fact that Tony was no longer fighting with scraps, that he finally had proper weaponry to be working with. Tony's new suit felt like a dream, and Tony felt exhilarated with the sensation of flight, the adrenaline bleeding through into every action he took.

Tony had never found true enjoyment in violence, but fighting with Loki by his side was a special kind of thrill that urged him forward. They split only for short periods, and only by necessity— such as when they found a room full of terrorists, and one would go in while the other guarded the door to be sure they couldn't be attacked from behind.

They weren't worried that they hadn't yet found the ring— they knew that those who were important had probably fled to the lower levels of the building, knowing that Tony and Loki had started from the top. But JARVIS had sealed the exits, so they didn't need to worry that anyone was about to escape. If they weren't so keen to have this done with as quickly as possible, then they could have taken their time— although of course, they did need to be wary of the possibility that the Ten Rings could bring in reinforcements. Surely, if this *was* an important location to them, then they would want to defend it?

They were about half way through the building when Tony realised that it wasn't reinforcements from the Ten Rings that he needed to be worried about, at all.

“Sir!” JARVIS said loudly, right as Tony was cutting through a group outside one of the large office rooms, stopping any of them from providing back up to the ones Loki was busy dealing with inside. “An Avengers quinjet is approaching the building!”

The words that came out of Tony's mouth were the kind that shouldn't ever be repeated in polite company.

“How?” he asked. “JARVIS, they're based in New York, and I know the quinjets are fast but they're not *that* fast—”

“They were flying to Italy, Sir, I believed that they were going to look for clues in Florence. They must have changed their course—”

“And you didn't tell me? *JARVIS*—”

“I did not wish to distract you, Sir—”

“We are going to have words about this—”

“They’ve landed on the roof.”

“Fuck!”

A terrorist jumped at Tony then, probably hoping to use his distraction, and instead of firing Tony just lashed out with a swipe of his arm, sending the man crashing against the wall. The man’s pained scream hardly even registered as he turned and flew toward where Loki was just coming out of the office he had been clearing, leaving only silence in his wake.

“Loki—”

“I heard.” Loki’s voice was low, his eyes dark. His dripping daggers left a trail of red dots over the previously cream carpet, and Tony’s gaze was drawn to those marks for a moment before Loki’s voice broke through the silence once again. “JARVIS, will it be all of them?”

Tony knew that Loki was only asking after one specific Avenger, but JARVIS gave the answer anyway.

“All of them,” he said. “Including Colonel Rhodes.”

“And Thor,” Loki hissed, but Tony had to draw in a deep breath.

Rhodey.

He was going to see Rhodey for the first time in months, and it would be from opposite sides of a fight.

“We need to get moving,” Loki said, cutting through Tony’s thoughts as he brushed past, moving toward their next target. “This floor is clear. We need to get as far as we can before the Avengers reach us.”

Tony gave his agreement, but they both paused as JARVIS spoke up.

“The stairwell is teeming,” the AI warned.

“Then we’ll just have to give them a surprise,” Tony said, baring his teeth in a grin that no one else was able to see. The door was already blasted wide from their entrance, so all Tony had to do was lob one of the missiles he carried in the suit down into the stairwell. Then he grabbed Loki around the waist—

Loki smashed the glass out of the window with his seiðr—

They flew out into the open air—

The whole building looked like it shook with the force of the explosion, and as Tony and Loki crashed through the window of the floor below the one they had just vacated, it was to find the terrorists inside in a panic, some of them crawling from the burning stairwell covered in injuries, others trying to find a way out that wasn’t on fire. It was easy enough to take them all out, like cutting down scurrying ants. They tried to organise themselves, but weren’t able

to make any headway with Tony flying through with repulsors blazing and Loki with his knives that were just as a deadly.

Tony reached the other side of the open office space in a moment, turning in a perfectly executed pirouette and was about to go for a second sweep when he heard the tell-tale whine of repulsors— repulsors that were not his own.

Standing by the broken window, palms raised, was a red, white, and blue parody of Iron Man, a huge gun strapped to his shoulder, his silver faceplate impassive. “Stand down, Loki,” he said. “This ends now.”

“Rhodey,” Tony whispered. He felt like he was frozen, his muscles seizing as he remained hovering in place. That was *Rhodey*, his best friend. And despite all of the logic, all of the times Tony had gone through *why* he couldn’t risk contacting Rhodey, in that moment there was nothing he wanted to do more than step out of his suit and go to give his friend a hug. He knew from JARVIS that Rhodey was working with the Avengers, but he also knew that he was trying to find Tony.

It wasn’t that he thought Rhodey had something against Tony himself, but he just worried that Rhodey would think he was trying to do the right thing, and would end up giving information to someone he shouldn’t. But seeing Rhodey *right there*, so close...

Tony moved forward just slightly, his heart in his throat—

Then fucking *Iron Patriot* shifted his aim and fired his repulsor at Loki. Loki reflected the beam away with a snarl and a flick of his hand, but the sight of that attack caused Tony’s hesitation to be replaced with something wild and feral.

There was no grey here, there was no walking a fine line. Tony had already picked his side, and there was no way that he was ever going to stand by while someone tried to hurt Loki.

Even if that person was Rhodey.

There was not an ounce of hesitation in his body as he fired a blast of his own at Rhodey, and then used the distraction to charge forward in a blaze of metal and repulsors. He hardly caught Rhodey unawares, though— he met Tony head on, swinging with a fist that Tony was barely able to dodge. But he did dodge it, ducking under the blue metal and jabbing his open palm into Rhodey’s gut— a move that wouldn’t have done much in a traditional fight, but which allowed Tony to blast at an area he knew was a little less protected on the older versions of the suit, and which gave him the upper hand.

As they fought, the other Avengers began to trickle in, some from the window, others from the stairwell, coming through a little covered in soot but otherwise all right. Natasha and Clint focused on the remaining Ten Rings’ soldiers, while Steve ran to meet Loki head on. Loki’s daggers vanished to be replaced by the staff Tony had seen him use back in Arlington. It was similar in shape to the one he had used in New York, just a little longer and without the stone in the centre or any of the unnecessary decoration. The extended reach would be far more efficient than daggers when fighting against Steve’s brutal attacks with his shield.

Tony's own fight turned brutal as well, the pair of armoured men battering at each other with everything they had to give— though Tony noted that Rhodey seemed to be reluctant to use the 'big gun', probably wary of injuring his *team*.

“Who are you?” Rhodey snapped between shots. “What did you do to Iron Man?”

Ah, good. So Tony's ploy had worked, then, they'd realised that this was the Iron Man he and Loki had stolen from the grave. Rhodey would know, though, that the suit had been empty when it was taken— but as curious as Tony was about what was happening in Rhodey's head, he didn't say a word.

The fight between them was fierce, but not completely matched. Rhodey had more combat training than Tony, and he had been fighting in that suit for two years. He was a formidable force to be reckoned with, and he handled Iron Patriot almost perfectly.

Almost.

But he never had been as comfortable in it as Tony, who wore his armour like a second skin. Even if this was his first fight in a suit in *months*, it came back to him as instinct, muscle memory executing those twists and turns like it was what he was born to do.

Still, even as Iron Patriot took a battering from Tony, he was still fighting strong. It seemed like there was something pushing Rhodey to go harder than he ever had before, and Tony couldn't stay ahead of his strikes forever.

That, and... well. Tony would be lying if he said that his entire attention was on his own fight.

At any given moment he was watching Loki out of one corner of his HUD, making sure that the god was holding his own well enough in his fight with Steve. Of course, Tony had seen Loki best Steve before, in Stuttgart when Loki had not even been properly trying. Loki would be fine.

But then—

A yell—

The crack of thunder—

The bright flash of lightning—

Loki went flying, crashing through the wall and into the stairwell— the stairwell that they had just destroyed, where there would be nothing but twisted metal to catch him.

Something inside Tony *screamed*, and he went to fly after him—

But Rhodey used the distraction to blast Tony with both hands, his repulsor smashing into Tony's shoulder and sending him careening back into the opposite wall. Rhodey didn't waste a moment and he was on Tony immediately, his hands pressing into Tony's shoulders, making the already damaged metal creak.

Tony struggled, his heart in his throat, needing to get free—

“Mr Liesmith is fine,” JARVIS said, and Tony could hear a touch of anger in his tone. Strangely, that anger calmed Tony enough that he was able to take in the rest of the reassurance. “He is on his feet and fighting, two floors down.”

That helped to slow Tony’s racing heartbeat, but it did not calm his rage, and he turned his focus back to Rhodey with a flame burning through him that would not be easily put out.

“Who *are* you?” Rhodey asked again, and Tony could hear the snarl even through the speech modulator in the suit. “Are you even a person? Or has Loki just animated you with his magic, corrupting Tony’s technology—”

Tony shoved Rhodey away, firing up the repulsors in his boots and shooting straight up. He didn’t bother giving an answer. He had more important things to be worried about.

He flew straight through the hole in the wall and into the stairwell, between the remains of the destroyed stairs and through the door two floors down, noting that it was hanging on only one hinge. As he did so, he realised that the other Avengers seemed to have disappeared from sight, probably chasing after Loki. Tony felt on the verge of panic, not knowing where Loki was but knowing he was in *danger*, needing to get to him, needing to help him, needing to *know* that he was okay—

“JARVIS—”

“To the left, Sir.”

JARVIS helped show Tony exactly where he needed to go to get back to Loki, and he crashed through walls and flimsy office dividers, not caring that he was causing enough noise to let the entire building know *exactly* where he was. His whole body was screaming, and he didn’t have the time to be quiet.

When he came out into what appeared to be a break room, it was to find that Loki was battling both Thor and Steve at the same time, taking a few hits as his magic and concentration was stretched beyond all limits.

Tony dove in without a thought and tackled Steve head on, slamming him into the ground. It was distraction enough to make Thor’s focus waver for a moment, and a moment was all that Loki needed to slam the flat side of his staff into Thor’s temple. Steve was groaning but still alert, so Tony punched him in the head and then scurried to his feet, heading straight for Loki and gripping his shoulders.

“Are you okay?” Tony asked, unable to help himself from checking, his gaze dancing over Loki’s face, JARVIS already cataloguing injuries on the HUD without needing to be asked.

Loki looked about to answer, but then his hand snapped out over Tony’s shoulder and snatched an arrow from the air. Loki flung it away just as quickly, and then Tony pulled Loki into his chest and turned so his back was to the following explosion, sheltering Loki from the heat of it.

“Give it up, Loki!” Clint yelled. “You’re outnumbered, this time!”

“But not outgunned,” Tony muttered, getting ready to fight again— but Loki, it seemed, had other ideas.

“Nor outsmarted,” he said— and then he grabbed Tony’s hand and used his seiðr to take them a few floors up, back to an area that they had already cleared. Bodies and blood littered the floor, and Tony knew that they would be safe enough for a few moments before the Avengers could work out where they had gone.

“We need a plan,” Loki said, his voice strained. Tony could see Loki’s green eyes assessing the hits that the suit had already taken, the scratched paintjob and the broken pieces that weren’t yet enough to hold him back in any way, but also weren’t far from it.

“We’re not retreating, not yet,” Tony said quickly, already knowing what was going through Loki’s mind. “I’m fine, I can keep going—”

“We weren’t expecting the Avengers—”

“That doesn’t matter. We still need more information on what’s going on here. We don’t want to jump in this blind ever again,” Tony insisted. “And besides, we can’t leave now, or they might just pack up and move. Even if they don’t they might increase their security, they’ll *know* we’re coming back. And we haven’t even found the ring yet.”

“I know,” Loki said. Then he reached up and ran his fingers just below the jagged edge of Tony’s shoulder, by the broken piece of armour where Rhodey had managed to get in a blast powerful enough to do surface damage. As if in answer to Loki’s touch, the bruise that Tony knew must be forming there throbbed painfully.

“I’m okay,” Tony promised, though he found his own gaze drawn to the patch of burnt leather along the line of Loki’s ribs, evidence of a lightning strike that Loki hadn’t managed to avoid or deflect. “I can keep going, so long as you can.”

“Then we keep fighting,” Loki said. “But this time, we need to stay together.”

“Agreed,” Tony said easily. They couldn’t let the Avengers separate them again— because yes, they were outnumbered, and they would always be at their strongest while they were fighting at each other’s side.

Although— they did have something of an advantage here, something that they would be able to work in their favour. Because... the Avengers were not on the Ten Rings’ side, either.

Of course, Tony and Loki knew that the Avengers and the Ten Rings were branches of the same tree, but growing on opposite sides of the trunk so that they did not see it themselves. If they managed to place the Ten Rings between them and the Avengers, then there was a chance that some of their work would be done for them, and they could focus on what they needed to achieve.

“Let’s go down to the bottom floor,” Tony said, still thinking it through. “We’ve cleared the top few floors already, and it might give us time until the Avengers catch on to where we are. And then, they’ll have to fight their way down to us.”

“Very well,” Loki agreed. “But if we do this, we’re going to change our strategy.”

That was more than easy enough for Tony to agree with, and once Loki had taken them to the lobby of the building, they moved through the shadows rather than just attacking immediately, keeping as quiet as they could.

There was no light to move by— even the soft red glow of the exit signs had been cut off. But Tony could easily see through his HUD, and the darkness made it easy to hide. It wasn’t Tony’s usual method of attack, but Loki was well versed in it. Tony found himself watching in awe as Loki moved smooth enough that he seemed to melt into the darkness, his feet not making a single sound other than the faint whispered movement of air.

Tony felt completely clunky in comparison, even though he knew that his new suit was silent so long as he wasn’t using his repulsors, the sound of gears smothered with oil and perfectly fitting parts. The new matte black blended in well with the shadows, and it meant that when they came upon their first band of terrorists, they were given only a few seconds between the time that they noticed the green glow from his eyes and chest to when he fired a few silent bullets from his undamaged shoulder into their hearts.

They moved through the lobby more slowly than they had any of the other floors. Tony could hear the sound of fighting up above, the peppering of bullets and the clang of Mjölfnir, and he knew that he had been right to hope that the Avengers would work in this instance as unknowing allies.

The plan had been to move upward, but as they headed toward the elevator – knowing the stairwell would be too cluttered at the bottom to use – Tony noted another door which shouldn’t have been there, because he had spent enough time earlier staring out the outside of the building to know that there couldn’t have been more than a yard or so there before it hit the outside wall. It was marked as maintenance, but... since when did maintenance cupboards need a keypad to enter them?

No. It had to be the entrance to the basement.

“Loki,” Tony hissed. “Here.”

After all, if the building was locked but you knew that a threat was coming from above, wouldn’t the best place to hide be as far down as was absolutely possible?

The door led to another stairwell, which was empty. JARVIS said that he had no vision down at the bottom, which meant that there were no cameras, or that they were on a different network, one that JARVIS had yet to breach. Either way, the prospect was a promising one.

Indeed, when Tony opened the door to lead into the next room— a large space, but grim and lined with concrete – it was to find that the lights were working perfectly fine, giving them a clear view of what lay before them.

Hostages.

It seemed that Tony had been right in his earlier deduction, that the Ten Rings were using this building to facilitate a human trafficking ring. Or perhaps these people were attempting to cross borders, were hoping to be smuggled into a safer country than the one they had come from. Either way, they were certainly not involved in this by choice, and Tony had no intention of harming them. They just looked scared.

He felt more than saw Loki flitter way from behind him, but before he could draw in a worried breath, he noticed a comforting gleam of green from the darkness at the back of the basement, just behind the group of terrorists and hostages.

It still wasn't a great feeling, having them between him and Loki. But Loki was close enough that Tony was still able to focus, and he turned his full attention on the group before him.

Fourteen terrorists, threatening twenty-three hostages.

Easy.

“If you make a single move, then we will kill them.”

The speaker was the man in the middle and back of the group. He looked older than the rest, his hair silver grey. His smirk was vicious, and although he was not holding a weapon to anyone's head as all the others were, he certainly looked like he felt that he was in control of the situation.

Tony snorted, and raised his palm— unable to stop the smile that curled at his lips when it made the terrorists squirm.

“What makes you think that I care about *them*?”

The hostages seemed to stutter at that, many of them shuddering and whimpering, but Tony held strong. There was no need to let any of them see the truth, not when it was so easy to have the terrorists on the back foot, making mistakes out of fear.

But their spokesperson, it seemed, was not so easily moved.

“We know who you are, Iron Man,” the man said, this time sounding smug. “You wouldn't risk it.”

“That's where you're mistaken,” Tony said harshly. “Iron Man was a hero. I'm not a hero anymore.”

The terrorist seemed to realise his mistake in the same moment that Tony opened up his weapons systems once again. JARVIS' targeting system was more than perfect, and all Tony had to do was give the all clear and several of the terrorists fell to the ground, leaving the hostages untouched. Loki darted forward in the same moment and took out a few more, moving quickly enough that his daggers were just flashes through the dark.

Then the hostages were screaming and trying to get away, and the scene was just a writhing mass of bodies, which made it difficult for even JARVIS to be able to get a shot. So Tony joined the fray, moving to fight more hands on with his fists as well as his repulsors. The room cleared as the hostages streamed out of the door – Tony hoped for a moment that they would serve as another distraction for the Avengers – and then, once he had more room, Tony grinned and raised his hands once more.

“You think that you’ve won,” the older man said– and there was *still* something triumphant in his gaze, which was more than enough to send a bolt of unease into Tony’s gut. “You *haven’t*.”

The man raised his right hand in front of his face, clenching his fist to show off the ring that sat on the knuckle of his middle finger. Before Tony could even utter a word the stone set into it began to glow blue—

And then, there was a low rumble as the building began to shake. The terrorist’s eyes closed in concentration, his brow creased with a frown as the ring glowed brighter and the rumbling grew worse.

Tony thought he could hear the sea again, the water surging against the dock. But that was impossible– he knew they were a fair distance away, that the tunnel leading down to the water had to be long, because if they were right on the edge of the dock then the foundations would not be strong enough to hold up a building this size.

It was *impossible*.

Right?

But... the orange ring manipulated fields of energy, and the pink worked within a person’s mind. It stood to reason then, didn’t it, that the other rings would all do something different?

No. *No*, this wasn’t real, this wasn’t happening. Not right now.

Tony shoved the man in front of him aside and charged his repulsors, preparing to blast the head guy before they could find out what that blue ring did. He could see Loki doing the same, swiping through the terrorists that he hadn’t yet killed, heading toward the man who was doing... something. They were going to make it, they were going to get that ring. Loki would slice off the finger like he had twice before, and then there would be nothing to worry about.

But then the wall by the stairwell was blasted in by lightning, dust billowing in the air and concrete falling to the ground as Thor forced his way through with a yell, heading straight for his brother and knocking Loki off course—

Tony swerved as well, the ring falling away from his attention as he aimed his repulsors at Thor—

Then a red, white, and blue frisbee came out of nowhere and knocked his hands to the side so that his repulsor fired harmlessly against the concrete wall instead.

“Everyone freeze,” Steve yelled, “Stop this needless killing, the fight is over!”

Tony was growling, the Avengers were going after the *wrong people*, couldn't they see? He and Loki were doing good here, and the Avengers had to come in and ruin it, just like Tony *knew* that they always would.

Natasha ran in behind Steve, and Tony shot at her for good measure. She avoided it, but Tony managed to nail Clint in the side with his next blast, feeling a vicious kind of pleasure at seeing the archer fall— though the blast had not been lethal. Clint, after all, had left Tony in the hands of those monsters just as surely as Steve had.

But Tony knew that Loki had been right in his fears, that the true threat here was always going to be Thor. Mjölfnir was sparking with power that made Tony's hair stand on end even from within the suit, and the hammer swung through the air with vicious precision that aimed to hurt.

Loki was holding his ground, his own snarl well in place, twisting his fine features into a mask of vengeance. Tony believed that Loki could win the fight, but that didn't stop him from charging forward, going to help in any way that he could—

Rhodey tackled him mid-air – where had he even *come* from? – and the pair went tumbling to the ground. Tony managed to spin so that he was on top, Rhodey's bulk working against him— but Rhodey dug his fingers into Tony's arm and held him in place.

“JARVIS,” Rhodey said, and Tony paused, scared for a moment that Rhodey had worked out who was in the suit—

But then Rhodey continued, and Tony realised that he was merely talking through the connection in his own suit.

“JARVIS, can you get in there? Turn the suit back to factory settings?”

Oh. Rhodey was trying to get JARVIS to do to Tony's suit what they had done to War Machine when it had been taken over by Vanko. Ha, well. Joke was on him.

“J, head him off,” Tony said quickly, after making sure that his own speaker was muted. “Tell him that there's magical interference, or something.”

“Oh, but I was so hoping to be able to take over the new suit.”

“Not the time for sass, J.”

The only answer from Rhodey was a frustrated growl and an angry mutter. “Surely there's something, JARVIS? It was Iron Man, Tony made it!”

Annoyed, Tony changed the settings to his repulsors and slammed his free hand down against the arc reactor in Rhodey's chest. The targeted electromagnetic pulse from Tony's palm was enough to cut most of the systems, though it wasn't enough to take out the reactor alone, not with all the precautions built into it.

But, when it came to his own suits, Tony had an advantage that no one else did.

“Cut power, JARVIS,” Tony ordered. “Fry him.”

The arc reactor stuttered under Tony’s hand, and then the light went out. The rest of the suit went limp with it, and Tony was easily able to pry his arm free. He could imagine Rhodey cursing inside, but oh well. Rhodey would be fine.

In fact—

“Serves him right,” Tony muttered. “That paint job truly is awful.”

He didn’t have long to revel in his victory though, for he suffered a kick to the head from Black Widow that was actually hard enough to jar his neck in the way that even bullets and explosions hadn’t managed. He swore and turned to blast her but she danced out of the way again, only to be replaced by Steve, his newly forming black eye making him look a little bit wild.

Tony raised his hands, preparing to take on the pair at the same time with a determined yell—but then he heard a tell-tale charge of electricity, and his attention turned once again to the fight on the other side of the room just in time to see Mjölnir crash against Loki’s side.

The sound of cracking bone echoed between the concrete walls, and Tony knew his filters would have prevented it but he swore he could smell the sickly scent of burning flesh. Loki didn’t scream, but his mouth fell open in a silent cry that tore at Tony from the inside out.

The rushing in Tony’s ears was still getting louder and louder—

The only thing he could see was Thor, was the way that he was raising his hammer *again* even as Loki tried to back away, his fingers sparking with green, his eyes burning with a mix of pain and rage.

Tony’s own rage pulled from him with a roar, and he charged his repulsors as he spun in a circle, destroying anything within a ten-foot radius of himself. Natasha and Steve dove clear, leaving Tony free to begin his charge toward Thor. No more phasers set to stun, no more playing nice— not anymore. They would *not* get away with hurting Loki like that. Not in a thousand years.

Thor hadn’t even noticed his approach, focused as he was on his once-brother. Loki had, though, his eyes meeting Tony’s over Thor’s shoulder, his lips tugging up into a pained grimace as they prepared to sync their attack—

And then a door on the other side of the room burst open and the world exploded with a thundering rush as the entire ocean began to pour into the room.

Water—

There was *water*—

It surged straight for Tony, wrapping around him like an inescapable prison, flowing over his head and all around his body, stopping his heart and freezing his breath in his throat. Maybe it was just flooding the whole room, or maybe it had come for Tony specifically— he didn't know, and it didn't matter. He was in its grasp, surrounded by panic and fear and that awful, terrible *rushing*—

Tony was in his suit, he was fine. He was *fine*. But he could see it gushing over his HUD, he could feel it burning in his lungs, in his mouth, down his throat. Every inhale was an agonised choke, every exhale felt like his last. He couldn't breathe, he was *drowning*—

Someone was yelling—

There was a bright flash of green—

Then something pulled on his arm, jarring his injured shoulder— but he couldn't have said whether it was friend or foe, for that was when everything just went black.

Tugging at a noose

When he came to, Tony was only aware that there was someone holding him, that he had been drowning, that something was very, *very* wrong. He remembered the fight, he remembered Loki getting hurt— the smell of metal and burning flesh, the rush of water in his ears—

Had he been captured?

Had Loki?

No, no—

Not again, he couldn't do this again—

Tony could feel hands at his back, his waist, his shoulders, in his hair. He struggled, he fought, but those hands were like iron and they did not give an inch—

Hadn't he been in his suit? Had they taken it off him, just like last time? Had they stolen it, would they *use* it?

What would they do to him, if they already had the suit?

What they do to *Loki*?

Tony could hear gasping breaths, whispered words, the thundering beat of his heart as he *tried* to focus, as he tries to stop the memory of the water surging through him, as he tried to fight the crushing fear—

Then three words snapped through the terror, not spoken aloud but slipping between the shadows in his mind and forcing him to *listen*.

'Breathe, Anthony. Breathe.'

Loki.

Tony stopped fighting, realising who it was that held him. He gripped those arms instead, slid his hands along them until he found shoulders, until he was pulling himself as close against Loki as he possibly could.

He was clinging, desperate, wanting to be held, *needing* to be closer. He wanted Loki to hold him *tighter* because Loki was the only thing grounding him, the only thing keeping him sane. He clawed at Loki's shirt, he whined into Loki's skin, plastering himself against all of Loki's body and curling into a ball in Loki's lap and not able to settle because nothing was ever enough. He couldn't say why, he only knew that he needed something more.

Loki was whispering in his ear, though Tony could only just make sense of it, his mind a mess. He still felt like he was drowning, but Loki was *helping*, and he clung on tighter still

with a desperate ache.

“Shh, it’s okay. I’m here, you’re safe.”

Was he? Was *Loki*? He had seen Loki hurt, and he still didn’t know where they were. They might both be captured, they— it could be anything, Tony didn’t know. All he *knew* was that Loki was there, and that Tony needed him.

The hug wasn’t enough, the press of skin wasn’t enough, the way Loki’s lips brushed lightly and gently over Tony’s forehead was not *enough*—

Tony’s hands buried in Loki’s hair and he crashed their lips together, whimpering into Loki’s mouth and just, he just *needed*. Loki kissed him back at first, his tight grip around Tony’s waist pulling him closer still, and Tony arched his spine to an awkward angle, because he could get closer, he could line their bodies up so every part of them was touching.

But Loki slowed their kiss then, and started to pull away. Tony chased his retreat, dotting his lips along the corner of Loki’s mouth, the line of his jaw, and then pressing open mouthed kisses down the curve of Loki’s throat. The familiar taste on his tongue urged him on, making things seem more solid, more *real*, but Loki continued to pull away— and Tony whined, wanting to be closer, wanting everything that Loki had to give—

“Not right now,” Loki whispered, his voice sounding smooth amongst the harsh gasps and desperate whimpers. “Please, Anthony, just let me hold you.”

Tony stopped then, not wanting to do a thing that Loki wasn’t comfortable with. But his bones felt like they were aching in his flesh, his skin itching and bubbling like the air was burning every part of him that wasn’t pressed up against something else, and he just, he needed, he wanted—

“Loki,” he rasped, his voice hoarse and painful, so he moved to something else, something easier. ‘*Loki, please, I need...*’ He trailed off, because even when he wasn’t speaking aloud, he wasn’t *sure* what he needed. Well, except— ‘*I need you.*’

‘*And I am here.*’

Loki leaned down, and Tony was almost expecting another kiss. But Loki just pressed their foreheads together, the touch as soothing as ever but still not the intimacy that Tony was craving.

Then Tony felt the odd sensation of leaving his body behind, that feeling he had only felt in wakefulness just the one time before. He could still feel Loki’s arms around him, holding him so very tight, holding him *together*. But he was also somewhere else as well, somewhere calmer, quieter— somewhere that his heart wasn’t thundering in his ears and he could actually focus on the way that Loki was looking at him, his green eyes full of worry.

They were inside their minds, their thoughts pressing together as they fell into each other’s arms. Tony couldn’t say who’s mind it was – it could have been either, it could have been both – but that didn’t *matter*. All that mattered was the sudden sense of safety, of having Loki

curled around him in every possible way, on every possible level. He leaned into Loki's hold, feeling calmer already, the madness of the world no longer able to touch him as Loki was all that he knew.

And, slowly, Tony began to come back into himself.

"Anthony, you're okay," Loki was still whispering, and even inside their minds, his voice sounded a little coarse. "You're okay."

Tony couldn't help but wonder if Loki was reassuring himself just as much as he was Tony, and he leaned closer still, his whole body trembling.

Loki's hands were gripping him tightly, curled into his shirt as Loki buried his face into Tony's hair. And Tony realised that for all that Loki was doing everything he could to comfort Tony, he was trying to hold himself together just as much.

Tony turned his head and touched their lips together once more.

It wasn't like the demanding, desperate kisses from before, just a soft touch to reassure himself that Loki was there— to reassure Loki that they were *both* going to be okay. And as Loki began to relax, Tony did as well, their bodies slumping together both in their consciousness and outside, wherever they were.

And when their breathing had steadied, when they were both calm, Tony turned his head and brought his lips against Loki's again, kissing him sweetly and chastely, letting his gratefulness and his affection shine through. Loki sighed into it, and he didn't pull away this time. He returned it with equal gentleness, and when it ended, they just stayed in each other's arms, neither willing to move nor leave their sanctuary quite yet.

"I'm sorry," Tony whispered. "I shouldn't have..."

"It's fine," Loki said, his lips brushing over Tony's hair as he spoke. "I understand."

"What happened?" Tony asked. "What... where are we?"

"Do not worry, Anthony," Loki replied. "We're home."

That simple word melted away the rest of Tony's fear, and he leaned against Loki's shoulder, his fingers gently playing with a lock of Loki's hair as Loki continued to explain.

"The room filled with water, and you were standing right in the path of the initial wave that came through the door," Loki said. "I knew you were in your suit, but JARVIS said that you were panicking, and you weren't flying out. There was water everywhere, and it distracted the Avengers. Rogers and Romanoff helped Rhodes out of his suit, Barton went to see to the hostages— and it was enough that I was able to get away from Thor."

"You got me out," Tony said. "The flash, that was your magic—"

"I forced the water back for a moment, so that I could get to you," Loki said. "That blue ring must allow its bearer to have some kind of control over water."

“Just what I needed,” Tony groaned. “It’s like it was tailored to target me *specifically*.”

“I doubt that,” Loki said. “Though... it is likely that they knew how you would react. He did seem awfully smug for someone who was cornered.”

“They all know,” Tony muttered. “That’s why they used it in Turkey, even though they had far more sophisticated instruments of torture. They knew about the first time.”

A low growl suddenly built up in Loki’s throat, and Tony leaned back just enough to catch his gaze.

“What?”

“I had forgotten you said they had taken you before,” Loki muttered. “No matter. I shall merely tear them all limb from limb, slowly, until they regret what they did to you.”

“They’re all going to pay regardless,” Tony pointed out. “And Loki? Thank you for saving me.” He touched their lips together for another short moment, not able to help himself, not able to stop. He would always enjoy kissing Loki.

“You are welcome, Anthony,” Loki said softly. “I always will.”

When they finally drew back from their minds and Tony was able to see all that he had missed, it was to find that they were curled together in the middle of their own mattress, the sheets all thrown to the ground no doubt in result of Tony’s struggle.

Tony was wrapped in Loki’s arms, and he noticed that Loki felt tenser than he had in their minds, his body shaking a little, his breath shallow and raspy. But his eyes were closed, and he seemed like he was smiling even though he was clearly trying to hold back a grimace.

Tony shifted back a little, trying to get a better look at his expression. Since Tony was in his lap the movement jostled Loki— and it was only a small movement, but Loki flinched back with a pained gasp.

Then the memory of the fight plummeted back into Tony’s mind, and he leaned away in horror.

Oh, shit—

“You’re injured,” Tony said. “Loki, oh god, I’m sorry—”

“I am fine,” Loki tried— but there was no way that Tony was going to believe that. Not after what he saw. He remembered the crunch of bone, the smell of burning flesh, the look of pain on Loki’s face. Tony slid away from Loki and gently touched the edge of Loki’s shirt, but before he could lift it, Loki caught his wrist.

“You don’t need to see it,” Loki said, sounding pained. “It will be but a bruise in a few hours.”

That might have been reassuring, except that Tony *knew* how fast Loki healed. He'd seen Loki get up and walk around mere minutes after having his spine shattered by the Hulk, and while he knew Loki would be drained from the fight the fact that it would take *hours* to become a bruise meant that it was something so much worse now.

"I'm going to kill him," Tony said, his voice low and completely serious. "The next time I see Thor. He's dead for this."

"No, don't," Loki said, and Tony looked up to him incredulously.

"Do *not* try to make an excuse for him. Yeah, we were fighting him, but I'm not going to just, I can't just let him get away with—"

"I'm not making excuses," Loki said. "I am *done* making excuses for him. He left me here to rot, even though he *knew* that I was on Midgard. And then during that fight, he never tried to reason. He always has in the past, he always wanted to know *why*."

"But not this time?"

"I guess I went too far, this time. We have killed more mortals since our escape than I did when I attacked your city—"

"Yes, *we*," Tony said. "Not just you. This isn't *just* you, I've been killing people as well, and we've got a fucking good reason. If Thor stopped for a moment to think he'd see that, they all would, unless every one of them is working for fucking SHIELD—"

"They won't," Loki said. "Even if we try to explain, they won't listen. Thor never does, and I don't think the others would either. Not after everything we've have done." Loki hesitated for a moment, as if he was unsure if he should say his next words. "I know that Rhodes fired the first shot."

"Rhodey didn't know that it was me," Tony pointed out. Maybe if he had, Rhodey wouldn't have attacked so fiercely— but he still would have attacked *Loki*. Tony knew Rhodey, and while Rhodey would be willing to listen if they had the time to talk. Even in the middle of a fight he would have at least tried to hold back on excessive force until he was sure of what was going on.

But, then. Even if Rhodey wasn't shooting to kill... Tony wasn't going to stay idle while anyone tried to shoot Loki *at all*, phasers set to stun or not.

And, hey, speaking of. Rhodey wasn't the one that Tony should be thinking about right now.

"Quit stalling," Tony said. "Come on, let me see. I promise I won't faint."

"It's not you fainting that I'm concerned about," Loki sighed— but he didn't argue, and tugged up the edge of his shirt. Tony had to help him pull the shirt all the way off, because he was struggling to lift his left arm high enough. That probably should have been a clue as to what Tony could expect, but his breath still caught with a strangled gasp as he saw the mess Mjölfnir had made of Loki's side.

“Shit,” Tony said aloud this time, staring at the mottled bruise that stretched over Loki’s side, the dark purples and reds and blacks covering almost the whole left half of his torso. Parts of the skin were burned and blistered, the spiderwebbed pattern proving it was lightning. His ribs on that side looked a little misshapen, as if they had been caved in by the force of the blow, and Tony couldn’t help the cry that escaped him at the sight. “*Loki—*”

“I am already healing,” Loki reminded him. “I have survived far worse than this.”

“That really doesn’t make me feel any better.”

Tony didn’t know what he could do to help, but he did know that sitting upright like this could only be putting more strain on him— not to mention the fact that he had Tony in his lap, that he had been pretty much holding Tony up for god knows how long.

So he helped Loki lie down on the bed, and although Loki protested initially those protests did not last long. With Loki horizontal and hopefully taking some pressure off his ribs, Tony cuddled against his good side, his head on Loki’s shoulder, still not wanting to move away.

But he was... conflicted, his gaze caught on that awful burn-littered bruise. Because he didn’t want to leave, he didn’t think he *could*, but...

“You need ice,” Tony whispered. “I should... I should go and get you—”

“No,” Loki said, his arm tightening where it was wrapped around Tony’s waist. “You are not going anywhere.”

Tony watched, a little confused at first as Loki held up his left arm, the one that had remained at his side in their new position so as not to jostle his ribs by reaching over. His hand hovered in the air in front of him, as if Loki were examining it— and then he glanced at Tony, and considered him for a moment.

The indecision did not last long at all, however, and then the skin on the tips of Loki’s fingers began to bleed into sapphire. His nails turned black and the deep blue spread from his fingers over his hand, down his wrist and right to his elbow. Loki’s brow was creased in concentration, and the blue slowed just as it made it past his elbow, so that the top half of his bicep remained its usual creamy colour.

And Tony was *curious*. He reached out tentatively, wanting to know what Loki felt like when his skin looked like this.

“May I...?”

Loki didn’t hesitate. He held out his arm, and let Tony brush his fingers over the smooth skin of his hand.

It was cold, freezing— but still the same shape, still Loki’s hand. He ran his thumbs over the curves he knew so well, and felt the ridges that ran over Loki’s skin. It was different, it was *fascinating*, and Tony felt as if he could touch Loki like this for hours and never grow bored.

In fact, he kind of wanted to see the rest of what Loki looked like— but he knew better than to ask outright.

This was the fourth time that he had seen Loki's skin turn blue to any kind of extent, and he still didn't know the whole story. He was curious, of course he was— he wanted to know everything about Loki that there was to know. But he had learned right back at the beginning, right back in their cell that Loki would open up given time. He'd open up when he was comfortable, and he wouldn't hide things from Tony for no reason at all. All Tony needed to do was wait— he trusted that Loki would tell him eventually.

Loki was smiling as he tugged his hand from Tony's now numb fingers. "So long as I hold myself like this," he said, carefully arranging his blue arm so that it rested over his bruise, "Then the cold should affect my injury as normal, since the rest of me is still in an Aesir form."

"That's amazing," Tony said. Then he looked up to meet Loki's bright green gaze. "*You're* amazing."

Loki's eyes widened for a moment, then he tilted down his chin to press a kiss to the top of Tony's head. "For the way you easily accept this," he said slowly, "I was just thinking the same thing about you."

"Of course I accept it," Tony said immediately, recognising that there were issues surrounding that which he didn't yet know about, but really... were not that hard to guess, given what he *did* know about Loki's past. "Loki, this is part of you."

Loki didn't respond to that with words, but the way he drew Tony a little closer spoke far louder anyway.

"I just wish it wasn't necessary, that you hadn't got hurt at all," Tony muttered. "I should have moved faster, I should have helped you."

"No," Loki said gently. "This wasn't your fault. You were fighting your own battle, and I did not see Thor's swing. I still would have been able to win the fight."

"You were in pain," Tony replied, his tone equally soft. "You still are. I should have done something, I, I don't know. Maybe I should have got him with a repulsor, just, *something*—"

"No, you should have been focusing on your *own* fight," Loki replied, his hand stroking lightly first over Tony's side, and then up to touch his bruised shoulder— lightly, not enough to hurt, but enough to make his point. Loki had to see Tony hurt as well, and even if it had not been quite so bad as Loki's own injury, Tony didn't doubt that it had still worried him. But then Loki's voice hardened a little as he said, "I watched you fighting Rhodes. You were not as focused as you should have been—"

"Yeah?" Tony interrupted, catching Loki's hand with his own and stopping its movement. "Well, if you were watching Thor instead of *me*, then maybe you shouldn't have been hit—"

“You should have gone straight for the ring, you could have made it before Rhodes got to you —”

“Rhodey came out of nowhere—”

“He blasted through the wall, you were too distracted to notice—”

“I was not too *distracted*, I knew what I was doing. I wasn’t about to let you get injured—”

“I *was* injured. Perhaps I would not have been, had you been more focused on the task at hand rather than protecting me when I did not need it—”

“Oh, so it *is* my fault?” Tony asked. He was sitting now, his chest heaving, glaring down at Loki who was glaring back at him. They both ran on short fuses, were both quick to anger, especially with something they felt so strongly about when emotions were already running high. “I thought you said that I had nothing to be guilty about?”

“I was hurt because I wanted to make sure that *you* were okay, and while I was watching Rhodes, Thor caught me unaware—”

“So it wasn’t just me who was unfocused then, right? If you weren’t watching me you wouldn’t have been hurt, and then I wouldn’t have been distracted either. Maybe this is on *you*—”

“Or maybe it was both,” Loki said. “Don’t you see? We were *both* distracted. We are each other’s weakness—”

“*No*,” Tony hissed. “Don’t you dare, don’t you *dare* say that. We’re stronger together, Loki, we *are*—”

“Had we not been so concerned for each other then it would have gone far smoother. We might even have been finished before the Avengers arrived,” Loki said. “Our strategy was not the best we could have chosen— we chose it because it allowed us to stay together. But we should have split up at first, covered more ground. I should have been using my *seiðr* to move more swiftly, and you should have been on the outside of the building, using your flight to scatter them while I took them down on the inside as they ran. We should have been able to focus on what we were doing, not just the other person.”

“That’s how teams *work*,” Tony tried. “You have to be aware of each other—”

“And you have to be able to trust that the rest of the team can hold their side of the fight,” Loki corrected. “Otherwise, everything just falls apart. I am more than capable of taking on Thor, I could have beaten him—”

“I know you could’ve,” Tony said. “I know how strong you are, but that doesn’t stop me from being worried, okay? Loki, I—” He cut himself off, not wanting to— oh, crap, this was so not the best time for that kind of—

“If you know that, then why did you?” Loki asked, thankfully providing Tony with something other than his near slip to focus on.

“Because it doesn’t matter whether I think you can or not, the fact is that we’re still stronger if we’re looking out for each other,” Tony answered back. “I’m never going to stand to the side when you get hurt, not ever—”

“But letting me suffer a scratch while you removed the bigger threat would have been better in the long run,” Loki said. “And this isn’t the first time that this has happened. We made mistakes at the graveyard because we were too caught up in each other—”

“That’s not how that happened—”

“You know that our plan went entirely awry that day—”

“We were interrupted by the ranger—”

“We never would have been if we had just—”

“And that all turned out fine anyway—”

“Anthony, just listen to me,” Loki said, harshly, his breathing fast, his ribs obviously bothering him but his anger was powering him through. “We cannot continue this way. You are going to have to learn to keep your eyes off me in a fight—”

“I won’t watch as someone is pummelling you, I *can’t*. And I bet you couldn’t, either.”

“If that is the case, then we might as well stop this search for revenge and safety now,” Loki snapped. “Because we will both likely be dead before we are able to get to the end.”

Tony stared at him for a moment, his hands clenched in fists against his thighs to try and stop them from shaking. He didn’t want to argue this, he didn’t think that he could— because... Loki’s expression was so broken, so finely shattered with real fear that this could be what would tear them asunder, and the sight of it just made Tony want to pull Loki into his arms and promise him that everything would be all right.

But Loki was wrong, he had to be. They weren’t tied together to the point that it was dangerous. They *weren’t*. Tony had always believed that they were stronger together, and he was never going to be convinced otherwise. And yeah, he didn’t want to argue with Loki but it wasn’t even something he thought he could compromise on.

Yet... he knew that if he stayed, he would give in, because he couldn’t deny Loki this. But if he gave in it would be a lie, because come the next fight he wouldn’t be able to move onto the ‘bigger threat’ if Loki was about to be hurt. He had seen Loki get injured far too many times before, and once more might be enough to break him entirely.

It was a fucking mess, because Loki was the one he was worried for, Loki was the only one who could ever make him feel better about this, *and* Loki was the one who had made him angry in the first place. It was like all of his emotions were at an all-time high, and Tony knew that if he stayed a moment longer, he would probably do something that he was going to regret.

Fuck.

“I need some air,” he said, pushing away from Loki and climbing off the bed. He turned away quickly so that he couldn’t see the expression on Loki’s face, turned and fled from the room before he could change his mind. He made it along the hallway and all but fell down the stairs, into the living room— but his steps began to slow as if his feet were made of lead, as if every step which took him further from Loki was tugging at a noose around his neck.

He leaned against the wall beside the staircase, throwing back his head and squeezing his eyes closed, trying to still his heart. Once again it was difficult to breathe, everything freezing inside him with a surge of fear.

It wasn’t that Tony didn’t feel safe himself without Loki around, though that was certainly part of it. But he was struck with a blinding, crippling terror that Loki could be in danger, that someone could attack the house that very moment and find them separated and alone and—

Loki was never helpless, but he *was* injured. Not only that, they had an enemy *in* the house, and even though Barnes was securely locked up the thought still had Tony biting down a rise of panic.

All he could see in his mind’s eye was the image of Mjölfnir hitting Loki’s side, the sight of that room where they had planned to torture him for his seiðr, the memory of how Loki had looked bleeding and unconscious on the ground in Turkey. What something like that happened again, when Tony was too far away to help stop it?

Every inch of Tony’s body was screaming, was crying for him to go back—

But to go back would only prove that Loki was right, that he was too weak to be able to cope with only a few walls between them. If he couldn’t stand to be on the other side of the house, then how were they ever going to be able to come out on top of the shit-storm they had found themselves in?

“Anthony?”

And then Tony’s breath left him in a gush of air, and he turned to glance up the stairs in relief.

Loki was stumbling down them, his still blue arm clutching his side, the other pressed into the wall for support. Tony’s heart immediately leapt to his throat, and he ran up the few steps with suddenly swift feet, making it just in time to catch Loki in his arms. Loki was paler than he had been before, his expression pinched, his eyes glassy with pain.

“You shouldn’t have moved off the bed,” Tony whispered, swaying slightly under his weight, not able to hold Loki up. To avoid tumbling back down to the living room Tony helped Loki lower to the ground, sinking down until they were seated in the middle of the stairs.

“Don’t leave me,” Loki whispered, burying his face into the curve of Tony’s neck.

“I couldn’t,” Tony said, holding him tight and rocking him gently, comfortingly. “I *wouldn’t*.”

It was clear that this was a two-way street. Neither of them were able to be apart from the other, not even for a moment. What Tony had seen as a strength before... well, it was rapidly

becoming clear that this was not only something which could be used against them, but also something that would cause them grief even without any action by their enemies.

And maybe... it was a bigger problem than Tony had been willing to admit.



Days passed, and Loki healed. Tony's shoulder took longer to completely recover than Loki's ribs, but even though Loki offered to heal the bruise Tony refused. He wanted all of Loki's strength to be focused on healing himself, and besides— they weren't going out to fight again just yet, and probably would not until they had sorted out their issues... if that was even possible.

They spent the days keeping each other in their sights, exchanging lingering touches and soft kisses and reassuring each other that they weren't going anywhere, that they had each other, that they were still *alive*. They kept each other grounded when otherwise, Tony knew that they would both be spitting bullets, itching to get out and do *something*, anything toward furthering their plan for revenge.

Tony didn't shrug off his irritation over the Avengers, because it was thanks to them that they hadn't got any information from Germany, and that they would need to come up with a whole new plan as far as that – and the third ring – were concerned. It seemed that they had at least disrupted operations at that base though, for JARVIS' sensors indicated that the ring had moved, now, to a different location still in the same country– not in Kiel, but further south in a Bavarian forest.

They hadn't lost sight of it entirely, so they would be able to try again– and Tony tried to reassure himself with the reminder that their plan *had* been to intimidate the Ten Rings with the knowledge that they were coming, that they wouldn't give up until every last one of them were dead. The Ten Rings had already known that they were taking them out. This was just more proof to that, and... Tony just had to hope that they hadn't inadvertently given the Ten Rings hope with their failure.

Although... maybe there was even a positive side to this, a silver lining hidden amongst the dark. The ring had moved, which meant that its bearer had as well– and if it stayed in the one place for a while, then perhaps they would find another base that they had not known about.

JARVIS kept an eye on it though, and they did not attack. They didn't even talk about their choice to hold off, it was just... an understanding between them. They needed more information, but... for that, they were going to need to *gather* it.

They had a lot on the Ten Rings already, and had just messed up their chance to get some more. On the other side of things, they knew SHIELD was involved somehow, and Tony itched to get into their servers. But for now, there was a chance that SHIELD didn't know *they* knew about the connection– so for as long as they remained focused on the Ten Rings, SHIELD could sweat and wonder when Tony would find out about their part in everything. Hopefully, the fear would continue to work in their favour. But they didn't know anything about how HYDRA fit into the whole picture, why they were looking for Tony when for all

anyone knew, their organisation had not been heard of since their defeat at the hands of Captain America in World War II.

Of course, it wasn't beyond the realm of imagination that Tony had managed to piss them off without even knowing of their existence, but it would be nice to know for sure—

And hopefully, for that, they wouldn't *need* to go anywhere. They had a source of info sitting just down the hall— they just needed him to actually *say* something.

After they had caught him, they had left Barnes to sit in his room alone, hoping that the passage of time would do him some good. After Germany, however, they began to try a more direct approach, going in and talking to him, trying to see if he remembered who he was, what he had done, or even just a few more names of people he had worked for.

Usually, Loki would talk to Barnes while Tony remained hidden, because they had been worried that seeing his original target would make Barnes snap out of whatever silence he had fallen into in a bad way. But as time carried on marching forward, it began to seem like making him snap would be the best way to get some kind of response.

Barnes wouldn't talk to Loki. But maybe... seeing the man he was meant to kill would be enough of a shock to the system to kick him into gear.

Loki went into the room with him, of course, but used his seiðr to keep himself hidden, so that Barnes would think he and Tony were alone.

Tony held his breath as he stepped into Barnes' line of vision, but Barnes did not make a move. There was something dark in his gaze, though, something haunted which suggested a touch more emotion than Tony had seen in him before.

"James Buchanan Barnes," Tony said, echoing his greeting from that first day. "Do you know who I am?"

"Tony Stark," Barnes replied, his voice not quite as dark as Tony remembered. *And* they were the first words he had spoken since that *Hail HYDRA*, and Tony felt a thrill of progress go through him.

"We're not going to hurt you," Tony said. "Okay? I don't know what HYDRA did you, but I know that it can't have been pleasant. And I am kind of sorry about your arm. Would you like me to get you some painkillers, or something?"

Tony wasn't really expecting that he'd get a verbal answer, thinking that the confused crease along Barnes' brow would be all the response he'd receive. But, then—

"Why?" Barnes asked.

"Because I might not be the nicest guy around, but I'm not quite as bad as the people who I think you've been staying with these past... seventy or so years. I know that I probably look just as bad right now, but... Well, you've been eating the same as us. If HYDRA fed you like that, I feel cheated. I definitely got caught by the wrong criminal organisation."

“You call me Barnes,” the assassin whispered, his frown deepening, pretty much ignoring all that Tony had said. *How rude.* “That is... familiar.”

“I believe your friends called you Bucky,” Tony tried.

Something flashed in Barnes’ gaze, then, and Tony hoped that he’d managed to hit a nerve. But, then—

“I don’t have any friends,” Barnes said harshly.

“Well, for now, you’ve got us,” Tony replied. “And I mean it when I say we’re not that bad. If you need anything, let JARVIS know and we’ll get it for you.” He paused, for a moment. “Now that we know you weren’t in your right mind when you tried to kill us, we’re not going to throw you to the wolves. I don’t think you’re our enemy, and until you prove otherwise, you’re not going to see any cruelty from us. We’ve had enough of that to last us a lifetime, I think.”

Tony wouldn’t let him *out* of course, he wasn’t stupid. But that didn’t mean that he was beyond showing a little kindness.

Barnes didn’t say much else after that, and Tony took his leave.

The moment he stepped out into the hallway and closed the door behind him, he felt arms wrapping around his waist from behind and the touch of lips to the side of his throat. Tony knew that Loki was just steadying himself, after seeing Tony talk to the man who had tried to kill them. Nothing had happened – relatively, Barnes had been downright pleasant – so there shouldn’t have been a need for this. Loki shouldn’t have been that worried.

A single word whispered through Tony’s mind.

Dangerous.

He pushed it away before it could fester. Difficulties during fights was one thing, but Tony would never deny Loki comfort in a moment like this, in the safety of their home and when Loki clearly needed it. So he turned in Loki’s arms and returned the embrace, hugging him back before Loki even made himself fully visible again.

They didn’t say anything, there was no need. And it was only when they were seated back on the couch in the living room with steaming mugs in their hands that they even discussed what it was that had happened.

“He’s opening up,” Loki started, sipping at his tea with one hand, the other absently tracing shapes over Tony’s thigh.

“Baby steps, I suppose,” Tony sighed, holding his mug carefully as he leaned a little into Loki’s side. “Even if we can make him talk completely freely, we still don’t know what they did to him. If he *has* been brainwashed, he might just turn on us again without warning.”

“Then once we have the information, we should rid ourselves of him,” Loki replied.

“I still don’t think he was working for them willingly,” Tony said. “I wasn’t kidding when I said I don’t think he’s the enemy. Perhaps... we might even be able to find some common ground.”

Loki’s lips pressed tightly together for a moment as if he did not quite agree, but then he sighed he gave Tony a nod. “If this goes wrong,” he said, his voice lighter. “Then I shall blame you for it entirely.”

“That’s fair,” Tony said. “But that also means I get the blame if it goes right.”

“For your sake, I hope that it does.”

“Was that a threat?” Tony asked. He put his mug on the table beside the couch without even looking, then turned so he could loop his arms over Loki’s shoulders.

“Perhaps,” Loki replied. His mug vanished into thin air, and he had a glint in his eye that was not difficult to interpret. Tony smirked as he slid himself into Loki’s lap, straddling him in a position they had used so many times before as a way to survive, but which now made Loki’s pupils blow wide.

“Oh?” Tony asked, that smirk only deepening as he felt Loki’s hardening interest, leaning in so their lips brushed just *slightly* and pressing forward even further with his hips. “And how would you carry out this threat?”

Loki’s hands were resting on Tony’s hips, and he pulled Tony closer still as he tilted up his chin. “I’m sure that I could think of something.”

Their mouths slid together then with a delicious groan, though Tony knew that this was more than just a kiss. Their hands were exploring everywhere, sliding under shirts and over skin in a bid to pull the other closer as much as it was to work themselves up. Even as Tony ground down with his hips and drew a low moan from Loki’s throat, even as their thoughts made way for waves of pleasure given eagerly by their hands and mouths, he *knew* that every touch was saying far more than it seemed on the surface.

Every kiss a brand, a promise pressed against their skin.

I won’t leave you.

We’re together.

We’re safe.

Playing around with memory

Tony stared at the white porcelain, the colour burning into his mind, bringing back more reminders than he had hoped to relive. His focus was harsh on the metal tap, but he forced his hand to move. It felt cold on his skin, and he grit his teeth and twisted it with so much force that when the water flooded from the faucet it crashed against the porcelain below, the clear liquid spreading quickly to fill the bath.

The tub was a big one. He told himself that meant it was nothing at all like the barrels they had shoved his head into, that the difference should be enough to cut through the fear. But that fear was a difficult thing to break, because it *wasn't* irrational, it wasn't something that he could simply reason away.

Tony knew how it felt to drown, he knew what it was to have water running down his throat, choking his airways, burying into his lungs and burning through his body. He also knew how it felt to not be able to breathe for *hours*, for however long they had kept him on low oxygen, gasping with every insubstantial draw of air.

Oh, yes. He knew exactly what it would be like to die in the water, and it was the knowing that plagued him. To live in ignorance would have been bliss.

The tub really was huge, the kind that Tony had always favoured before the first time in Afghanistan. He remembered putting it in out of habit, and then never thinking of it again, because he had such baths in almost all of his houses. And being so used to having bathtubs of that size, its presence had never bothered him before— so long as he wasn't looking at it, so long as he tried to forget what it was.

“Sir,” JARVIS said, his voice soft and almost breaking through the haze that Tony was pressing upon himself, to try and distance his mind from what it was he was about to do. “Are you sure this is wise?”

“I need to fix this, J,” Tony said, his voice blank and yet underpinned with a kind of desperation. “Please. I can't let what happened happen again.”

JARVIS was silent for half a moment before he spoke. “Are you sure that it is wise to do this alone?”

“I'm not alone, J,” Tony said. “I've got you.”

JARVIS didn't respond to that. He didn't need to. Tony knew what the AI was thinking, and he only had to hope that he would hold to his promise regardless of what he thought was best.

Unable to help himself, Tony glanced over his shoulder toward the door. He had left it wide open, so that he would be able to hear every movement from the other side. It wasn't really helping his nervousness, but it was *enough* that he didn't feel the urgent need to go back into the bedroom and fall into Loki's arms, to entwine together and reassure himself that nothing was wrong. Besides, JARVIS would let Tony know if something was happening with Loki,

and Tony would be able to be inside the bedroom in half a moment. If he craned his head, he could even see Loki's feet, sticking out from underneath the twisted covers.

Tony wasn't going to wake him. He didn't need Loki to see him like this, not when he had already put his lover through so very much these past days. Drawing a deep breath, Tony glanced back down to where one of the constant sources of his nightmares was sitting calm and seemingly unthreatening beside him.

Thoughts of Loki had distracted Tony enough that by the time he focused back on the bath, it was almost full. The water was lapping along the edges of the white porcelain, undulating slowly as the force of the tap sent air bubbles tumbling over the surface down the other end.

Tony reached out and twisted the tap closed, cutting off the water and leaving only a calm surface, the waves soft, catching a reflection of the light in a way that was almost hypnotic. Then he sat on the ground beside the tub and slowly dipped his fingers into it, feeling the slight press of the surface before his fingers slid underneath. It was ice cold, the same as the water in Afghanistan, in Turkey, in Kiel. He needed to be able to face his trauma, and he knew from his ability to shower that running water hot enough to burn did not feel the same as this.

He forced his hand lower, lower, until he was touching the bottom of the tub, submerged almost all the way up to his shoulder. He was not wearing any clothes, having torn himself straight from the bed, but he thought that perhaps he should have been. The feel of wet material scratching over his skin was a sensation he knew well, and maybe not feeling it now would make this test useless. He wanted to be able to deal with everything that he couldn't, but when he thought of wet clothing sticking to his skin, pulling at him in an awful sickly way, he just... he couldn't. Tony clenched his fist against the bottom of the bath in the effort to keep his arm submerged, fighting the urge to get up and run away.

Okay. So he would do this without his clothes, just another little something different that would hopefully offset this enough to let him concentrate on something else. He could always go with the full deal later.

Baby steps, right?

But if he was going to do this, then he needed to do the rest of it *properly*. He had done the dishes before, because even though Loki seemed to make it his mission to get to the sink before Tony could, Tony had been unwilling to force Loki to do that chore after every single meal. And yes, he almost always completed the task with rubber gloves over his hands to keep away the wet, with scalding water so hot it could never be mistaken for the stuff he had drowned on, and with the calming presence of Loki always never far away. Just having a hand submerged was not enough. If he wanted to fix this, he needed to get in all the way.

But that was easier said than done.

Tony closed his eyes, and forced himself to remember what had happened in Kiel. Loki had been injured, and Tony had *frozen*. What if Thor had hit something more vital? What if Thor had succeeded in making Loki immobile, or unconscious? If that had happened, then Tony should have been able to hold Loki in his arms and fly them both out of there.

Hell, Loki had been injured, hurt, and he'd still fought to get them both out, fighting tooth and nail and to the very last. He never would have given up on Tony like Tony had given up on him, and Tony *could not* allow it to happen again.

He needed to *fix* this.

Tony shoved himself to his feet, bracing against the edge of the bath as he did so, forcing his shuddering limbs to cooperate. One foot into the bath was easy enough, not unlike his arm—the other was difficult, knowing that if he fell, he would be all the way under.

Focus, Tony.

He lowered himself into the water, his limbs shaking, his breath quickening— and then he was gulping down oxygen, as if his body was preparing itself to hold his breath for a long time. But he kept his head above the water, his hands still gripping the edge of the bath so tightly that his knuckles were turning white.

He could hear JARVIS talking, but he was too focused on trying to breathe. He tried to remember what Loki's voice sounded like, the words Loki always used to calm him down. But there was no calming rhythm to follow, nothing to help—

“JARVIS,” he gasped, “Count for me.”

Then JARVIS began a small beat, a simple series of quiet beeps that gave Tony something to hold on to.

In, and out.

As Tony's breathing began to calm, he opened his eyes and flicked his gaze over the room, searching for something to focus on other than the whisper of cold water over his skin. It didn't take him long to find something—the walls of the bathroom were tiled white to about half way up, where the boundary of tile and plaster was broken by a line of grey mosaic. Tony focused on that line, focused on counting how many different shades of grey he could see, and then how many tiles in total.

He estimated the tiles' width and then calculated the area of the strip, and then how many grey tiles would be needed to create a line from Florence to New York and then back again. It was easy math, something he didn't really need to think about, but enough to draw him back into himself until he was almost focused, the fear *almost* manageable—

But this wasn't *enough*.

“Sir—”

He needed to fix this. He needed to go all the way.

Tony drew in a long, deep breath, his heart hammering—

Then he slid down the side of the bath and let his face submerge under the water.

The moment the water touched Tony's face he was thrashing, his hands hitting the side of the tub, his knees crashing against the porcelain. He drew in a terrified gasp and breathed only water, he was choking and drowning and *scared*.

He tried to focus again, tried to take stock like he always did to remind himself that he was *fine*. He tried to catalogue injuries or limbs or count breaths or *something*, but what had worked in the past didn't work now. It was as if he had pushed himself beyond all limits, as if somehow, even now in the safety of his own home, this horror had grown *worse*.

Then Tony felt strong arms around him, pulling him from the water and holding him close. He scrabbled against them for a minute, because he wasn't done, he wasn't— he needed to go back in, he needed to see this through even if it killed him.

Loki's bare skin felt hot against his own, chilled as he was from the freezing bath, and the heat drew him in even as he tried to pull away.

"No," Tony was saying, *hissing*, fighting against Loki's hold. "No, don't—"

"It's okay, Anthony," Loki said, trying to soothe him. "You're safe, you—"

"*No*," Tony said again. "That's not what— Loki, put me back down!"

Loki was quick to comply, but he still didn't do what Tony *wanted*. Tony felt his feet touch the cold floor, the tiles wet from the water that had flooded the room at Tony's thrashing. He looked over to the bath, emptier than before but still full enough to send a shudder through his whole body— and then he curled into Loki almost involuntarily.

Loki held him close again, rubbing his hands hard over Tony's skin as if he were trying to warm him up. In fact, Tony thought distantly, that was probably exactly what he was doing.

"I need to go back in," Tony said even as he pressed closer, needing to feel that solid anchor that Loki always gave him.

"Anthony, you were on the verge of another panic attack," Loki said. "You need to come out of here, warm up and calm down—"

"I need to get used to it," Tony snapped, his voice harsh. But Loki was warm and comfortable and safe, and he rested his head onto Loki's shoulder, nuzzling at his neck.

Loki didn't say anything for a while, and he didn't try to take them out of the bathroom. He just held Tony close, and after a few moments Tony felt a spark of magic through his body. He smiled as he felt himself begin to warm properly, the shakes finally abating, and he held Loki just a little bit closer.

"Anthony, why did you do that?" Loki asked after a while. "Why would you do such a thing to yourself?"

"Because I can't keep being afraid," Tony replied, still hiding his face. "I know I'm useless compared to you, and I just—"

“You are not useless,” Loki said immediately, but Tony only shook his head.

“I don’t want to let you down, not again,” Tony said. “Loki, I’m sorry that I’m so weak all the time. I’m sorry that you’re always putting me back together.”

“Who is it that calms my nightmares?” Loki asked, something dangerous in his tone. “You are the only thing holding *me* in one piece, Anthony. I will never mind doing the same for you.”

“No, you’re stronger than me,” Tony said. “You don’t *need* me, not like I need you. You could be fighting them by yourself and you would still win. I’m just dragging you down, we both know it. But I don’t *want* to be.”

Loki sighed then, and Tony felt him lean his head atop Tony’s hair. “You think that I’m strong?” Loki whispered. “I’m not. Anthony, when Thor struck me, I thought that I was going to be caught. And that *terrified* me.”

“Of course it did,” Tony said, finally leaning away just enough to catch Loki’s gaze. “That’s perfectly normal—”

“No,” Loki interrupted. “You don’t understand. In that moment, all I could see was the way that Thor put that muzzle on me in your penthouse, and I knew that he would do it again. I knew that I would be going back to exactly the same place, back to their demands and their attempts to steal all that I am. And... I thought about running away.”

Tony’s heart ached at that, but Loki wasn’t done.

“Every time I think about losing you, even just losing sight of you for a moment, I feel a fear that I cannot escape, even when I *know* that you are fine,” Loki said. “And when I saw you in that water—”

“Loki, if I am about to get caught, I would *want* you to run,” Tony interrupted fiercely. “You *run*, okay? I’m not worth the risk of them taking you and— and taking your—”

“Stop,” Loki said. “Please, don’t—”

“Loki—”

“I can’t,” Loki said, his eyes burning with pain, his hands at Tony’s waist gripping tight enough that it almost began to hurt. “I know— if you were in danger... to stay, to be caught would mean the worst pain imaginable, and to leave would tear me apart. But I am afraid that... when it came down to it, I do not know which decision I would make.”

“I do,” Tony said. “You’ll make the right one. You saved me in Kiel, you saved us *both*. But, promise me that if you can’t save me from something, if trying will only get you caught as well— promise me that you’ll *leave*.”

Loki didn’t respond other than to pull Tony close once again, to wrap his arms around him and bury his face into Tony’s still wet hair. Tony didn’t fight it— he hugged Loki tight as well, not wanting to let go, not wanting to examine this too closely.

He didn't want to admit that Loki had been right, that there were so many problems between them that they were almost drowning in weakness. Neither of them had wanted to admit it in the past either, too focused on their mission of revenge, too high on the success of their escape to want to even consider that there was anything they couldn't do.

But they had more to lose now than they had then.

"Loki," Tony said, pulling away just enough to glance back toward the water which still sat seemingly innocuously inside the tub. "This is why I need to do this. I need to be able to do *something*. I can't change the fear I feel whenever I see you in danger, or whenever I can't see you at all. But I *can* do something about this, and I need to try."

Loki stared at him for a moment, and Tony wondered whether Loki would say something about this not being the best way to go about fixing his PTSD, the same way JARVIS had when Tony had first pulled himself from a sleeping Loki's arms and moved toward the bath. He also wondered whether Loki would refuse to let him go, because it was clear that Loki was drawing comfort from holding him close. And although Tony would be willing to do anything to help steady Loki, he knew that this was something that *needed* to be done, for it would be best for them both in the long run.

They considered each other for a while in silence, and just when Tony was about to pull away and simply get into the bath, Loki relaxed with a sigh.

"Very well," Loki said. "If this is something you need, then I will not stop you. But... you are not going to face this alone."

That wasn't something that Tony could complain about, and he leaned forward to touch his lips to Loki's bare shoulder in thanks.

When they stepped into the bath together, Tony realised that the water was warmer than before, but not by much— more lukewarm than freezing, just enough that it would not make him shiver. Maybe it had warmed from the air, though Tony suspected that it had something to do with Loki.

They arranged themselves so Loki was underneath, so that there was no way for Tony's face to slip below the water since his head was pillowed on Loki's shoulder. Loki's arms were securely around Tony's waist, holding him both in place and pressed close into Loki's lap.

Tony turned his head to kiss Loki properly, their mouths sliding together slowly but firmly. Despite the way they were lying with their bare bodies pressing against each other, there was nothing sexual about it. This was a comfort, a promise, a reminder that while they needed to learn to be able to pull apart, that still did not mean that they ever had to do anything alone.

When the kiss broke and Tony lay back, Loki even let his seiðr flow out, caressing Tony's body in a green light show that made Tony smile. He turned to touch his lips to Loki's again, just for the briefest of moments, and then he kissed Loki's cheek, his jaw, his neck, his shoulder. It wasn't only distracting— it was *grounding*, and it wasn't long before where they were hardly mattered any more.

Even with the water lapping over his skin, Tony slowly began to feel *safe*.



Days turned into weeks, and slowly, they began to recover from their ordeals. Tony could cope with sitting water so long as Loki was near, and although he still could not submerge his head, he grew to the point where if Loki was beside him and holding his hand, he could stay in the bath by himself without feeling like his skin was trying to claw its way from his bones.

They still found it difficult to be apart from each other, but they tried to work on that, as well. It was difficult, though, because every time they tried to be apart, one or both would rush back with a need to *check*.

But... the time they spent holding each other afterward gradually began decrease. They would come together with a kiss, a touch to the cheek, a reassuring hug, and then they could go back to reading or working or whatever it was with a calm mind.

They still couldn't manage it for long periods, not even with the other just out of sight— and Tony was slowly coming to realise that it was worse for Loki. Loki always held on a little tighter, always lingered long after Tony's heartbeat had slowed. He supposed that it made sense. When they were captured, Tony was always the one who had been dragged out of their cell, and there must have been moments where Loki wondered whether Tony would come back, whether he would be left alone.

But Loki was as equally determined for them to fight this as Tony was, because they were both all too aware that outside of their own little bubble, things were still moving forward, and he could only hope that they were not being left too far behind.

The Avengers especially were a worry. Rumours were abound online and in the media regarding what had happened in Kiel, since the world knew the Avengers had been there, knew that they had attacked the same person who had stolen Iron Man and *knew* that they had rescued hostages from the building itself. But it seemed that the details had become blurred, because the media remained unaware that it was *Loki*.

It almost seemed like that was being done on purpose.

Tony debated sending an anonymous tip that the Avengers had injured the people who had *actually* saved those hostages, and that they had fought on the wrong side of the fight. He could probably even get JARVIS to find some footage to back him up. It would certainly send a message to all the right people, but... he had made a promise to Loki to lay low for a while, and he was not about to break it. Not for this.

There was one thing he wanted to know, though— and when better to ask than when he was down in the workshop alone, since Loki had reluctantly gone to fetch them hot drinks. It would be a distraction, at least, from the growing ache inside him.

“Hey, JARVIS?” Tony asked. “How is Rhodey?”

He still remembered what it felt like to shoot his best friend, and the fear he'd known when he remembered that he'd left Rhodey wearing a dead suit in a room filling with water. Of course, he already knew that Rhodey had escaped that, but... still. Not to mention the fact that Rhodey knew Tony better than anyone, and if the reason for the strange silence on the matter had anything to do with... well. If any of the Avengers had seen something the others hadn't in that fight, it would have been Rhodey.

"Colonel Rhodes is in good health, Sir," JARVIS answered. "However..."

"J?" Tony prompted at the pause.

"He has... been asking me questions that I have found difficult to answer."

Tony frowned. "Questions about what?"

"About Iron Man. He has asked me to try and track the suit that you are using, and when I told him that I could not, he said that he believed I was lying."

"Lying?" Tony asked. "*Why?*"

"He believes that you would have built multiple failsafes into the suit, that there is no way you would chance that I couldn't find it. Every time I tell him that I cannot find it now only deepens his suspicions."

Tony's frown deepened, because... well, Rhodey was *right*. He certainly had installed about a hundred failsafes in every one of his suits so that he would always be able to find them. Anyone who knew him would never think otherwise, and it would be difficult to convince someone who knew him as well as Rhodey did of anything different.

Unless, maybe—

"Tell him you can't because Loki's magic is interfering with your connection to the suit," Tony said. "You already told Rhodey that I put it on lockdown before I died, right? Use that to say you can't track it."

"I informed the other Avengers that the suit was locked down, and so I could not open it to let them see Iron man's body," JARVIS said, sounding a little rueful. "However, I gave Colonel Rhodes what I knew to be the truth at the time."

"Don't beat yourself up, J, you did the right thing," Tony sighed. After all, JARVIS hadn't known about the additional danger back with the Avengers, not until Tony had used the Fortress of Solitude protocol. JARVIS had merely been doing everything he could to find Tony and bring him back to safety, and Tony loved him for that. "Okay. So Rhodey knows that you *could* have opened the suit before?"

"Yes," JARVIS said. "Any excuse I give him now as to why the connection is broken seems only like another lie, and remaining silent makes the situation worse."

"Tell him that my magic is hiding it from view."

Tony turned to see that Loki had reappeared, and instantly crossed the space between them to step into Loki's embrace. Loki had already placed their mugs on a bench, and he held Tony tightly, kissing the top of his head. Both of them felt their hearts slow, their bodies begin to relax at the comfort that the feel of each other brought them.

It was a few moments before Tony spoke, leaning back slightly. "You think that would work?" he asked.

"I believe so," Loki replied, his lips brushing over Tony's temple, as if he could not resist continuing to touch at every opportunity. "Would all of your tracking devices still work, if I were hiding the suit with my seiðr?"

"I'm not sure, but I suppose it doesn't matter," Tony said. "If *I'm* not sure, then there's no way for Rhodey to be, either. That should work. JARVIS?"

"I will try," JARVIS replied. "But I do fear that Colonel Rhodes is not far from discovering not only your survival, but also that you are working with Mr Liesmith."

"Of course he is," Tony groaned.

Loki frowned.

"That's not all, is it?" he asked.

"Ms Potts also has her own suspicions," JARVIS admitted. Well, at least that wasn't a surprise. Tony had learned that much from her interview, after all. "Thankfully, she is rather distracted by other matters at the moment, and is focused on your company. She has trust that Colonel Rhodes will find you first."

"Goddamn it," Tony groaned, leaning his forehead into Loki's shoulder. "Okay. But if Rhodey is stumped by the magic, then he'll hold off for now. At least to give us some more time."

Loki's arms tightened a little at that, and Tony knew they were thinking the same thing. *A little more time to recover.* They needed it, and neither of them were conflicted anymore about admitting that, no matter how much they had begun to scratch at the walls.

It was probably the progress that was helping with that, because they *were* getting better, and seeing results made the pause in their plan easier to bear. It was going to be a long hard slog, and they weren't going to suddenly heal over night, but they were *improving*, and that was all that either of them could hope for at the moment.

The other person in the house was seeing progress, as well. It really did seem that time was helping him, that being away from the people who had tugged at his strings was doing a world of good.

They had worked out why in a particularly fortuitous conversation, about three weeks after Kiel.

“They needed to renew it,” Barnes had admitted, not even looking up from the book he was reading. He was lying on the couch with his knees bent, one foot hooked over the other thigh to hold the book in place while he used his only hand to turn the pages. They had tried to keep him entertained, knowing all too well what it felt like to be cooped up, but it almost seemed like Barnes had been somewhat enjoying the peace. Somehow. Tony didn’t entirely get it, but he wasn’t going to begrudge the guy.

“They?” Tony asked. “And that’s HYDRA, yeah?”

“At first,” Barnes said, absently turning a page. Tony wondered if the multitasking calmed him down, let him talk about stuff. Maybe *he* should try that.

“But the Winter Solider is a legend of *Russian* intelligence,” Tony said. His research into it with JARVIS had helped him realise that much. “How is it you ended up with them, but told us you worked for HYDRA?”

Barnes shrugged. “I didn’t ever really ask. Didn’t ever really care. Maybe HYDRA is just larger than any of us thought it was before.”

“Okay,” Tony said, exchanging a glance with Loki. They had taken to both staying visible for these conversations, and Barnes never gave an indication that he minded. “And by *us* you mean...?”

Barnes finally did look up at that, his eyes narrowing.

“I know you know who I was,” he said. “I... am starting to remember as well. I had a friend once, and I we fought against HYDRA together.”

“I do know,” Tony sighed. “I’m... I *was* a, uh, a teammate of Steve’s.”

“Steve Rogers?” Barnes dropped the book to the side and turned so that he was sitting, pinning Tony with a heavy stare.

“I’d offer to try and get in contact, but we’re not really in a position where we can risk it right now,” Tony said. “I mean, if you think it might help your memory I can find some old footage. And, uh. Well, I’m not all that— we’re not going to let you go, but maybe we could —”

“No,” Barnes said, glancing away again. “It is better that you keep me in here. They can’t get to me, that way. They can’t make me kill anyone else.”

Tony didn’t know what to say to that. He couldn’t even imagine what it must have been like, to be forced to kill people against your will— to have puppet strings pulled and tugged until you were screaming in your head without control.

Had Barnes been screaming? Or had he merely woken after each mission and recalled what his hands had done with the emptiness of blind obedience? Would that be better, or worse?

Well, in a way, Tony supposed it didn’t truly matter. Either way Barnes hadn’t had a say in the things he had done, and both options were their own brand of terror. Tony didn’t know

how Barnes was functioning even as well as he was after all that he had been through.

But, the mention of Barnes' memory tugged at something in Tony's mind, and he reached for Loki's hand with a question.

Unfortunately, though, Loki shook his head. *'I have not seen anything like this before,'* Loki replied. *'Every form of mind control I have seen involves the use of either seiðr or a powerful artefact, not this form of twisted science that Midgardians have invented.'*

'That's how you did it, right?' Tony asked. *'During the invasion? If you don't mind me asking, obviously, tell me to shut up whenever you want—'*

'I had the Mind Stone,' Loki confirmed, offering Tony a smile for his attempt at thoughtfulness. *'It allows complete control over the mind, though at the risk of the user losing their own.'*

Tony had already heard that story of course, Loki had long since told him about what had happened. But he only wanted to ask—

'So we can't just whack him over the head, then?'

'Unfortunately, I doubt that would have any effect,' Loki replied wryly, his lips twitching. *'Yes, perhaps the sceptre would be able to heal Barnes' mind in a way that the pink ring is not powerful enough to do. But we do not know where it is, and even if we found it, I would never want to use it again.'*

'I know,' Tony replied. *'And I would not make you.'*

"You know, if you want to make me frustrated with you, this is a really good way to do it," Barnes said loudly. "If you're talking about me, I think I deserve to be part of the conversation. It is *my* head, after all, even if I haven't been in control of it lately."

It was probably the longest sentence Tony had heard Barnes say, and he turned to him in shock. "Did you just make a *joke*?"

"Look at that," Barnes said. "So I did. Are you going to tell me what you were talking about?"

"I think I preferred you when you were all dark and moody," Tony muttered.

Tony could *feel* Loki's amusement, but the mage's voice was level as he spoke.

"We were just discussing a few options as to how we might be able to help you," Loki said.

"And what did you come up with?" Barnes asked— though, considering what he had just said before, he seemed almost... disinterested, for some reason.

"I cannot bring back your memories, and I cannot remove the trauma," Loki told him. "Trust me, if that were possible, then there are many other things that I would use the skill for before I used it on you."

“But you might be able to fix whatever they did to get control of me?” Barnes asked doubtfully. And, *oh*. Barnes had lived with this for long enough that he didn’t think there *was* a way to fix his mind. Maybe that was why he had accepted his imprisonment here so easily—after all, Tony and Loki had held to their word, and they weren’t being unnecessarily cruel. Here, at least, Barnes was in control of himself, free in his mind even if not to move around.

Tony supposed, in a way, he could understand that.

“It is not magic, so I cannot remove that as easily as I might have been able to otherwise,” Loki continued. “But if the triggers you described are based on repetition, or a response that has been worked into you through hypnosis, then that means that the key is held in your memory.”

Barnes frowned, as if he didn’t understand.

“If those memories are removed, then maybe the trigger will be as well,” Tony explained.

“You can do that?” Barnes asked, raising his brows.

“Taking away a memory is far easier than retrieving them,” Loki said. “So long as I can identify *which* memories, that is. I would not want to risk removing anything else, lest I take away all that is left of who you used to be.”

“I don’t much care for who I used to be,” Barnes muttered, but Tony saw the way his fist clenched, and he wondered if that was a lie.

“Maybe I can do something about that,” Tony murmured. Two pairs of curious eyes turned to look at him then, and he shrugged. “I was playing around with memory for a while, trying to create something that would let me go over past experiences properly again and come to terms with them, without the exaggeration that normally happens over time. I stopped when just working on it started to trigger the memory of falling from the wormhole and started on the Iron Legion instead, but I saved everything I had on file. Maybe it’s time to dust the idea off— and with the pink ring, maybe it’ll be even easier than what I was trying to do before.”

He paused, catching Loki’s eye. They didn’t speak in their minds this time, because they didn’t need to— they understood each other through just a long look.

“It’s going to take some time, though,” Tony finished, turning back to Barnes.

“Take as long as you need,” Barnes told them, settling back into the couch and rearranging himself to read again. “I’m hardly going anywhere, am I?”

“In the meantime,” Tony sighed, “I can build you another arm, if you want. Not as strong as your last one of course—“ *At least*, Tony thought hopefully, *not yet*. “—but I can throw something together.” He let his gaze run over the way that Barnes was sitting once again. Surely that wasn’t comfortable. “It might make reading a little easier, at any rate. Just let me know what colour you want and I’ll get right on it.”

“If you want to, I’m not about to complain,” Barnes said. Then he paused. “Just... please, don’t make it red. That colour... well. I’m not that person anymore. I don’t *want* to be.”

“Don’t worry,” Tony muttered. “That’s certainly a sentiment that I can understand.”



Thankfully, JARVIS did have the old plans on file, and it didn’t take long for Tony to catch himself up to speed on what he had accomplished in the early days after the invasion. It was going to take a fair amount of work, but with the help of the ring it would be even easier than if he had tried to complete it back in Malibu.

Barnes’ arm would take a bit of work as well, because it wasn’t as simple as an Iron Man gauntlet. It needed to be wired into Barnes’ neural system and attached to the tendons that remained in his shoulder. Tony would need to properly examine what was left, if Barnes was willing to let him— when they had wrapped it, Tony had seen that the damage was extensive, but anything would help.

Both projects were going to be a challenge, and while he was stuck inside the house a challenge was exactly what Tony needed.

He was enjoying having something to work on that was actually solvable, that wasn’t the jigsaw puzzle of the Ten Rings and SHIELD, of which they still only had half the pieces. It was nice to be able to knuckle down in iron and oil and build something from the ground up, to test his mind to its limits without their lives depending on the outcome.

“Sir.”

“Yeah, J?” Tony answered, his eyes still on the metalwork before him, his eyes narrowing as he tried to construct a way for the device to interact with the mind in a safe way. Loki was ‘helping,’ since he knew the workings of both the ring and the mind far better than Tony did. He was leaning over Tony’s shoulder, his suggestions *almost* helpful enough to offset the distraction of Loki’s lips brushing over his ear.

“Sir, I know that you are not following the rings at the moment—”

“We’re not,” Loki interrupted immediately, his fingers clenching where they had come to rest on Tony’s upper arm. “We still must—”

“I understand,” JARVIS interrupted— and his voice was worried enough to give even Loki pause. “But my sensors indicate that one of them has just entered Avengers Tower.”

Tony was immediately on his feet, the beginnings of the hippocampus-hacker dropping to the workbench.

Avengers Tower.

It made him feel conflicted, because... Pepper was in there, and Rhodey, at least as far as Tony knew. People that Tony had once considered his friends, even if they were not so anymore— people and items and *memories* that he had once held dear, that maybe, he still did.

That tower had been Tony's home for a time, and while he was perfectly happy in this *new* home that he had found (outside influences aside, anyway), Tony still felt a need to defend it.

But... Loki *was* right. They weren't ready to face something like that, not yet.

Except. Avengers Tower was *his*, and if the Ten Rings thought that they could just waltz inside, then Tony felt a raging urge to prove them otherwise.

Tony hadn't even said anything, but it seemed he had said enough for Loki to understand. Loki's expression was worried as he took both of Tony's hands in his own, but his words were firm.

"I can disguise us," Loki said. "Not as Fandral and Sif, of course, but as random humans who would not cause suspicion. JARVIS will be able to let us through security— will you not, JARVIS?"

"I will be able to create employee profiles for you," JARVIS said immediately. "Interns would work well, I believe."

"No one ever looks at interns," Tony agreed. "And they always end up where they're not meant to be, since everyone seems to agree that handing over a shitty job to someone else is worth a little breach of protocol."

"That doesn't sound very safe," Loki commented.

"Nah, it was fine, they're all vetted and JARVIS keeps a better eye on them than security ever could." Tony felt a smirk curl onto his lips. "And with JARVIS on our side, we'll be fine. We'll be able to walk in there and see exactly what's going on, and no one will be able to stop us."

"Yes, we shall," Loki said. "And if they do not know we are there, then there will be no reason for a fight."

It was a compromise, but it was also one that Tony was more than willing to accept. He tugged Loki a little closer and brought their lips together, kissing him gently.

"Thank you," he whispered. "I know we shouldn't be going back there, and I wouldn't... I don't—"

"Don't worry," Loki said, his expression softening. "I understand."

Tony still felt like Loki was the only one who he could trust, but that didn't stop him from wanting to defend what was *his*. Perhaps the Ten Rings thought that since the pair of them had pulled away for a few weeks, they had decided to let up— and perhaps then, the Ten Rings had grown bold.

Well. If they had, then Tony would make sure they would regret it.

Nothing more than misleading truth

If James ever got his hands on Loki, he was going to wring that Asgardian bastard's neck.

No, seriously. James had always been an Earthly guy, and he'd never really believed that those armour-wearing weirdos were *gods*. Aliens, sure, he could buy that— and powerful ones, too. But he knew they weren't really any bigger or better than the *ants* they wished they could lord over, and James wasn't afraid to take one of them on. Especially not with all that was at stake.

You know what? Scratch that *if*.

When James got his hands on Loki, the horned *maniac* was going to regret ever putting a single foot on Earth's soil.

James' hands were currently empty and shaking, and he curled his fingers into fists to try and stop them from trembling as he paced back and forth through the penthouse. It still felt strange, to be in Avengers Tower without Tony— well, it felt strange to be without Tony at all.

He would still wake suddenly in the middle of the night sometimes, reaching for a phone that wasn't ringing, because there was no late emergency that needed James' help. He would still walk through the halls of the Tower, expecting to hear Tony's laugh from around a corner— a laugh that he hadn't heard in far too long.

Because yeah, James had been through this before of course, when Tony had been kidnapped in Afghanistan the first time. But that hadn't been even nearly this long, and it was grating at James' very being. Tony was his friend, his *best* friend, and even though they spent more time apart than together they were only ever a few presses of buttons away.

Now though, there was no way to reach Tony at all. And it *hurt*.

But just like the first time, James refused to give up. He kept searching everywhere that he could, now with more means than ever before thanks to Tony himself. Iron Patriot truly was a gift as far as James was concerned, because it put him right at the forefront of the Air Force, and made him perfect for search and rescue since he could safely get where armoured vehicles and unarmoured men could not. It meant that he was able to spearhead every mission, even when the Avengers had been forced out of the game entirely.

Oh, the government tried talking to him about it— even the President got involved, trying to convince him that he could take a step back, let others continue the search, that there were other, somehow *more important* things for Iron Patriot to do. James knew that if they ordered him to stop there would be very little that he could do about it other than to desert entirely, but he fought tooth and nail to make sure the Pentagon *understood* exactly what was at stake. Thankfully, it was not difficult to make them see why leaving Tony Stark in the hands of terrorists was not a good idea.

They still tried to convince him that it would be better to give the suit to a different pilot, one that was not so close to the mission– but Tony had James’ back in that as well, because the systems in the suit would not respond to anyone else. They would not even open up to let anyone else in– and to override that would mean causing incalculable damage to the suit itself, something no one was willing to risk without Tony there to fix it.

The thought made James smile in spite of the circumstances, knowing Tony would love it. Not even present, and he still had the government running in circles only to become more ensnared in his web.

So James had *searched*, flying all over the globe and never pausing even when it seemed that the world had nothing to give– but now, out of nowhere, there was a chance that he had managed to find the first real, *solid* clue in months.

When Iron Man had been stolen from his ‘grave’, James had been angry. The other Avengers were as well of course, but they thought their friend’s corpse had been violently exhumed. James, on the other hand, was fully aware that the suit was empty, but felt an all-consuming rage at the thought of someone getting their hands on Tony’s technology like that. Especially after James had fought for that suit to be placed in the hands of the Air Force, to be kept safe and away from anyone who might want to steal it. It could have been used as a back up for Iron Patriot, perhaps, since they had no real means of repair– but there was no use. Pepper had agreed with Fury that the suit needed to be kept out of military hands, and that was that.

And then, SHIELD hadn’t done the fucking stellar job they said they would.

Anyway.

The suit was stolen, and James had *wondered*– because the only reason anyone would have for keeping Tony Stark alive this long without asking for ransom would be to make him *build* something. That they were stealing Iron Man suggested that the terrorists had failed on that front, and were trying a different route.

But then there had been the incident in Florence, and they had seen the Asgardian woman – probably someone else in disguise, by all accounts – using weapons that were far too familiar to Tony’s repulsors to be anything else. James knew that Romanoff, like him, had taken that to mean Tony was still alive, but James couldn’t take as much comfort from it as she.

Because James *knew* Tony better than any of them. He knew that Tony wouldn’t give in, wouldn’t give up– he would fight to the very end if he had to. Or, if there was a chance, he would *pretend* to do what they asked and subvert them the moment they weren’t looking. It was what Tony always did, even with his allies.

With those two incidents on the mind, with both someone using repulsors and the Iron Man suit that had been lost, James couldn’t help but wonder whether Tony had told them to recall that suit on purpose, either for parts or perhaps... for some other reason.

That was what had given James the idea at first– because if there was one thing that could be said about Tony, it was that he *never* left a thing to chance, especially not when it came to the safety of his own inventions. Especially not after Stane.

Tony included every safeguard and failsafe in his suits as was possible, and James knew there was no way that the man hadn't made sure he would always be able to locate his suits—especially after he began trying to implement a system to call them to him.

And if Tony could find them, then... so could JARVIS.

It had been such a simple idea, such an easy plan. JARVIS would be able to tell James where the suit was – since it *definitely* wasn't in Russia, as the SHIELD STRIKE team had discovered, to their dismay – and from that, James would be able to find Tony.

Tony had to be where Iron Man was, because no one else would be able to make any adjustment. And that suit was... Well. It wasn't *much* changed, and yet, James could hardly look at it and see Iron Man anymore. Because Iron Man was his friend, but that thing was *not*.

The memory of that black suit which moved just as Iron Man once had, those glowing green eyes that somehow seemed so much colder than the old white... It set James completely on edge. It had been so disquieting to watch, to *fight* against, because the shape and the movements were undeniably *Iron Man*. And yet, at the same time, the difference was incredibly stark.

Iron Man had only ever moved to kill when he had to. But this... *armour* had been coming at James as if killing him was its only mission, as if it wanted to tear him limb from limb. It had seemed to focus on James as well, as if targeting him specifically— but then, when it had James under its thumb, when it had the perfect opportunity to end him for good, it hadn't taken it. That didn't make a whole lot of sense, considering how many people it had already killed, and considering that it had fought with such viciousness.

Rogers suggested that Loki might have been trying to capture James rather than kill him, not wanting to damage what was possibly another suit to add to his first. And as much as James didn't like Rogers, he had to admit that the possibility was as likely as it was unnerving.

But that didn't matter, not in the long run. Because James would find the suit, and then he would find Loki— and hopefully, Tony as well. All he needed to do was ask JARVIS, right?

Wrong.

"I'm sorry, Colonel," JARVIS said before James was even entirely finished asking. "There is nothing I can do."

James had pressed the matter, of course he had— this was his first lead, his first real *chance* at finding Tony. Yet, no matter how many times he asked, JARVIS remained adamant that he couldn't reach the Iron Man suit— but that *didn't make any sense*.

"I know that he would have trackers in them, JARVIS," James tried again. "Please, just look again."

"You know that the tracker was removed and sent as a decoy to—"

“To Russia, yeah I know. But I also know that was the tracker *SHIELD* put on the suit, not Tony. *JARVIS*. Try again. Try *harder*—”

“Do you not believe that I am using all of my resources to find Mr Stark, Colonel?” *JARVIS* asked, sounding almost offended. “Do you not think that I haven’t already—”

“Of course not, but it doesn’t make any sense.” James snarled at nothing, rubbing his hands over his head in frustration. “I *know* that Tony would make sure he can find his suit. And it’s been out and about, they can’t be keeping it locked up away from where sensors can reach it—*JARVIS*, there *has* to be a way—”

“I’m sorry.”

“And you’re not even going to try?” James asked. He frowned then, realising that— when *JARVIS* had tried to divert him, he hadn’t given a statement.

Do you not believe...

It wasn’t a lie, because it couldn’t be. *JARVIS* had used one of the oldest tricks in the book, and had answered his question with a question.

James knew that *JARVIS* *could* lie, of course— Tony would never make anything that couldn’t. But the AI was well aware of people’s distrust of systems like him, and James knew that *JARVIS* didn’t like to do it. Not unless he had been given permission, anyway. Even when he had informed the Avengers that Iron Man was gone, his statement had been nothing more than misleading truth.

James couldn’t help but wonder whether *JARVIS* was hiding something—

“Colonel Rhodes,” *JARVIS* said, cutting through the silence. “I cannot locate the Iron Man armour because something is interfering with my ability to connect to the trackers in the suit. I believe that the most likely cause is Loki’s magic, as it has proven to be volatile in combination with technology in the past.”

James turned that over in his mind for a moment before he stopped with a heavy sigh, realising that *JARVIS* was likely right. They had seen the way that Loki could tear through his enemies with a single green blast, ripping through metal and flesh. That kind of power had to be capable of causing interference.

But.

Something that powerful, that strong... if it were causing interference then surely—

“There has to be a way to track it,” James muttered, before speaking more strongly. “Okay. *JARVIS*, is Doctor Banner in the building?”

There was a pause for a moment, before—

“Yes, Colonel. He is in his lab.”

“Perfect.”

James hadn't spoken to Banner much, though there wasn't a particular reason for that. The man merely seemed to prefer his solitude, keeping to his lab rather than spending time with the rest of the team— even more so since Tony had been taken. Tony (and Iron Man, James supposed) were the only ones who hadn't been afraid of him, who hadn't walked on eggshells the moment Banner seemed to be even slightly upset.

But despite his apparent desire to be alone, James knew that the man had been stung by the order for him to remain in New York while the rest of the team had gone to Florence— and then had ended up in Kiel. No one was keen for the Hulk to cause more problems than necessary, and despite agreeing in theory, Banner had been upset that he was still benched rather than being allowed to help search for his friend.

It gave James hope that Banner would want to help in this, since it was something that he *could* do— but Banner was already shaking his head and turning back to the glass beakers lined on the bench in front of him before James had even managed to finish his question.

“As far as I know, no one has ever tried something like that before,” Banner said.

“Because there's never been a need,” James replied instantly. “When Loki attacked, either we knew where he was all the time or— well, you and Tony were tracking the Tesseract. I know that you were able to find it—”

“The Tesseract gave off a very unique gamma radiation signature, which SHIELD had been studying for *decades*,” Banner cut in, looking back up from his current experiment and gripping the edge of his bench. “There were scores of data for us to work from.”

“SHIELD had Loki captive for a while during the battle of New York,” James said. “Don't tell me they didn't run scans.”

“They only had him for a few hours,” Banner reminded him. “They definitely ran scans, but I believe at the time they were more curious about his biology. All we'd seen him do up to that point was illusions and using the sceptre to shoot at people. SHIELD was *more* interested in scanning the sceptre itself, because we thought that was where his magic was coming from. Clearly, we know now that's not the case, but that doesn't help us.”

“Just because they weren't looking for something doesn't mean they didn't pick it up on the scans that they *did* do,” James tried again, doing his best not to grow more frustrated. Banner wasn't the bad guy here, no matter how much it felt like it.

“If they did, then I still can't help. I don't *have* that data, SHIELD kept it classified.”

“Well, we'll just need to go and ask them—”

“Steve already tried that,” Banner interrupted again, shaking his head. “He wanted to know more so we could be more prepared to fight him, but they won't budge. Not for us.”

“And not for Tony?” James asked, incredulous. “I *know* they want him found—”

“It doesn’t seem to matter. They won’t give up the data on Loki.”

“Well, maybe not to Rogers,” James muttered. “But I’m not planning on asking nicely.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Banner sighed. “Look, I know you want to find Tony. I do as well. But this is... I mean, how can you be *sure* that this will help us find him? Why would Loki work with the Ten Rings? He hates humans. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Nothing about this makes any sense,” James groaned. “You’re right about Loki as far as I can tell, but I don’t think he *is* working with the Ten Rings. If you think about that attack in Miami—”

“We don’t know for sure that was Loki,” Banner started, but James shook his head.

“It must have been,” James said. “Thor confirmed it was Loki in Florence, and we *know* Loki was in Kiel. We also know he has the Iron Man suit. *And*, on top of that, Pepper told me she thinks *Tony* took the suit himself, that he was able to remotely break it from its grave, but the eye witness reports of glowing green lights are too similar to dismiss as a coincidence. Loki *must* have been at both, and that means...”

“Oh,” Banner said, his eyes wide. “You think Tony was in Miami, like some of those reporters claimed, and that *Loki’s* holding him captive now.”

James ran his hands over his face. “I’m not sure *what* I think,” he admitted. “I just want to find him, and this is the only hope that we’ve had in far too long. Don’t you think that it’s at least worth a try?”

Banner turned away, raking a hand through his hair. James wondered whether he would have better luck asking someone else, but when Banner turned back, he looked determined. “Okay,” he said. “*Okay*. Let’s try.”

“That’s all we can do,” James said, sighing with the relief of *finally* having found a direction to move in, of feeling like he had some purpose.

They moved through the lab for a while, Banner muttering under his breath as he collected everything that he thought might be useful.

JARVIS was quiet again, which only made James wonder more— but *why* wouldn’t JARVIS want to help, if Tony was being held prisoner by the guy who was carving a bloody path across the whole world? But they didn’t really need him— alone, they worked out that the data Iron Patriot had picked up during the fight in Kiel should hopefully be enough to isolate the footprint of Loki’s magic.

“I *might* be able to do this,” Banner said after a while, leaning against a bench-top with both hands as he stared at all the items he had accumulated. “But I don’t have all the equipment here.”

“Well, what do you need?” James asked, quickly jumping onto the new problem, glad that this seemed more like something that he *could* fix. “I’m sure in Tony’s workshop there would

be—”

“I can’t get into Tony’s workshop, you know that,” Banner said, shaking his head. Oh yeah. James had forgotten that JARVIS had forbidden access. James knew he could probably get in if he wanted, but... he hadn’t been able to bring himself to try. Besides, there was a better option.

“Then we’ll ask Pepper,” James said firmly. “Come on.”

Banner seemed reluctant, but he didn’t fight as James led him out of the lab and toward the elevator. It was a short trip down to the main offices, and as they walked through the corridor, it didn’t jar James as much as it had to walk through Tony’s penthouse. It was easier, because Tony very rarely actually came down to visit his place of work.

But still, seeing the name *Tony Stark* gleaming across a door that had not been opened in much too long caught James’ heart in his throat.

“You’re sure about this?” Banner asked as they approached the biggest office at the end, acting as a welcome distraction. “I don’t want to be a bother, I know Ms Potts is already considering stopping the Avengers from living here.”

“She won’t,” James told him. “Tony invited you all to stay here. No matter how angry she is with Rogers, she’s not about to kick you out. Don’t worry, she’ll want to help us.”

Pepper’s secretary was a nice enough woman, cut from the same cloth as Pepper herself. She smiled at them and let them through to the office straight away, and when they pushed past the door it was to find Pepper eating her lunch at her desk.

“Hello Pepper,” James said, offering her smile.

“Rhodey,” Pepper greeted. James’ smile softened a little at the nickname, even though it gave his heart a twinge. “And Bruce, good to see you. Is this a social visit, or is there something I can do for you both?”

“It’s always lovely to see you Pepper,” James said, taking one of the offered seats in front of her desk. Banner took the other, still moving as if he were a little nervous.

“I’m sensing a ‘but,’” Pepper said, arching a brow.

“Well, we are here for another reason.” James paused, wondering how best to word it— then Banner spoke up.

“We think we might have a way to find Tony,” he said.

Pepper’s eyes widened as she breathed, “You what?”

Banner explained quickly, using much simpler words than the ones James had heard muttered in the lab. And by the time he had reached the end of what they were planning to do, Pepper’s surprised expression had hardened into determination.

“Anything you need,” she said. “Anything at all. You shall have it.”

“Thank you,” Banner said.

“There’s no need for that,” Pepper said firmly. “If you think that you can bring him back to us, then that’ll be all the thanks I could ever want. All I ask is that you keep me updated on your progress, and that if you need anything else you will not hesitate to ask.”

“We’ll do that,” James promised.

And as he and Banner headed out to start on their task, James finally felt like he was taking a step in the right direction.



Over the course of the next few days, James spent more time in a lab than he had since MIT. He helped Bruce as much as he could, and together they not only isolated a unique signature of Loki’s magic that they would be able to detect, but Bruce also created a device that would alert them to when Loki’s magic was being used— at least when used in large bursts, such as what James saw in Kiel.

When James congratulated Bruce on what he had done, the other man merely shrugged.

“I have a lot of experience with this kind of stuff. I’m using a modified version of the algorithm Tony and I created to find the Tesseract, like you suggested,” Bruce said. “I suppose you could say that Tony is helping us to find him himself.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time,” James said, not able to keep from smiling fondly. “But okay, are you saying it’s done?”

“There’s no way to test it until Loki shows himself again, but this version will work over short distances, I’m sure of it,” Bruce said. “I could build a bigger one, but I will need more resources. And I still don’t think SHIELD is going to budge. *Maybe*, when we have something more concrete, but not before then.”

“Well, you heard what Pepper said,” James replied. “And I’m sure she’ll be wanting her update soon.”

Bruce winced, and James frowned.

“What?” he asked.

“I just don’t want to be a nuisance,” Bruce insisted. “We already owe her and SI so much, and what I need to ask this time is neither cheap nor easy—”

“We’re finding Tony,” James said. “Worst comes to worst, he’ll just foot the bill himself when we get him back. Now, come on. I think Pepper will be *more* upset if we stay quiet on this.”

Bruce didn't argue any further, and once again they took the elevator together to the lower floors.

Just as she had before, the secretary smiled when she saw them approach, though this time her expression was apologetic.

"Ms Potts is in a meeting just now," she told them. "I don't know how long she'll be, but you're welcome to wait if you wish."

Bruce looked like he was going to turn back around, already half way through a mutter about not having time to spare, but James caught him with a pleading glance.

"Thank you, I think we will," James said, giving the secretary a smile— and then he and Bruce sat down on the couch that was pushed against the wall opposite the door, just for moments like these.

Bruce was turning the device over in his hands, fidgeting nervously. It wasn't large, and it wasn't pretty. It looked something like a Geiger counter, one of those box-shaped ones that could almost pass for a tin lunchbox, just a fraction smaller than a car battery. There was a gauge on the front and a series of lights arranged in a line, which would light up on a colour spectrum depending on how much magic it detected. They couldn't get a location or even a direction yet, just noise and light if Loki's magic was used in the vicinity. But hopefully, with the new idea that Bruce wanted to pass by Pepper, they would be able to improve upon it.

As Bruce continued to fiddle, the dial on the gauge flicked up just slightly, and a red light began to shine which was supposed to indicate very low levels of magic.

"Stop playing with it," James muttered. "You're setting it off."

"It's probably just picking up on something in one of the R&D labs," Bruce muttered. "I might need to fine tune it. But it *does* work, trust me. We'll know if Loki uses his magic anywhere near us."

Ah yes. The plan was for James to take it with him the next time the Avengers faced Loki – and if they hadn't managed to get Iron Patriot back online by then, they'd probably give it to Romanoff – so they could test for *sure* whether it worked. But Bruce was certain already, and while that wouldn't be enough for SHIELD or the Pentagon, hopefully it would be for Pepper.

Thankfully, despite his argument, Bruce placed the device on the couch beside him, and folded his hands in his lap.

They waited in silence then, and James found his gaze wandering. He glanced back to the door they had passed earlier, the office that technically belonged to Tony, even though he hardly ever used it. Everywhere he looked there were reminders, but *now*, James didn't feel sad when he saw them.

Now, he was actually making progress, and he finally felt like it was only going to be a matter of time before he would be able to see Tony again.

As he looked away from the door, James saw two people lingering in the hallway that he didn't recognise— not an alarming thing, of course, considering how many people worked in the building. The taller of the two wore a frown below his bright red hair, blue eyes narrowed as he surveyed the room. The shorter one had blonde hair that probably would have brushed past his shoulders if it hadn't been pulled back at the nape of neck, and he was staring at James with a look of concern that seemed a little out of place. In fact, both of them seemed rather worried. Then James snorted as he recognised the colour of the badges clipped to their white lab coats.

Interns. They were probably just lost.

James considered going to offer them some directions, but then Pepper's door opened a crack, and a low voice caught his attention.

“Are you *sure* that you're not going to reconsider—”

“We've been dancing around this for months now, Aldrich,” Pepper was saying, her tone of voice the one she usually used when she was trying to politely get rid of someone. “But my answer is not going to change. It's too easily weaponised, and Stark Industries has no interest in weapons. We haven't for years.”

“But you *do* have an interest in medical technologies—”

“We've been over this,” Pepper said, harsher this time. “Please, do not come back. My answer will *not* change. Now, if you don't mind, I have another appointment and I would rather like to keep it.”

There was a heavy sigh, and then the door opened more fully. The man that stepped out might have been called handsome by some, but there was something about him that James didn't quite trust, something about the glint in his eye that made it obvious he hadn't given up, perhaps, or maybe it was the way he smirked as he turned back to Pepper.

“Until next time, then,” he said smoothly.

Pepper's smile was strained, but she didn't say anything else, clearly just wanting to be rid of him. The man actually seemed to get the hint, and finally turned to leave.

It was only because James' gaze was following Aldrich that he noticed that the two interns had vanished from the corridor. Maybe they finally worked out where they were supposed to be.

“Beth, if he tries to book another time to see me, tell him that I'm not free for the next two years,” Pepper said, sounding incredibly exhausted. “And if he just shows up, call security.”

“Yes, Ms Potts,” the secretary said. “And Colonel Rhodes and Doctor Banner are here to see you.”

“I know,” Pepper replied, smiling tiredly at the pair of them. “Thank you. I suppose my excuse to make him leave will look more legitimate.”

“He’s still wanting you to take on Extremis, then?” Bruce asked as they all moved inside the office.

“Yes,” Pepper sighed. “He won’t take no for an answer. He doesn’t seem to realise how dangerous his project is.”

“Or maybe he does know, and he just doesn’t care,” Rhodey muttered.

“Or maybe he’s fully aware of what he’s doing,” Bruce added darkly. “I’ve met men like him before.”

Pepper’s lips pressed into a tight line for a moment, and James realised that possibility wasn’t something she had been unaware of.

“I’m surprised SHIELD hasn’t caught on to him already,” Bruce said. “Surely this is something they should be interested in—”

“I already spoke with Director Fury about him,” Pepper admitted. “I didn’t want to, but he would not leave SI alone and there’s something... not quite right about all of this. Fury said that Killian was already being watched by them, but... I don’t see why they aren’t *doing* anything about it.”

“They might be,” Bruce said. “SHIELD is the shadiest organisation I’ve ever seen. They don’t like people knowing what they’re up to.”

James didn’t know all the details of Extremis, and this conversation was more than enough to set his hair standing on end. Thankfully, though, Pepper saw fit to change the subject.

“You didn’t come here to talk about Killian,” she said. “Have you made progress with finding Tony?”

“Yes,” Bruce said, placing his boxy device in front of her on the desk. “We’ve found a way to detect Loki. This’ll tell us when he uses magic anywhere close by.”

“And it works?” she asked, running her gaze over it.

“Yes, I’m sure of it,” Bruce said. “But it won’t be any use in finding Tony, not unless we can use the technology on a larger scale. And for that...” He paused, clearly still unsure.

“Anything you need,” Pepper reminded gently.

Bruce let out a heavy breath. “I need a satellite,” he admitted. “As it stands, I can’t amplify the range of this enough to be more than about a thousand feet. But with a satellite, I could do it on a much wider scale. Not over the whole planet, but— I could cover enough of an area to make it worth it. Otherwise, we’re going to be stuck mounting this on James’ armour and having him sweep the streets one at time.”

“And that would work,” James added. “But it would take a long time. And we all know that time is not something we can afford, not when we’ve lost so much of it already. I might be

able to talk to the Pentagon, but they won't let us use theirs without definite proof that it will work, which we can't provide without doing this in the first place. It's a Catch 22."

Bruce looked as if he had swallowed a lemon. The cause wasn't difficult to work out— James knew that Bruce had suffered unfortunate run-ins with the military before, but he had to understand that not all of them were like Ross. And besides, if this was their best chance to find Tony, then surely it would be worth it.

But, it was a moot point anyway, since SI's satellites would do the trick.

"I see," Pepper said, turning to Bruce. "But you're sure?"

"I am."

"Then you shall have access to the satellite. But... did you try and ask JARVIS? He should be able to help you with getting onto the network."

"He's not talking to us about this for some reason," James told her. "He's gone silent, just like he did for the others, and it's worrying me. There might be a chance that he's—"

James was cut off by a sudden, violent beeping noise, and they all turned their gaze immediately to the device. It had lit up like a Christmas tree, the entire row of lights shining red through yellow and right to the green at the end of the line, the dial indicating a surge of power that couldn't have been only interference.

"Loki's *here*," Bruce said, his eyes wide.

"Oh, god," Pepper gasped, springing to her feet. "Why? Why would he— we need to evacuate— JARVIS—"

"There is no indication that Loki is in the building," JARVIS told them.

Bruce shook his head, his skin tinged green. "The device *works*—"

"I know it does," James said, already on his way to the door, his fists clenched by his sides. "JARVIS, I don't care whether or not you believe us, call the others *now*. And call SHIELD, and everyone else that you can. Pepper, get everyone out. We're not going to let him hurt anyone else. Not here."

Pepper's gaze was already blazing with purpose as she grabbed the phone from her desk.

James paused as he reached the door, and glanced back. "Are you coming?"

Bruce scurried to his feet and followed, clutching the device to his chest. Having Bruce at his side made James feel more confident, and his lips twisted into a snarl as they hurried back toward the elevator.

Maybe, *hopefully*, he would be able to get his hands around the would-be-god's neck sooner than he thought.

Smooth enough to cause worry

Walking into the lobby of Avengers Tower felt like fifteen different shades of strange. For starters, it felt so familiar and yet like something out of another lifetime, because so many things had changed since the last time Tony was there. He felt a decade older rather than only a few months, and he felt like an intruder despite the fact that he *owned* the whole goddamn building.

Everything still looked shiny and new, and Tony realised the Tower had only been finished for a year, and that most of it was even newer still due to the renovations after the damage that had been done during the invasion.

Still, he drew a breath to steady himself, and his steps were sure as he led the way inside the building that had, for a short while, once been his home.

Not one person gave either he nor Loki a second glance as they entered, thankfully proving that their disguises were working. They looked nothing like themselves—Loki had placed illusions over them both so that they appeared to be no more than random humans, a mishmash of features from different people Loki had seen. Tony could still only see them as themselves, just as he had with the illusions of Sif and Fandral that Loki had created before, but he could see what they looked like to everyone else whenever he caught one of their reflections.

Loki had bright red hair and blue eyes, while Tony's hair, after a bit of complaining and teasing, had ended up somehow looking rather close to Thor's—something Loki had seemingly regretted moments later, but was too proud to take back.

Creating an identity good enough for something like this was easy with an AI on their side. The intern ID badges that JARVIS had ordered through the system were waiting for them at the front desk, they got through security without a hitch, and stepped into the elevator that JARVIS had kept empty for them when they arrived.

"I've scanned every person in the building, as best I can," JARVIS told them, his voice coming through their earpieces rather than the building itself, so that they were the only ones who were able to hear him. "I believe that the ring you are looking for is being worn by the person currently speaking with Ms Potts in her office."

"I wish you could be on all of our missions like this, J," Tony said. "It would make life so much easier—wait a second. Did you just say *in Pepper's office?*"

"Yes, Sir."

"What the hell is it doing in there?"

"Nothing currently, Sir. Its wearer and Ms Potts are speaking about a business deal."

Tony asked for more details, and JARIS explained that the man was Aldrich Killian, the CEO of the think tank called Advanced Idea Mechanics, or AIM for short. He had been trying to convince Pepper to invest in his company, and particularly in one project called *Extremis*—a serum using nanotechnology to hack into the brain and change the genetic make-up of the body, designed to enhance healing.

Pepper, though, had determined that the program was too easily weaponised, and had refused at every turn. The fact that Killian had not given up after his many attempts rubbed Tony the wrong way—though he was sure that Pepper was able to deal with it herself, he wondered how much flack she'd had to put up with since Tony's disappearance. He knew that most of the business world had derided Tony's decision to make Pepper his CEO, though they had pretty much all quietened when they realised just how competent she was.

But it wasn't just worry for Pepper, because... Tony had seen the name *Aldrich Killian* before, in the information they had stolen from Miami. He had learned about their plan to use the Mandarin as a puppet, something that Tony and Loki had stopped when they had unmasked Trevor Slattery. He had also discovered that AIM, the Ten Rings and SHIELD were all interconnected, though he hadn't quite worked out why or how.

They'd briefly discussed looking more into what AIM was doing, and the need to go after them just as much as SHIELD and the Ten Rings. Of course, they had been distracted by Barnes, the discovery about HYDRA, and their misfortune in Germany, but the knowledge that AIM needed to be dealt with had still sat heavily in the back of Tony's mind.

It seemed that now, they were going to get a chance to face them, whether they wanted it or not.

The elevator took them right up to where they needed to go, not stopping on any floors. It really *was* smooth sailing, smooth enough to cause worry. When they reached the corridor with the main executive offices, Tony paused just before they rounded the corner to the open area in front of the CEO's office. After all, a lost intern might be nothing suspicious, but the secretary would only give them directions and expect them to be on their way. The only thing they could do would be to stay out of sight until the right moment reached them.

"J, is my office locked?" Tony asked, keeping his voice down.

"Yes, Sir. But I can open it for you, if you ask nicely."

"JARVIS," Tony hissed. "Just open it, will you? This is so not the time—"

"For Norns' sake," Loki sighed. He rolled his eyes and touched his hand to the door, a bright green spark dancing between his fingers. The door clicked open, and they both stepped inside.

"That was unwise," JARVIS said.

"Why?" Loki asked. "You two were too busy arguing, so I simply—"

“Because Colonel Rhodes and Doctor Banner believe that they have just created a working prototype of their device, and going by their calculations, *I* believe that they may be right.”

Loki paused, and Tony frowned in confusion.

“What device?” Tony asked.

“They have created a sensor which will allow them to detect when Mr Liesmith uses his magic nearby,” JARVIS explained. “I do not believe that they were able to detect that small burst, because it was *small* and they are currently several floors away. But Mr Liesmith, I urge you to be more careful.”

“And you didn’t think to warn us about this before now?” Tony asked, incredulous. “*JARVIS*—”

“I warned Mr Liesmith about it a few days or so ago,” JARVIS replied, sounding almost haughty about that fact. “He chose to ignore it.”

“I did not ignore it,” Loki muttered. “I merely knew that it was nothing to be concerned about.”

“Loki!” Tony complained. “And you didn’t even mention it? Really?”

“I didn’t think that it was a problem,” Loki told him, and there was enough strain mixed with the nonchalance in his tone that Tony knew he was telling the truth— not that it was much of an excuse, really. “I can hide myself from *Heimdall*. I did not think that they would be able to detect me through that—”

“From what I understand, Heimdall merely looks for your physical form,” JARVIS interrupted. “They are tracking your magic, which is far more difficult to shroud.”

“Is he right?” Tony asked, arching a brow.

There was a short pause before Loki admitted, “Yes.”

“Then we’re going to have to be more careful,” Tony said firmly. “And *you* need to stop hiding stuff, even if you think it’s not important.”

“I apologise for that,” Loki sighed. “We have had a lot to worry over, and I truly did not think that this would become a problem. In fact, I am still sure that I will be able to avoid detection— because while JARVIS is correct, that does not mean that it is *impossible*.”

“I just really hope that’s not only arrogance talking,” Tony sighed, shaking his head almost fondly.

“Since when have I ever been arrogant?” Loki asked— and at that, Tony had to laugh. Loki grinned in response, as if making Tony laugh had been the only reason for saying it in the first place.

“Really, though,” Tony sighed, “We *are* going to have to be more careful—”

“Don’t worry,” Loki said. “I will be cautious as I use my seiðr. JARVIS, you said that it will only detect me if I am actively using it, correct?”

“Yes,” JARVIS said. “However, I would still be cautious—”

“I’m sure that I am capable of hiding from a few mortals with an energy detector,” Loki cut in.

“They’re not just any mortals, though,” Tony told him. “Bruce is a genius. We were able to track you before—”

“You tracked the Tesseract,” Loki corrected. “And while the cube is powerful, it is not sentient. I am, and you will find me far more difficult to follow.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Tony whispered. But that didn’t mean that he wasn’t still concerned. He knew that Loki considered himself above mortals, that unless a human had *earned* his respect he didn’t see them as an equal. Tony could *kind of* see why, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t goddamn annoying. And, well... it was dangerous too. Loki had yet to underestimate someone where it mattered, but the chance of it happening was still *there*, and that was a little worrying.

Loki looked like he was about to say something, his brows pulling into a frown. They were standing very close together, still pressed beside the door of the dark office. Even in the dim light, though, Tony could see Loki’s concern.

Thankfully, they were interrupted by the sound of voices out in the corridor, so Tony did not have to broach the topic. It wasn’t the time or place. They exchanged a firm glance, each knowing that they needed to get ready to move. They had decided that they would not engage anyone in a fight, but that did not mean that they were going to be without risk at all, especially with everything that JARVIS had just told them.

Goddamn it, Loki. It would have been nice to have a heads up on that one— not that it would have made any difference.

Although... the fact that Loki had known about the device before, even if he believed it would not work— and had decided to come anyway, just because it was important to Tony... yeah, Tony would be lying if he said that didn’t make him feel a little warm on the inside.

But it was certainly *not* the time for mushy feelings, so he forced the thought away and cracked open the door. They slipped out of the office and into the corridor—

And there were Bruce and Rhodey, waiting outside Pepper’s office. Tony stilled when he saw them, and Loki almost walked right into him. It was the first time Tony had seen his friends, actually *seen* them since he had been taken. Oh, he’d fought Rhodey in the suit and he’d been well aware of the threat that they would face if the Hulk appeared in a fight, but seeing them there, muttering to each other about the device that Bruce was holding in his hands was another thing entirely.

But it didn't change anything. Tony still knew what he had to do. And, to make matters worse than he could have hoped for, the device in Bruce's hands was lighting up more than was probably normal.

Oh, great. So Loki wasn't even doing any magic and it was already lighting up. Well, best case scenario was that it wasn't responding to Loki at all, and was instead just malfunctioning— but then Tony realised that perhaps Loki *was* doing magic, if only at a low level.

Tony took a slight step back and to the side, his hand brushing against Loki's.

'The illusions,' Tony asked. *'Do they require like, a steady stream of magic to maintain, or are they a one off thing?'*

'They do require energy to stay in place,' Loki replied, and Tony could hear the frown in his voice even as his eyes remained locked on the device. *'If I had changed our appearances entirely then it would not, but that is not the case.'*

Right, because Tony had asked that they were still able to see each other as *themselves*. Goddamn it, he should have known better than to let his feelings get involved in something that should have just been strategy— it was stuff like this that they needed to get better at, that they needed to fine-tune if they wanted to survive in the end.

More angry at himself than he was at Loki, Tony's tone was a little harsher than intended as he hissed, *'I thought you said that you would be able to hide!'*

'Of course I can,' Loki snapped back. *'I merely need to focus for a moment.'*

Sure enough, the device darkened after a few seconds, sitting innocuous and calm on the couch beside Bruce, and Tony was able to let out a breath. It seemed that Loki was right about being able to hide, but... Tony was all too aware that was just the *illusions*. There was no telling whether Loki would be able to hide his magic when he was using it for more impressive purposes, and Tony couldn't help the concern which coursed through him.

Rhodey and Bruce were once his friends, but now they were putting Loki in danger. *Again*. They were getting far too close, and... Tony was worried that if they did, they would pull SHIELD along with them.

Tony was fully aware that Rhodey was watching them, and he hoped that the disguise was enough. This was only supposed to be a quick recon mission, just to *look*, to make sure that everything was okay—

Thankfully, Pepper's door opening was enough of a distraction that they were able to slip further back down the corridor and out of sight, straining to hear what was being said while not wanting to risk drawing too much attention. Rhodey had already noticed them, after all.

Still, though, when Tony heard the strain in Pepper's voice, he couldn't help but shift closer to the corner, peering around it. Loki put his hand on Tony's arm as if trying to make sure

that Tony remained in place and didn't try to do anything reckless, and Tony placed his own hand on top in reassurance. He wasn't going to be stupid, he just wanted to *see*.

"There," Tony said, watching as Killian turned to leave. As he raised his hand in the air to wave over his shoulder, the ring on his finger glinted in the light. The shape of it was undeniably familiar, and the stone which adorned it was a bright, shining white.

Tony and Loki pressed against the wall as Killian walked toward them, playing up the part of nervous newbies seeing someone important. He paused as he passed them though, his gaze skimming over their forms for a moment, his eyes narrowing slightly. Tony almost held his breath, though he knew that Loki's illusions were fool-proof. There was *no way* he would be able to see who they were—

And then Killian's lips slid into a smirk that was far too pointed to be anything other than a taunt before he continued down the hall toward the elevator.

The moment he was gone, Tony turned back to Loki. "Did you see that?" he hissed.

Instead of answering aloud, Loki took his hand. '*It would have been impossible to miss,*' he replied.

'I don't suppose there's a chance he's just amused by the poor lost interns?'

'Doubtful.'

Yeah, Tony didn't think so either. They had both seen the challenge in Killian's smile, in the way that he had looked at them before continuing on his way. The man might not know who they were, but it was clear that he knew that they weren't ordinary interns— and they weren't just going to be able to sit back without doing anything. They needed to know what *he* was doing, because was clearly up to *something*—

And, you know, he did have a ring, and he was only one guy. They probably would have followed him even without the creepy smile, but... that didn't really make Tony feel any better about the situation.

JARVIS told them where he was going as they stepped into the other elevator, and let them know that he would slow the other man down a smidge— not enough to be noticeable, just so that Tony and Loki would be able to keep up despite the head start.

And sure enough, when the doors opened again they were able to spot Killian immediately as he walked across the lobby, his step still just as irritatingly arrogant as it had been before.

'If he gets into a car, we'll have JARVIS follow it,' Tony said, his fingers tightening around Loki's. He felt Loki's agreement as they paused by one of the large potted plants that lined the wall— Tony leaned in toward Loki and started to blather on about some kind of invention he made up on the spot — playing the part of an excited youngling hoping to maybe catch the attention of the greatest tech company on the planet — while Loki kept his gaze on Killian over Tony's shoulder, silently relaying what the man was doing.

Killian stopped by the front desk, chatting to the receptionist as he handed back his visitor's ID badge. Then, they were expecting that he would just leave— but instead, the receptionist suddenly stood from her chair and began to walk out of the door instead, her movements quick and hurried.

Loki's eyes were narrowed as he watched, and Tony found it hard to keep up his ramble without breaking his flow.

'There's something very wrong, here,' Loki whispered.

Tony resisted the urge to give a *well, obviously*, but before he could Loki froze.

"Well, well," Killian said, his voice sounding far closer than Tony had been expecting. "I must say, I was not expecting *this* when I came here this afternoon. I never thought you would be so stupidly arrogant as to come *here*."

Loki's hand was tight in Tony's, and Tony turned to see what was going on for himself. *All* of the receptionists had run out, now, and every other person in the lobby looked like they... weren't really supposed to be there. There were four of them in all, not including Killian—and they were all staring at Tony and Loki with narrowed eyes and the kind of smirk which indicated that they were preparing for a fight they were sure they could win.

'Maybe we should go,' Loki said.

'I don't think we can.'

To leave would mean to turn around and get right back into the elevator, because they couldn't risk Loki's normal method of transportation with Bruce's device only a few floors up. But there was someone *between* them and the elevator, and Tony didn't think that they would be able to get past them without some kind of fight.

'We can't afford to make a scene,' Tony hissed.

'I know that,' Loki replied. *'But I think there is going to be a scene either way. We're outnumbered, and you don't have your suit.'*

No, he didn't. It was a real problem, actually. He had considered making implants so that the suit would be able to come to him, but even that would not have helped in this situation—because it was a hell of a long way between New York and Florence, where the armour was sitting comfortable and useless in his workshop.

Fan-fucking-tastic.

And of course, JARVIS *could* possibly grab one of the suits Tony had left in his workshop in the tower, but that would rather give the game away a lot earlier than Tony had wanted to. As a last resort, maybe, but until that became necessary—

They were just going to have to hope that Killian didn't *really* know who he was talking to.

"Hi, guys," Tony said, lifting his chin a little. "I'm sorry, was I being too loud?"

“Oh, drop the act, Stark,” Killian said. “I can see who you are.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Tony tried, exchanging an incredulous glance with Loki. “Do you know what he’s talking about?”

Killian rolled his eyes at that and held up his hand, wiggling his fingers as if he were showing off an engagement ring. The white stone glinted in the light— and Tony shuddered as he felt the slide of something over his skin. It felt slimy and itchy and *wrong*, and nothing like the comfort of Loki’s seiðr—

And the moment Tony saw Loki’s livid expression, he knew what had happened. Their illusions were gone, and they were standing as themselves for all to see, in the middle of the lobby of Avengers’ Tower.

“My ring lets me uncover the truth, no matter what it is,” Killian told them smugly. “I could see through your illusion, just like I could see through Ms Potts when she told me that the only reason she does not want to be part of my company is because she believes Extremis could be too easily weaponised.”

“Maybe she just thinks you’re a jerk,” Tony snapped— and Killian’s grin widened. “But really? Out of all the powers you could have had, you picked the ring that let you see the *truth*? Or did you not get to pick?” He scoffed, raising his brows tauntingly. “Are you so low on the food chain that you just got given the least powerful one—”

“Oh, I don’t need something to give me extra *power*,” Killian said, his smile positively *foul*. “Why would I? Power, I have in *spades*.”

As Killian’s smile widened further, his skin began to glow, bright orange lines spiderwebbing across his cheeks as his eyes burned red hot.

“Great,” Tony sighed, preparing himself for a fight, knowing he was on the back foot since he didn’t have his suit, and there was no way it would be able to get to him in time. “Another fucking fire person.”

“Oh, I’m not just *another* of anything,” Killian said. “I am so much more powerful than *them*.”

Tony *had* hoped that Killian was only referring to others in like, the sense that others *existed*. But, of course, as he glanced around it was to see that the others were beginning to glow as well, all of them stepping forward until they were surrounding the pair in a ring.

Killian drew in a breath, his expression manic—

And then he opened his mouth and spat out a torrent of fire, raising his hands to add to the violent and powerful stream.

Loki threw out his hand and a wall of green flew out around them, halting the surge of heat. The fire exploded across the surface of it so that the pair were completely encased, the only thing stopping them from being burned to ashes Loki’s shield of seiðr.

“Sir,” JARVIS said, his timing as fantastic as *ever*, “Colonel Rhodes and Doctor Banner are on their way, and they have demanded that I contact SHIELD—”

“Well, don’t do it, JARVIS!”

“I wasn’t going to, Sir, but you should know that they are both heading down the stairs. Their device detected Mr Liesmith’s magic and there is nothing I can do to stop them—”

“Okay, just— just don’t call SHIELD—”

“I *know*, Sir—”

“Will you two let me *concentrate?*” Loki snapped, his voice strained. Tony quietened immediately, pressing closer to Loki in the hope that it would make things easier if there was less space that Loki needed to protect. Tony tugged the single grey gauntlet he had brought with him out of his pocket and slipped it over his hand, wanting to be ready— but there was nothing else he could do, other than be supportive. He reached up to put his free hand on Loki’s shoulder, the tips of his fingers against the bare skin of Loki’s neck.

Loki was snarling by the time the onslaught came to an end— and when the fire dissipated, they saw that Killian was gone. Perhaps even worse than that, his minions were *not*.

“Goddamn it,” Tony snapped even as he and Loki prepared for a second assault. *‘That’s two rings we’ve come so close to, and have lost. This keeps happening!’*

‘But this time, we may be able to use it to our advantage,’ Loki said, his eyes darting between the four approaching hostiles as he drew his favoured staff from one of his dimensional pockets. *‘He will go back to his hideout now, to prepare for another fight. And when that happens, when the time is right, when he has gathered enough strength in one place that a single strike would be a crippling blow... that is when we will make our move.’*

‘All that strength in one place is going to be hard to beat,’ Tony said. He wasn’t even sure how well they were going to do against what they were fighting now. In the past, Tony had killed one fire-person with a double repulsor blast to the chest, and Loki had killed another by encasing him in ice. They knew that it was possible to defeat them, but they had never faced so many at once.

‘Perhaps,’ Loki told him. *‘But we will just have to gather strength of our own.’*

The first person to jump at them reached for Loki with her hands white hot, but Loki batted her away with his staff. What followed was a display of skill like nothing Tony thought he had ever seen before. Loki wielded his staff with one hand and his seiðr with the other, keeping the four fire people away from Tony— and in comparison, Tony felt so fucking useless. He could fire his gauntlet but it did little more than blast them back, injuring them enough that any *normal* person would have long since fallen, but even with shattered bones and snapped limbs they just kept on coming.

Loki was clearly tiring, sweat forming on his brow, his teeth bared in frustration as much as rage, and Tony wasn’t sure how long he would be able to keep it up. They needed to *go*, but

even in the precarious position they had found themselves in Tony still wasn't willing to risk skywalking. They were going to need a miracle to get them out of this unscathed—

Then Hulk exploded through the stairwell door, setting upon the first fiery person with a violent roar, smashing her into the floor with his fists. He howled immediately at the blistering heat, but it only seemed to make him *angrier*, and he slammed down again and *again* until even the enhanced healing could not help, until the woman was no longer moving.

The others turned from Loki and Tony to face what they believed to be the larger threat, and Tony breathed a momentary sigh of relief. Loki, however, had the opposite reaction to the Hulk's appearance.

"We need to go," Loki choked, reaching out to take Tony's hand again—

"No, wait," Tony said, his own hand twitching where it rested on Loki's shoulder. "We can't —"

"We *have to*," Loki said. "It's the *Hulk*. We must go while they are all distracted—"

"We *can't*," Tony insisted. They didn't have time for explanations— Hulk's roars were loud enough to rattle the windows, and it would not be long before he had all the fire people running scared. Tony didn't doubt that Hulk could handle them, and... he knew that Rhodey would not be far behind.

Tony grabbed Loki's hand again and pulled him toward the stairwell, where the door was swinging on its hinges.

'We know they can track your seiðr,' Tony explained as they ran. *'What if they get a reading from your skywalking, and manage to track that? What if they find the house that way?'*

'Then I will skywalk somewhere else first—'

'You're too tired for that, and besides. We can't leave until we've got the device.' He drew in a breath. "JARVIS, where's the safest place for us to get on an elevator?"

"Anthony," Loki said, tugging on Tony's hand and forcing him to stop on the platform between the second and third floors. "Wait."

Tony was breathing heavily, the fight and then the dash up the stairs more than enough to wear him out.

"We do not even know where this device is," Loki said. "And if we do take it, there is nothing to stop them from simply making another one."

"It will give us time—"

"It will give them a confirmation. Why would we take it if it didn't work?"

“Then we need to alter something in their data,” Tony said. “Make it so that if they make another one, it will be wrong. JARVIS, get into Bruce’s work and mess with a few of his numbers—”

“I cannot, Sir,” JARVIS said, sounding frustrated. “Doctor Banner compiled his notes on paper.”

It was silent for a beat.

“Are you fucking *kidding* me?” Tony asked. “On paper? *Really?*”

“It does at least mean that his notes will be safe if SHIELD attempt to hack into the servers,” JARVIS tried, but that didn’t do anything to calm Tony down.

Even though he knew Bruce didn’t particularly get along with SHIELD, Tony didn’t doubt that he would hand over a Loki detector to Fury if he asked. And having something that could track Loki in SHIELD’s hands? Hell fucking no.

That thought, of course, only strengthened Tony’s desire to get this sorted while they were already in the middle of the mess— which meant, ring or not, they couldn’t just *leave*.

“Okay,” Tony said. “*Okay*, we can do this. JARVIS, where are Bruce’s notes? In his lab? Loki, you think you can alter the stuff on paper with your *seiðr*?”

“Yes,” Loki said, nodding firmly. “I can do that.”

It wasn’t perfect, but it would give them precious time so that Loki could work out a way to circumvent whatever Bruce and Rhodey had discovered.

Together, they sprinted up another flight of stairs, pulled open a door and ran out into the corridor—

And nearly ran straight into Rhodey, who held the detector in his hands and was staring between Loki and Tony with rising horror.

Trust is a two-way street

Chapter Notes

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

In that moment, the first thing which ran through Tony's mind was a good, solid— *Oh, fuck.*

He should have known that this could happen. JARVIS had *warned them* that Rhodey was on his way to the lobby, and no doubt all the explosions of heat downstairs had caused the elevators to shut down as per their fire protocols. They knew Bruce no longer had the device since Hulk was busy smashing up a storm downstairs, so logically they should have guessed that Rhodey would be on his way.

Not that the thing really mattered now, since thanks to Killian and his stupid ring, Rhodey could see both Tony and Loki as clear as day. The device was silent, in fact, sitting seemingly peacefully in Rhodey's hands as Loki was not currently enacting any spell.

That was likely soon to change, though, if the way that Loki protectively tugged Tony behind him was any indication. Tony was close enough that he could feel the tension rolling off Loki in waves, and he knew it wouldn't be long before that tension snapped.

Tony tried to step further forward to say something, but Rhodey beat him to it.

“Loki,” Rhodey said— and despite the taut lines Tony could see all over his face and in the way he was holding his arms, Rhodey's voice was incredibly level. “Let him go.”

Loki's grip tightened. “Rhodes,” he answered, his voice just as even but far more deadly. “You will let us *pass.*”

Tony knew what Loki was doing— he was trying, at least as best as he could, to avoid a fight with Rhodey because he *knew* that it would be difficult for Tony to bear. But Tony recognised the look on Rhodey's face, and he knew in all likelihood that any effort made by Loki would likely only make it worse.

If this was going to have any chance of ending in anything other than bloodshed, Rhodey needed to hear the truth from *Tony*.

Rhodey wasn't armed, and he certainly knew that they knew it. Yet he stepped forward, even though the muscles in his jaw were tense as he eyed the way that Loki had lifted his hand in defence.

“JARVIS,” Rhodey said, his voice cutting through the sharp silence. “Get me one of the Iron Man suits, I know there are still a few around here.”

JARVIS remained silent.

“JARVIS?” Rhodey tried again— and then, when he still received nothing in return, the glare he held on Loki hardened. “JARVIS is on your side?” he asked.

“Of course he is.” Tony’s voice sounded surprisingly flat to his own ears, and he stepped slightly to the side so that he was still close by Loki, but not quite entirely behind him. Loki allowed it, though Tony could see the way his jaw tightened.

All three of them were tense, and Tony knew that the relative peace between them would not last long.

The play of emotions across Rhodey’s face was certainly more than enough to make Tony concerned— a mixture of concern and rage and confusion that was never going to bode well for the outcome of the conversation. And he certainly hadn’t missed the fact that Rhodey had held his attention on Loki from the moment they had caught sight of each other. Even as Rhodey turned on Tony now, his expression seemed taut, skin stretched as his lips pressed together as if he were physically restraining himself from lurching forward.

“Tony, you need to come away from him,” Rhodey said, still calm despite the way his hand shook as he reached out across the space. “Don’t worry, SHIELD are on their way. They’ll be able to contain Loki, you’ll be safe.”

“No,” Tony said, shaking his head. He didn’t move any closer to Loki, but he drew Loki’s hand in toward his side a little— and Rhodey’s gaze darted down to the movement for a fraction of a second before he met Tony’s gaze once more.

“Tony, don’t do this,” Rhodey said. “I know you, I know that you’re strong, I know that you *want* to fight this—”

“I won’t fight him,” Tony said, narrowing his eyes and raising his other, metal-clad hand toward Rhodey, palm facing out. “But I will fight *you*, if you don’t get out of our way and let us go.”

There was a moment where Rhodey stared in horror, his eyes landing on the grey gauntlet with sudden understanding.

“It was *you*,” he whispered. “You’ve been fighting with him all this time, you were the person we saw in the footage from Florence... oh god, what Slattery said about what happened in Miami... *no, you can’t be—*”

“Yes,” Tony cut in, trying to calm his racing heart over the fact that Rhodey *knew*, trying to focus on the task at hand.

“You’re... the one in the Iron Man suit,” Rhodey said. “You *attacked us—*”

“Only after you attacked us first. And I’m *not* Iron Man,” Tony insisted. “Not anymore. But that doesn’t mean that I’m not the same person— I’ve changed, yeah, but not all that much.” He paused, taking half a moment to rush through his thoughts. He knew the smart thing here would be to just take Rhodey out and leave no witnesses, but... it was *Rhodey*. He wanted to at least try, and maybe, if he could just make Rhodey see that he hadn’t been forced into anything, then *maybe* there would be a chance. “Just... just come on, Rhodey, tell me, does it look like I want to leave Loki? Do I look like I’m crying out for help right now?”

The fact that Rhodey had yet to call for help himself was a promising sign, though only slightly. Because Tony remembered what JARVIS had said about SHIELD, and what Rhodey had said himself— and he knew that Rhodey was most likely stalling. After all, he *wasn't* armed, not with his suit, not with anything that could actually help, and he had to know that fighting a god in a building that was run by an AI *on the god's side* had to be a bad idea, even without throwing Tony into the mix as well. Oh, Tony didn't doubt that Rhodey would hesitate to hurt him, but he also knew that Rhodey would do what he felt like he must— and if it came down to it, Tony would as well.

Rhodey continued to stare at Tony for a while, his eyes assessing— but then he turned to Loki. “*You*,” he said, his expression twisting and his voice turning into something close to a snarl. “You've done something to him.”

“It was not I,” Loki snapped. “You are aiming your ire at the wrong man.” But even as Loki spoke he leaned further forward, the hand not holding Tony's still raised slightly in front of him, almost mirroring Tony's pose though the threat of his magic was surely much greater than that of Tony's weakened repulsor.

‘Are you going to be all right, if this turns violent?’

‘Don't worry about me, Lokes. We need to get out of here.’

He could feel Loki's agreement, but they both still knew that they needed to do something about Bruce's notes. Leaving was, of course, preferable to getting caught, but so long as there was a *chance* that they could still succeed in getting what they needed, then... well. Then all of *this* wouldn't be a waste.

But as they spoke they unconsciously leaned a little closer together— and Rhodey, to put it rather lightly, did not take to that well.

“Let him go!” Rhodey snarled, stepping forward and dropping the device to the ground. It fell with a clatter, but did not break— and then Rhodey reached under his jacket and pulled out a handgun.

A gun, of course, wouldn't do Loki any harm, but it held an intention so clear that Tony instinctively moved to stand right in front of his lover.

“Rhodey, no,” Tony said, his repulsor charging with that familiar whine. “If you fire, then so will I.”

“You're... protecting him?” Rhodey asked, pausing for a moment—

But Tony didn't get a good look at his expression, because Loki twisted around and pulled Tony back behind him again. Tony could hear Loki silently asking him not to do anything stupid, and it was only the real concern bleeding through Loki's tone that had Tony not trying to get back in front of him again— even though he desperately wanted to with every bone in his body.

Instead, he stood once more behind Loki and slightly to the side, staring at Rhodey in... well, he wasn't quite *pleading*, but he was still *hoping* that it wouldn't come down to a fight. Maybe, just *maybe*, if he could make Rhodey see— then they would have a chance at coming out of this on top.

“You *know me*, Rhodey,” Tony said, his voice firm as he echoed his earlier words, but this time with far more force behind them. “*Look at me*. Do I look like I'm being controlled, or like I'm doing this under duress? He's not forcing me into anything.”

Rhodey's expression was flickering again, and Tony held firm, waiting for an indication either way. If Rhodey tried to attack Loki, then Tony knew that he *would* fire, that he would take Loki's side without hesitation.

And then... it almost seemed like Rhodey could *see* that, perhaps picking it up from the determination in Tony's gaze, or in the way that he refused to be moved from Loki's side even as Loki continued to coax him further behind with gentle tugs of his arm. Because Rhodey's eyes were narrowed— but with thought now, rather than rage.

“Tones,” Rhodey said, his voice low and laced with a caution that gave Tony a little bit more hope. “Do you remember back when we were in MIT? Do you remember the promise I made you?”

Suddenly knowing without question what Rhodey was doing, Tony answered immediately. “You said that you'd stand by my side, no matter what ridiculous thing I was doing— but that the moment it became too self-destructive, you'd give me the kick up the ass that I needed,” he said, not even needing to stop and think. He could remember that moment like it was only yesterday— he'd been blind drunk at the age of sixteen, and Rhodey had dragged him out of a party where some older girls were trying to convince him to take some substances of a dubious nature. Tony had complained like there was no tomorrow, but... he'd been mostly grateful for it by the time morning rolled around. And Rhodey's pledge was one that he had come to value greatly over the passing years.

Rhodey never lied to him, and never tried to make him feel better with honeyed words. He always told it like it was and never tried to get on Tony's good side just for the sake of their friendship.

So when Rhodey asked— “And do you ever remember me breaking that promise?”, his expression far more open than before—

Tony felt his lips begin to curve into something of a smile.

“I *do* remember you once leaving me in lock-up for two nights before you came to bail me out, you ass,” Tony said, his gauntlet lowering just slightly.

“You didn't drink and drive again after that, though,” Rhodey pointed out, his gun also lowering in kind.

“It was your disappointed look that did it,” Tony admitted. “Always worked far better than the threats.”

Rhodey actually smiled at that— a small thing that flashed for only a moment over his lips, but it was still *there*. It was as familiar as anything, and it *almost* let Tony think that his hopeful ploy was working. He'd learned to trust too much in a good beginning, however, and he held his ground, waiting...

And, sure enough—

“Right,” Rhodey said. “Well, this is me, kicking you in the ass. God help me, but I believe you when you say you’re doing this of your own free will— but what you’re doing... it’s not right, Tones. It’s not. I know I don’t have all the information—”

“No, you don’t,” Tony snapped, feeling that rage building again. He’d started so *happy* when Rhodey was talking, like a balloon was inflating inside with the chance of maybe being able to talk to his friend again, on good terms— but then Rhodey had gone and tried to threaten Loki again, and the whole situation was changed. “You don’t know what’s going on, you don’t know all that we’ve been through or all that we’re dealing with—”

“So tell me,” Rhodey replied. “Come away from Loki and explain, help me understand—”

“You won’t. Not as long as you still think Loki’s evil, or that he’s controlling me in any way. You’re never going to see the *truth* until you can accept what’s staring you in the face— that Loki and I are partners now, and that I’m not going to betray him. Just like he’s not going to betray me.”

Loki’s chin tilted up defiantly at that, as if he were daring Rhodey to argue that particular point.

Rhodey’s eyes narrowed at the gesture, and Tony held firm.

“If you want to understand, then you’re going to have to *accept* that working with Loki is what’s best for me right now. Please, just... look. We’ll go, okay, we’ll leave right now, if you promise that you’ll let us destroy that device, and that you’ll help JARVIS stop Bruce from making another one. Let JARVIS scrub the footage, and let us *go*.”

Tony knew that he was throwing out a Hail Mary, that this was never going to work. Even if Rhodey agreed to all of this – which was unlikely at best – Hulk had seen them as well, and that would probably lead to Bruce working it out. Really, there *was* no way that this was going to end well. They had fallen too deep this time, and the only way they were going to be able to get out of it would be if they could somehow eliminate all the witnesses and scrub all the footage— or if they were able to make a new ally who could work with JARVIS to convince the others of a story about what had happened that day.

But.

If they *were* able to make a new ally, then perhaps there could even be a silver lining in all of this mess. For that, though, Rhodey needed to see reason— and Tony thought he knew his old friend well enough to recognise when he wasn’t going to budge.

Except... Rhodey's gaze was sliding over the space between Tony and Loki as if it could give him some kind of clue, and his eyes rested on the way that their hands were still clasped together. Tony wondered if Rhodey was still thinking about coercion, or perhaps some kind of Stockholm Syndrome, but then...

"You really mean it, don't you?" Rhodey asked, his voice quiet and shocked. "You... you're *not* being forced. I don't understand it, and I don't know why you haven't asked for help, but —"

"You can't tell SHIELD about this," Tony cut in quickly. "You can't tell anyone, but *especially* not SHIELD. And not Pepper, either, because I know she's been talking to them."

"You know, it's stuff like *that* which is making it hard for me to trust you," Rhodey said, eying them carefully. "*Either* of you. But... I *will*, for now, at least a little. Though I will be expecting a better explanation in the near future."

The near future— that meant that Rhodey was going to let them go, that he was going to trust them enough to maybe want to talk to Tony again *soon*.

Knowing that, Tony slowly took a step forward, his gauntleted right hand finally falling back to his side. Tony could tell that Loki did not want to let him go— he held Tony's left hand a little tighter for a moment, as if trying to keep him near. And yeah, Tony didn't particularly want to let Loki go either, but he knew that this would provide a measure of trust that Rhodey sorely needed— if this was going to work, anyway.

So he gave Loki's hand a soft, comforting squeeze before letting go, and then he slowly crossed the distance toward his oldest friend.

Tony was fully aware that Rhodey still had a gun, that while Loki was safe from it, Tony himself was *not*. He knew that Loki would be ready to put up a shield or to pull him out of harm's way at a moment's notice but there was no guarantee that he would be fast enough, faster than Rhodey who had trained with the Air Force for years. But Tony knew that if he and Loki wanted to get out of this — if he wanted even a *chance* at finding the ally in Rhodey that, despite everything, he still hoped for — then he was going to have to take the first step.

Trust is a two-way street, after all.

As Tony stepped closer Rhodey didn't freeze up like Tony was half expecting, since Rhodey now *knew* that Tony had fought against him, had been the one who had destroyed Rhodey's suit. But instead of a flinch, Rhodey took a step closer and accepted Tony's hug by wrapping his own arms around Tony's shoulders.

Tony let out a long breath, not entirely relaxing, not quite, but holding on tightly to Rhodey nonetheless.

This was something he was sure that he had lost, and while he knew that what he had gained was far more precious he still would have mourned its passing. But now, with Rhodey... well, not back with him, but at least willing to *wait* to be given the whole story— it was already more than he had hoped for.

“You’re really all right?” Rhodey asked, his voice quiet, as if he didn’t want Loki to hear.

“I will be,” Tony told him, matching the tone if that was what it took to soothe the rest of Rhodey’s nerves. “So long as Loki and I can right the mess that we found ourselves in.”

Rhodey drew in a deep breath, quite clearly not wanting to believe the truth in that, but he didn’t say anything to the contrary. At least, not immediately. He held Tony a little closer for a moment— and then froze, his head lifting and his muscles tensing.

Tony wasn’t sure what Loki had done, but he was more than able to make a guess.

Not wanting to make Loki uncomfortable for any longer than necessary, Tony pulled away from Rhodey then took a decent step back, letting go of the hug entirely.

He didn’t bother to look apologetic. It was clear in Rhodey’s face that Tony’s actions there had been the opposite of what Rhodey had wanted, and that in Rhodey’s eyes, moving away because *Loki* had wanted him to was exactly what Rhodey was afraid of— but to be honest, Tony couldn’t bring himself to care. As pleased as he was to have made some progress toward *maybe* being able to get his friend back — though he remained somewhat hesitant to let himself feel *too much* hope on the matter — he knew exactly what was more important, and he wasn’t about to let go of that. Not even for Rhodey.

“I don’t like it, but I’m going to give you the benefit of the doubt,” Rhodey said, his sharp gaze still flicking over Tony’s body, as if still searching for evidence that something was wrong. “I’ll try and discourage Bruce, but I don’t know how convincing I’ll be, since I was the one to suggest looking for Loki in the first place.”

“You never told any of the others about me being Iron Man, even when Iron Man was stolen, and even when people started to think I might be dead,” Tony said. “I feel like I owe you some trust for that, at least.”

“Only some?” Rhodey asked— and hey, look, that was even another smile tugging at the corners of his lips.

But before Tony could respond in kind, Rhodey’s expression hardened again— and a moment later, Tony felt a cool hand slide back into his own.

‘I’m okay,’ Tony said immediately. *‘I promise.’*

‘I know.’

Still, despite the certainty in Loki’s tone, Tony could feel the tension in the way Loki’s fingers gripped his hand. The way that Loki stepped closer to Rhodey let him slide back between him and Tony once more— and while it wasn’t as flagrant as before, the movement was still undeniably protective.

“If you betray us, James Rhodes,” Loki said, his teeth bared, “Then I will make you understand the meaning of true torment with an intimacy that most will never come to know.”

Despite facing Loki's wrath, Rhodey held firm. "And if it turns out that you *don't* have Tony's best interests in mind, then I swear I'll do worse to you."

Loki's eyes blazed, and Tony wondered for a moment whether Rhodey had taken a step too far— not with the threat, but by insinuating that *Loki* would ever harm him. But then, after giving Rhodey one final once over, Loki wrapped his arms around Tony's waist and Tony felt the familiar itch of Loki's seiðr over his skin.

Rhodey frowned, taking a half-step closer— and Tony couldn't help but shoot him an amused, cocky grin as Loki whisked them both away, his arms holding Tony close as he led them back to their home.



The moment they made it back to the house, Tony threw himself face down on the couch. It had been a harder day than it should have without a doubt, and he didn't want anything more in that moment than he wanted to sleep. Well. At least until he felt Loki gently shifting him over that is, because there weren't many things that Tony liked more than curling into Loki's side, breathing him in and feeling those arms wrap snugly around him. He always felt safe, like that, and he knew that Loki did too.

The closeness was something that they both sorely needed after what had happened, after the too many close calls. They just need that grounding force of *knowing* that they were both okay, that they had come out of it... well, not on top, but without injury and without too many things going wrong.

But, still—

"We need to talk about what happened," Loki said, and Tony leaned his head into Loki's shoulder with a groan.

"Yeah," he sighed. "I know."

Though the problems they needed to talk about were rather different to after their last few fights, there *was* still a lot to talk about. They spoke in a seamless blend of verbal and mental words, long since having become accustomed to both, sentences mixing with emotions that had them exchanging touches and kisses all the while. Loki's fingers never stopped running through Tony's hair in a gesture that was soothing for them both, and Tony's hand resting on Loki's chest let him follow that steady rise and fall that would always keep him calm.

It was clear that the hardest part of it for Loki had been to watch Tony go to hug Rhodey, which was entirely expected. But... Loki *had* been able to let him do it, and that meant that they had made more progress than either of them had previously thought.

But despite the progress and the worries that still remained, there was, of course, the two major concerns which stood out amongst the rest.

The first, thankfully, was quickly put to rest. JARVIS interrupted their discussion by pulling up the footage of Rhodey's reaction, and they watched as he obligingly destroyed the device

by slamming his foot down on it a few times before hurrying downstairs to where Hulk was dealing with the final fire person— or, well, Extremis-enhanced, Tony supposed they should be called.

The footage JARVIS showed them also proved that everyone in the Tower was confused— Pepper was speaking with SHIELD about Killian and AIM, and demanding that they take swifter action. Loki was mentioned here and there, but no one, at least, was talking about Tony. It seemed that JARVIS scrubbing the footage had been enough, and... well. Tony would just have to hope that the Hulk wouldn't say anything. *Hopefully*, Hulk had been focused enough on the Extremis-enhanced that he hadn't noticed Tony at all, but. That was probably a little too optimistic.

When Rhodey told Bruce that the device didn't work because it had picked up on the Extremis as well as Loki and there was no point in continuing to pursue it, there was a crease on Bruce's brow that Tony wasn't quite sure that he liked— but he didn't think he knew the man well enough to make a judgement. He just had to hope that Bruce trusted Rhodey enough to let it go, and if he didn't...

They would have JARVIS watching them regardless, and he would let them know of *any* developments— both of them, not just Loki, who also promised that he would pass over stuff like that to Tony as well.

Honestly. Tony had long since thought that communication was their *strength*. Hopefully, after that one minor hiccup, he would not be proved wrong.

So, yeah, that was one issue... well, if not solved, then at least dealt with as far as they could for now. But the other was a little more difficult.

“We were going to sort AIM out ages ago,” Tony muttered. *‘I suppose that’s our own memory coming back to bite us in the ass—’*

‘No,’ Loki said, shaking his head even as his fingers gently shifted through Tony's hair again, his nails scratching over his scalp and causing Tony to close his eyes with a soft, contented sigh. “There are enemies coming at us from all directions. We are but attacking a branch at a time, and it is inevitable that while we attack one, another will continue to come at us from behind. We determined that it is all connected, did we not?” Loki asked. *‘We need to find the root of the problem, and cut it out so that they cannot ever rise to hurt us again.’*

They were the sort of words that they had spoken to each other on numerous occasions, and while they still held the same level of hope they had lost some of their weight. It was difficult to believe that they were capable of taking on such a task, of defeating *so many enemies* when it felt like they had been met with defeat at every turn.

Tony sighed, and leaned up so he could look Loki in the eye. “Maybe... we *do* need help.”

Loki's expression twisted, and Tony couldn't say that he blamed him for it. He didn't like the idea of bringing anyone else into their circle, not when there was so much at risk, when they had so much to lose from even the slightest misstep.

And perhaps they had started down the right track with Rhodey, but they were nowhere near close enough to even consider giving him details, at least not before they were *sure* he wasn't going to take what he already knew to SHIELD— or anyone else, for that matter.

But... they both knew there was another option, and that Rhodey wasn't the one whom Tony had been talking about.

As Tony held his gaze, it seemed that it was Loki's turn to sigh.

'I do not entirely trust him. Not yet.'

'Neither do I,' Tony agreed. *'But we're not going to know unless we try.'*

It was a difficult situation, and one that neither of them particularly liked.

"I wish that it could be just us," Tony whispered. "That we didn't need any of this, that we could just *be*."

"I wish that, too," Loki said. He leaned up to kiss Tony, gentle and sweet— but as he leaned back, there was something hard in his expression which didn't quite match. *'But I will not stop. Not until all who have harmed us are in the ground.'*

Tony gave Loki his agreement with another kiss— harder this time, deep and slow and more than enough to have them both pressing closer for more. When Tony broke the kiss, he didn't move away. He kept his lips on Loki's smooth skin, kissing over Loki's jaw and down his neck, enjoying the taste of him on his tongue. Loki tilted back his head and tightened his grip on Tony's hair, and Tony grinned against his throat.

Tony slid down Loki's body, pushing clothes out of the way as he went, lifting up Loki's shirt and trailing open-mouthed kisses over his chest. There wasn't much room on the couch but Tony managed, shifting his legs under Loki's and off the edge so he could curl around to reach where he wanted to be and still be able to look up at Loki's face.

He licked and nipped at the soft skin of Loki's hip as he opened his lover's pants, his hands sliding over Loki's underwear and rubbing at the swiftly hardening bulge. Loki moaned at that, and lifted his hips so Tony could shove his pants further down— and then Tony looked up to meet Loki's hooded gaze with a pleased grin before ducking down to slide his lips over Loki's hard cock.

And as Tony focused on pulling as many moans from his lover as he could with smooth strokes, hollowed cheeks, firm swallows, and hard swipes of his tongue, the rest of the world began to slip away—

If only for a few, blissful moments.

Omg guys **Rabentochter** has drawn some amazing art of Tony's black Iron Man suit!!
It's on tumblr [here](#), seriously go check it out I yelled when I saw it 🥰

A day for truths

Chapter Notes

~~the majority of what's in this chapter wasn't even meant to be in here, I swear all three of them have a mind of their own, they're throwing off my plans~~

Loki was still hesitant as they made their way into Barnes' room the following morning— Tony could see it in the taut line of his shoulders, and the tightness of his jaw. So when Loki stopped to begin opening the door, Tony stepped closer to run his hands firmly up Loki's back and over his shoulder blades.

Loki's movements paused at that, and he let out a heavy sigh.

“Hey,” Tony said gently, running his hands down again and then gently prompting him to turn around. “There's nothing to worry about.”

Loki's lips quirked slightly at that, though Tony knew it was likely in response to the attempt at comfort, rather than any agreement to his words themselves. Still, he leaned into Tony's touch as Tony reached up to cup Loki's cheek, smoothing his thumb over the dark shadows below Loki's eyes. Neither of them had been sleeping well lately, spending more of their resting hours in each other's heads than in their own— and it was beginning to show.

But Tony was sure he was right on this— he *knew* they needed help, and he knew Loki knew that as well. And asking Barnes made more sense than asking anyone else.

Of course, they hadn't totally managed to remove what Barnes called his triggers, so there was always going to be a danger. Tony had been working on it, of course. He had created a device which allowed someone to go back and view their own memories— tentatively called Binary Augmented Retro-Framing, or BARF for short, which was a name that both Barnes and Loki had decided was worth ridiculing at every turn.

Honestly, it was like they thought he'd ended up with it by accident or something.

Tony hoped that BARF would help them to identify the memory containing Barnes' triggers, and then all they would need to do would be to wipe them from his mind. It was the single benefit of this being done through psychological methods rather than magic— while it wasn't an *easy* fix, the triggers themselves weren't lodged any deeper than the memories in which they had been formed.

Once they had used ordinary technology to identify precisely which memories they were, then Loki would be able to remove them easily with the help of the pink ring— and the triggers with them.

Yeah, it was only a theory, they knew that— but in *theory*, it should work.

But, okay, so maybe until they had managed that, *trust* was a word perhaps too strong for how they felt toward the assassin turned possible ally, and Tony entirely understood Loki's hesitation. For so long it had been just *them*, and then just them and JARVIS— and now they were discussing bringing in people who had not been there with them from the beginning. It was rubbing at Tony as well, but... he didn't see that they had much of a choice.

Still, he wanted Loki to know that no matter what was about to go down with Barnes, it would be the two of them above all else either way. So he leaned up to press their lips together, brief and sweet, a gentle touch that held more of a promise than words could— but he gave the words anyway.

“Whatever happens, it's still me and you, okay?” It was something that they had said before of course, but at the same time it was something that couldn't be said often enough.

Loki kissed him again, harder this time, his hands moving from Tony's arms and into his hair. Tony pressed in closer, pushing Loki back against the door. He stroked his tongue along Loki's lower lip before pressing it further in, arching his spine to grind his hips forward at the same time— and they both moaned, the sounds passing between their mouths and urging them on.

They were interrupted as a muffled groan sounded from the other side of the door.

“You know I can hear you, right?”

Tony laughed against Loki lips, and then kissed him chastely one more time before pulling away so that Loki could finally open the door.

They settled in side by side on Barnes' couch while the other man remained on the bed, listening quietly as they gave their explanation, but also adding in pieces of what he knew himself. They had talked about what had happened to him during previous conversations of course, but there were the smaller details that came back the longer Barnes spent out of the ice, and every time they spoke with him it seemed that he had remembered something new.

They worked up to their suggestion, making sure that Barnes understood just what they were up against. But they had not even finished their request for his help before he was giving them his answer.

“No.”

“No?” Loki asked, arching a brow— though he didn't sound particularly surprised, nor disappointed.

Barnes didn't reply, but the *you heard me* was written all over his face.

“Don't you want to get back at the people who did this to you?” Tony asked. “They took away your agency, they made you kill people—”

“And if I leave, it'll just happen again,” Barnes cut in, shaking his head.

Tony frowned, thinking it over. “You said you know *what* the triggers are—”

“I said I know them when I hear them, but I can’t *remember* hearing them after. I can’t tell you. I know... the first two. Maybe.”

“Well, that’s a start. We can get the rest with BARF, and then you can write them down for us. Then when they’re gone, one of us can read them out to see whether it worked or not—”

“No,” Barnes snapped— and he actually rose to his feet from the edge of the bed, his hand curled into a fist at his side.

Loki moved in the same moment— his fingers bending slightly as if preparing to grab a weapon that was not there, and one of his legs straightening just a little so that he would be able to get up in an instant if it became necessary. Even though he hadn’t moved to stand as Barnes had, the threat was clear.

Barnes eyed him for a second before holding up his own hand in a gesture designed to placate— then he sat back down, his expression relaxing.

“Look,” he said, the word coming out in a rough exhale. “I am grateful for what you’ve done for me, but I’m done fighting for other people. You *know* that I don’t want to leave here, that I am perfectly happy with being locked up in this room. Perhaps there’s something else that I could give you in return.”

“We’re not asking because we think you owe us something,” Tony said immediately, not liking the implications there at all. “That’s not why—”

“You kept me here because you wanted information,” Barnes cut in. “Don’t insult all three of us by pretending different.”

Tony was about to argue the point, but Loki cut in smoothly before he could. He had relaxed a little from before, but Tony could see that the stare Loki had pinned on Barnes was piercing.

“What Anthony meant was that we are not asking you to fight in return for anything we’ve given you,” Loki said. “We would never ask that. We would, of course, be grateful for any assistance that you are *willing* to provide, but force is not something that we would condone.”

There was a pause before Barnes let out a long breath. “I get it,” he said, his lips quirking a little in a smile that almost made Tony see how this man could be the same as the one from the stories he had heard Steve tell. “But I think I might tell you anyway. Consider it as being for my own peace of mind, if it makes you feel better.”

“Very well,” Loki replied. “So long as you understand that—”

“Hey, I said I get it. I don’t owe you anything— that means that you don’t owe *me* anything either.”

Loki nodded shortly, and Tony felt a little thrown as he realised that Barnes and Loki had been having a conversation that he had not been party to. He could tell by the slight thinness

to Loki's lips that he hadn't been expecting Barnes to see that so clearly, but he was also not irritated by it. Loki had got what he'd wanted either way, and Tony was suddenly reminded of just what a force of nature his lover was.

Loki could cut through a hundred trained SHIELD agents with barely a scratch, but it was in *conversation* that he truly shined. This was what Loki was good at.

If only they would be able to solve all of their problems with words, then things would be a whole lot easier. As it stood, they were using the media and manipulation as much as they could, but... it wasn't enough.

"Okay," Barnes said, cutting through Tony's thoughts and catching his focus once more. "We've talked a lot about HYDRA, and the Ten Rings, but... what do you know about SHIELD?"

"SHIELD?" Tony asked with a scoff. "Please. I worked with them, I've hacked through their whole system— and that was *before* I was actively trying to destroy them. It would be easier to list what I *don't* know about SHIELD."

Barnes glanced away at that, his lips twisting into a grimace.

"What is it?" Loki asked, voice laced with suspicion.

"There's a lot about SHIELD you don't know," Barnes muttered. "A lot you don't *know* you don't know."

"And you do?" Tony asked.

"I'd say you know more. But the little I *do* know fills the gap of what you don't."

"Oh?" Loki leaned forward. "And what would that be, *exactly*?"

"I know it was SHIELD that ordered me to kill you."

Tony was shaking his head before Barnes had even finished. He knew, of course, that they were the ones who had orchestrated his kidnapping— and that they had handed Loki over to the Ten Rings for experimentation. But they couldn't have ordered the Winter Soldier's attack, because—

"I thought you said you worked for HYDRA," Tony said. "What are you trying to—"

"Stark." Barnes said. He glanced up to meet Tony's gaze, and then flicked between him and Loki, his dark eyes burning with something Tony didn't like. "HYDRA *is* SHIELD— or maybe it's the other way 'round. It was Alexander Pierce who ordered me the past few years. I know that for sure."

Tony felt like his vision was tunnelling. What Barnes was saying couldn't be true... could it?

No, no way, it didn't make any sense. Not a single, infinitesimal scrap of sense *at all*.

...Right?

No, yeah, of course. After all, Fury was the head of SHIELD, and *he* definitely wasn't HYDRA. Nor was Clint or Nat, because Tony would've... he would've *noticed*.

Oh and hey, if it *was* true then there was no way Steve knew about it— and if anyone had a chance at spotting something like this, it probably would have been him. Right? If Steve hadn't seen it, then surely there was nothing to be seen?

Although, maybe that was grasping at straws. After all, Steve had only just woken up in a new world of computers, a world where spies hid in plain sight rather than in the shadows. He was still learning the ways of this 'future', still had so very much on his plate that an organisation which had remained hidden for near on seventy years was more likely to slip past his gaze than not.

And fuck, it had been so hidden that even *Tony* hadn't known about it until Barnes had spat the word at them after his attack in Florence. And hadn't he *just* told Barnes that he knew more about SHIELD than pretty much anyone else?

But, okay, since then he and Loki had learned a fair amount. They knew that HYDRA and the Ten Rings were connected, and they knew that the Ten Rings were connected to SHIELD. It had felt like a tangled web, but now, with just a single sentence from Barnes, it was like the missing piece of the puzzle they had been fighting with for weeks just fell into place, and the rest of the picture became clear.

If HYDRA had infiltrated SHIELD... if HYDRA *were* SHIELD, then they would have the kind of resources to pull the impossible crap that he and Loki had been dealing with, right? A few other things might become a little less confusing, too perhaps— if it were true. Like why SHIELD hadn't done anything to stop Killian's work on Extremis, and why HYDRA had suddenly become involved by sending Barnes and showing their hand before Tony and Loki had even realised that HYDRA were part of the game—

Ah, fuck.

It... it actually *did* make sense, didn't it?

Tony got to his feet, jerking from Loki's side as he stepped away from the couch and turned to the wall on his left, so that neither of the others could see his expression as he rubbed his hands hard over his face.

If HYDRA and SHIELD were one and the same, then things were both far worse and yet far *simpler* at the same time. They had been right about needing to find the root of the problem— it had just been a much smaller tree than they had originally thought.

"Why didn't you say anything about this earlier?" Tony asked, turning back to face Barnes. "This was something we needed to know."

Barnes didn't say anything to that, just stared at Tony like he should know the answer himself. And Tony supposed he could guess — the Avengers' affiliation with SHIELD had

never really been *hidden*, after all – but that argument didn't hold any ground.

“You *knew* that SHIELD wanted to kill us. Why would they, if we were on their side?”

“Not all SHIELD's HYDRA,” Barnes growled.

“Yes, and not all information is passed knowingly, I get it. But we told you that we were alone—”

“And I was supposed to trust *you*?” Barnes asked, his voice suddenly gaining more fire. “At first, you were merely something better than HYDRA, an escape from going back on ice and having them tear at my arm. I didn't want to go back when I knew what I was going back *to*. But yeah, okay, so now I see you're the enemy of my enemy—”

“That doesn't make us friends,” Tony spat.

“Oh, of course not,” Barnes drawled. “We're not friends, not even close. That's why you asked me to fight for you—”

“We already discussed that—”

“Both of you, calm down,” Loki said, getting to his feet but not moving any closer. “This isn't helping matters.”

“Nothing is helping matters,” Tony snapped— and when Loki's brow creased into a frown, he forced himself to take a deep breath.

Barnes didn't have the same drive to keep Loki happy that Tony did, but it seemed that he too took the moment to compose himself and sat back down on the bed. “I do trust you,” he said slowly. “At least enough to know that you'll fight to end them.”

“It's not going to be easy,” Tony said, half hoping that would be enough to remind Barnes of the fact that they could *do with some help*— because even if the guy was grating at his nerves, Tony knew he would be invaluable.

But it seemed not to be the case, and what he got was something else.

“Cut off one head, two more will take its place,” Barnes muttered, his tone of voice bitter and mocking.

Tony gnashed his teeth before responding, his voice harsh. “Cut off one head, and you're just left with one less bloody head.” He turned away from Barnes and caught Loki's eye. “They can claim they're replacing them as much as they want, but there's only so many. This isn't some fucking Greek legend, this is real people. And real people *bleed*.”

Loki's lip curled. “Yes,” he agreed. “And they *will*.”

Tony held his gaze for a moment longer before giving him a firm nod. Then he turned back to Barnes. “I do understand your reasons for not helping us,” he said. “I do, and we won't force

you. But if you ever change your mind, if you ever want to get a piece of revenge, then... well. You know you're welcome."

"I'd be more hindrance than help," Barnes muttered— and as Barnes' gaze shifted to where his single fist pressed hard against his thigh, Tony was hit with an idea.

"I wouldn't be so sure." He glanced to Loki again, this time with purpose. Loki knew what he meant without need for explanation, and left with a touch of his seiðr— and the fact that he was willing to leave Tony alone, especially considering his feelings where Barnes was concerned, proved in Tony's mind just how ready they were for revenge all round.

Loki returned a few seconds later with an item wrapped in cloth, and once he had passed it to Tony, he wrapped his arms around Tony's waist and leaned over his shoulder from behind.

Tony held the item out to Barnes expectantly— and when the other man didn't move to take it, he shifted the edge of the cloth off the end, so that Barnes could see the black metal fingers. Barnes' eyes widened almost imperceptibly, just the smallest of movements which betrayed his surprise before his expression went blank.

"It might take some adjustments to fit it, but it's yours whenever you want, whether you choose to help or not," Tony told him. "As is the run of the house."

Barnes stared at the arm blankly for another moment. "You sure I don't owe you a thing?" His eyes darted back up to meet Tony's with a gleam that was almost amusement, though not quite. "You sure we're not friends?"

Tony didn't bother to grace that with an answer. "We'd just appreciate it if you stayed out of the workshop, though," he said instead. Then he paused. "Oh. And our bedroom."

"That won't be a problem," Barnes muttered— but there was still something distant in his expression, something which made Tony think that Barnes was going to refuse this offer as well.

But that didn't make any sense— he was as safe from HYDRA in the living room as he was in this bedroom, and if it turned out that they were wrong to trust him, then surely he would be only all the more willing to have more freedom? The play of emotions across Barnes' face was more than interesting, and Tony was clearly not the only one to think so.

Loki's arms tightened around Tony's waist as he spoke. "Is something wrong?"

"Well, there is one thing you should know before you do this." Barnes' hesitation melted away as his eyes hardened, his words matter of fact. "And I won't fight if you keep me locked up, after. I know I'm a monster."

Tony felt Loki tense at that, and without looking he ran his hands over Loki's forearms and entwined their hands— and although he did not say anything, he smoothed his thumb over Loki's skin and nudged through some reassuring vibes, hoping they would help with whatever it was Loki was reacting to.

“It wasn’t your fault,” Tony said aloud, speaking to Barnes even though most of his attention was on the man behind him. “You’ve already told us some pretty terrible things that they’ve made you do, hell, they made you attack us and we know that wasn’t *you*, right?”

Barnes shook his head. “No, don’t. It wasn’t my choice, but *I did it*. I remember it, you know? The feel of bones breaking under the hand they gave me, or the emptiness whenever bullets hit their target. I didn’t choose. But it *was* me, and if you say it wasn’t then you’re saying there was another person in my body for...” Barnes frowned. “For how long?”

Tony felt frozen, not quite able to answer as he realised... they had never gone over that, had they? Barnes must have known it was a fair while, because even though he’d spent a lot of it asleep, there was no way to miss such a large passage of time. But they had never given him a number. Tony hadn’t even thought to.

“Sixty-eight years, Sergeant Barnes,” JARVIS said, breaking the silence.

“Sergeant Barnes,” Barnes echoed weakly. “You know, that doesn’t sound like me either, but I guess it is. It all is.” He shook his head then, and turned back to Tony. “It’s all me. Which means you need to know what I’ve done before you let me out.”

It was hard for Tony to understand, because... well, he’d always seen *himself* as having different personas. Not different people, exactly, just masks and faces and personalities he wore for different occasions.

The Winter Soldier wasn’t an entirely separate being, but nor was he the same— at least, not in Tony’s mind. But he knew that he had no place to make a judgement on whatever was going on inside Barnes’ mind, so he didn’t make his own thoughts on the matter known.

“Tell us, then,” he said firmly. “But either way, it’s still not your fault, and it doesn’t make a difference to our decision.”

Barnes’ expression contorted. “You might change your mind about that.”

“Then what is it?” Tony asked, so tense now with the anticipation that his muscles were starting to ache. What could be so much worse than the fact that Barnes had tried to kill him and Loki not so long ago?

And as Barnes gave his explanation – in words that were short, precise, and *inarguable* – Tony felt his limbs go cold.

—•—

Losing himself in his workshop was the easiest thing to do, hoping the sounds of clanging metal and whirring machines would be enough to drown out the noise inside his head. The metal arm he had offered Barnes – another offer refused – was sitting in the corner of the room, and its presence felt almost *loud* in its own right.

Focus was difficult to achieve at first, everything else giving way to the madness of Barnes’ reveal. But he started with something simple and loud, just forming the panels for...

something, maybe a new suit– by hand, smashing at the metal until the noise and the ache in his muscles left no room for anything else.

At least Loki stayed with him through it, which Tony was grateful for– it was one less thing to worry about, just knowing that Loki was close by and safe. But Loki didn't try to say anything, didn't try to offer comfort, and Tony was grateful for that as well, because he knew that in that moment, such a thing would likely only end up making him feel worse.

He wasn't just upset.

He was *angry*, and he needed to take that out on something.

Most of the time, just knowing where Loki was calmed his mind and brought him to a place where he could just *breathe*, where he could go over everything rationally. Even while Barnes had been talking, Tony knew Loki's arms around him had been all that was stopping him from flying off the rails entirely. But now, with what he had just learned, what he now *knew*, he felt like he needed something more than that.

The knowledge was still battering around in his mind with the sound of a thousand crashing drums, accompanying the sounds of his hammer and making everything just hurt all the more.

HYDRA had killed his parents.

HYDRA had killed his *Mom*.

The moment the reality of what Barnes was saying had hit him, Tony tore from Loki's arms and moved straight out of the room. Only the sudden and overwhelming instinct not to leave Loki alone with a *killer* had kept him from moving further than the doorway– and as soon as he had felt Loki's presence at his side, he wasted no time in getting as far away as he could.

He wasn't angry with Barnes. He realised that fairly early on, because– while Barnes' face was the last thing his mother would have ever seen, *he* was not the one who had killed them. The Winter Solider – Barnes or not – had been controlled by HYDRA, and it was they who needed to suffer for all that they had done.

And, apparently, they had done a hell of a lot more than Tony realised they had.

The thought felt angry and sour, and it kicked at him until he was aimlessly slamming a hammer against the piece of metal, flattening it down for no plausible reason other than to work out his rage.

They had been attacking him from all sides before he even knew they existed. Before he knew about SHIELD, before he had become Iron Man– hell, before he was even of legal drinking age.

Everything, *all of this* was connected.

HYDRA, the Ten Rings, AIM, *SHIELD*– everything done to him and Loki, everything he had suffered. And oh, of course he knew that not *every* bad thing that Tony had been through

could be attributed to them, but there was enough that if HYDRA had not existed, his life would have been fucking sunshine and rainbows.

They really had taken everything from him, hadn't they? Everything that mattered, everything he cared about, everything that he had ever hoped to gain. Every piece of his past, every future he had ever hoped for—

Well, perhaps... except for one.

Tony's hammer paused mid-air for a moment— and then he turned to catch Loki's worried gaze, his own eyes blazing determinately.

No. They hadn't taken *everything* from him yet.

Loki seemed glad that Tony had calmed a little, though his expression was still strained— somehow even more so than it had been when they were talking to Barnes. Tony realised that he wasn't the only one who had been hit hard by this, though thinking back, he couldn't pinpoint anything that would cause this reaction beyond worry for Tony. But it was clear that this went further than that.

Dropping the hammer and leaving the flattened metal on the bench, Tony moved slowly across the room, wiping his sore and sweaty hands on his jeans as he went. Loki watched his approach without saying a word, and he accepted Tony's hug easily, wrapping his arms around Tony's waist and pressing his face into Tony's hair. Tony could feel his question, and he sighed into Loki's shoulder.

'I'm not okay, not right now. But I will be.' It wasn't a lie. When they beat down HYDRA, he *would* be.

But Loki still felt tense, and Tony was only more sure that there was something else wrong. Loki had gifted him with silence while he had been upset, but... Tony could feel in the tremor of Loki's hands that this was something they might need to go over. But he waited for a few minutes, just enough so that Loki relaxed some into his embrace before giving voice to his question.

'What's on your mind?' Tony asked.

Loki sighed, and held Tony a little tighter for half a moment. *'It's nothing,'* he said. *'I know it's nothing. I'm more worried about how you're—'*

'If it's bothering you, then it's not nothing,' Tony interrupted. He leaned back a little, just so that he could catch Loki's gaze. "Come on, talk to me. Is there some way that I can help?"

Loki lips tightened, and Tony felt the need to add something more.

"Lokes, please, don't say that it's nothing again. If you don't want to talk, fine, but. It's clearly *something*."

Loki sighed at that, the tension leaving him along with his stubbornness. "It's just Barnes," he said, shoulders lifting with a shrug. "He knows what he is, and he is willing to not only admit

it, but try to... come to terms with it.” Loki’s eyes flickered to the side. “That is something that I’ve always struggled with.”

Tony frowned. “I’m not sure I get it,” he said. “You’re nothing like Barnes—”

“Aren’t I? I was never brainwashed as he was, but our situations do bear certain similarities.”

“You’re not talking about New York, are you?” Tony asked, suddenly hit with the thought. “Because, Lokes, you know I forgave you for that a long time ago, right? We’ve talked about it—”

“I know,” Loki said quickly. “I know that, and I’m grateful for it. But the past, in this instance, is of little importance. It is merely that I know I am a monster as well.”

Tony very nearly flinched— though he was glad that he managed to rein the reaction in, because he was rather sure that it would not have gone over well. It wasn’t the word itself that made him feel like there was something sharp jabbing right below his arc reactor— it was Loki’s matter-of-fact tone, as if there was nothing in his statement to be rebuffed.

Oh, Tony knew that they had each called themselves monsters on occasion— Loki had admitted as such during their bloody escape in Turkey, and at the time Tony had agreed. They’d killed a lot of people, they’d done horrible things, but some circumstances call for a certain type of monster. If they had been sweet angels, they would have perished in that cell.

And while there had been moments where Tony had feared they were leaning toward the same cut as their captors, he knew they were doing things differently enough. Their intentions were in the right place, and while he knew the saying about the road to hell, they had yet to do anything truly monstrous. He was sure of it.

But Loki seemed so convinced of the opposite—

Except. He hadn’t been talking about *them*, had he?

He’d just been talking about himself, and to even begin to think of Loki in such a way was enough to make Tony start to feel sick.

“Loki,” he said firmly, reaching up to cup Loki’s cheeks and then waiting until Loki met his gaze. “You are *not* a monster, okay? You’re not.”

But Loki only sighed. “I have been hiding something from you,” he said. “I told you about my past, about how I was adopted. But I haven’t told you what I *am*.”

He stepped back so that they were no longer touching, and even though Tony keenly felt the loss, he understood why when Loki held out his hands.

The colour started at his fingertips, his skin turning blue and his nails darkening into an inky black. The blue continued up his forearm and disappeared under his sleeve, but like the last time Tony had watched this happen, it did not continue up to his neck.

And yeah, Tony had seen all this before, but only ever in moments of necessity— either when Loki was using the only weapon left at his disposal, or utilising his ice powers against the Extremis-enhanced, or when he had been using the ice to cool his injury. Never had Loki changed his skin just because.

And yet...

“You weren’t hiding this at all,” Tony whispered, reaching out to take Loki’s cold hands in his— and then smiling softly when Loki didn’t pull away. “You may not have explained, but you *showed* me. And I could see how hard that was, and I...” Tony had to stop, a lump forming in his throat that was difficult to speak past. But their hands were connected, and instead of words, Tony just pushed through all that he was feeling, every piece of trust and affection he held.

Loki’s green eyes were wide and little damp, as if it was overwhelming— but Tony could feel him as well, and he knew that everything he felt himself was reciprocated. There wasn’t anything to hide between them, there were no lies and no secrets.

“Listen,” Tony said. “I don’t want you to explain because you feel like you have to. I only want you to talk to me about this when you *want* to, okay? Loki, I... I’m not going anywhere. No matter what you say now, it’s not going to change anything.”

Loki’s lips quirked into a half smile, and although he didn’t say anything in response to it, Tony could feel his gratefulness in the connection that still sung between them. But it seemed that Loki had made up his mind, because then he steeled himself— and began to talk.

“I am what the Asgardians call a Frost Giant,” Loki started, his fingers tightening around Tony’s. “Although, they call themselves the Jötnar. They are from the realm of Jotunheim, and they have been Asgard’s enemies for as long as anyone can remember.”

Tony listened intently all through Loki’s explanation, hearing every word and trying his best not to take it with a grain of salt. It was clear that many of Loki’s words were influenced by what he’d been told by others, by the way that Asgard — a warlike nation on all accounts — viewed its *enemies*. From an outside perspective Tony could see that a good part of it was likely not even true, or at least overly exaggerated— but that did not change the way that Loki *felt*, and Tony could only feel angry and concerned over everything Loki had been through.

They moved to the couch at one point, though their hands remained entwined— and Loki’s fingers stroked absentmindedly over Tony’s skin throughout. There were a few points in Loki’s explanation where Tony could feel a touch of self-loathing, and when he did Tony made sure to focus on the way *he* felt for Loki, reminding him that he wasn’t alone in this, and that Tony didn’t care about his heritage. He just cared about Loki.

And in that moment, all that mattered was making sure Loki knew that *this*... it didn’t make a difference. Not to how Tony felt, and not to who Loki *was*.

But Loki was not yet finished.

“I know that Frost Giants... that the Jötunar might not be all that I think they are,” Loki said—and Tony wondered briefly whether Loki had picked that up from his own reactions, or whether it had been something he’d thought about for a while. He’d seemed more comfortable about letting Tony see his blue skin recently, after all. “And I know that you will be able to see it past it, because you are right that... you’ve known for a while, and you never pushed, never asked to see more. But that does not change the simple fact that I—”

“It’s not that I can see past it,” Tony corrected, cutting through Loki’s pessimism and holding his gaze, the words laced with his own emotion. He turned his hands in Loki’s so he could grip them a little tighter as he said— *‘It’s that I don’t care either way. This is just who you are, and you’re important to me.’*

Loki’s smile was small, but it was certainly still there. “How you see me doesn’t change *what* I am,” he said, though his expression was far lighter now, and Tony knew he was making headway.

“Nah, it doesn’t. But if you’re a monster, then I am as well,” Tony said simply. “And if that’s the case, then we’ll both be monsters together. But it will *not* be because of the colour of your skin, or your eyes— or the place where you were born, okay?”

“Okay,” Loki replied— and even though Tony could tell that he really, truly had accepted that, Loki still looked a little hesitant, still like there was something else he needed to say.

Well, it seemed that it was a day for truths, and Tony only needed to wait before Loki drew in a deep breath and closed his eyes—

And then he changed, the blue spreading from his arms to flow over the rest of his skin. The lines that Tony had noticed before spread all over, forming a pattern that highlighted every line and curve of his body that Tony could see. And when Loki opened his eyes, Tony saw that the green had been replaced by red, the colour bleeding over even the parts of Loki’s eyes that were normally white.

Loki still *looked* like himself, his face still the same shape as the one that Tony had come to know. His eyes still held the same intelligence and wit and *wariness* that Tony could have recognised anywhere, and his hair remained entirely unchanged.

And he was beautiful.

All Tony felt when he looked at him was the same intense adoration as always, and he squeezed Loki’s hands once again before letting go of one so that he could cup Loki’s face once again.

“You’re still Loki,” Tony said, stroking gently over Loki’s blue cheek. *‘And I still love you.’*

He hadn’t planned to say it— but in the same moment that the words escaped him, Tony already knew that it had been true for quite some time. There hadn’t been a sudden moment of realisation, or any abrupt understanding like he’d heard other people talk about. It was just something he *knew*, something sitting deep inside him, as if it had just been waiting to be

said. And as he stared into those bright red eyes that he knew so very well, Tony didn't think there was anything in the world that made more sense.

Loki's smile was bright, his expression filled with the kind of disbelief that came from awe, rather than any kind of shock. And even though Tony had known it already, Loki's response made him feel happier than he thought it possible to be.

"Anthony," Loki whispered, leaning close so that they were only a hairsbreadth apart. *'I love you, too.'*

And even though Loki's lips were frozen cold, their kiss felt like the warmest that Tony had ever experienced.

The first law of thermodynamics

Chapter Notes

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

There's something about the sensation of falling which always drew Tony in. Perhaps it was the weightlessness, the feel of nothing but air beneath his body, and the knowledge that there was nothing he could do but close his eyes and wait until he hit that inevitable end. Perhaps it was having fate torn from his own hands, or perhaps it was that initial choice— the decision not to just fall, but to *jump*.

It had always given him a thrill like nothing else, a surge of pure *life* that was otherwise painfully absent.

In his youth, it had caused problems, since he obviously couldn't go skydiving whenever he wished. Drugs and sex and alcohol came close, and so did fast cars and blowing things up— but there was something not quite the same as losing sense of the ground, as feeling that jerk in his stomach as gravity took hold.

Then Iron Man allowed him to fall as much as he liked, and none of the thrill vanished from it though he knew that his suit – and JARVIS – would always catch him. Falling in the suit felt almost as if it was just *him*, and he never grew tired of it.

Even after New York, after he had fallen from a window and then from somewhere far higher, it wasn't the fall itself that he feared. The problems had always been up at the top, and the fall was a peaceful – if rapid – escape. And even though the darkness beyond the portal sometimes plagued his nightmares still, the fall after never did.

But as much as Tony loved falling, he was beginning to learn that maybe, just maybe, there was something even more perfect in knowing that there would be someone there to catch him at the bottom of it.

When Tony was with Loki, there were moments when he felt like he was falling faster than he ever had before, and yet with Loki's arms around him he always knew that he was safe. It was a paradox, and yet... Tony couldn't think of a thing that felt more perfect.

And standing there, in Loki's embrace, pulling back from his lips only to smile up at that bright red gaze?

Tony was falling and standing still all at once.

Feeling almost giddy, he pressed up on his toes and kissed Loki again, burying his hands in Loki's hair and deepening the kiss with deft strokes of his tongue. Loki responded eagerly, his hands around Tony's waist, drawing him as close as was possible— then they slid lower, cupping his ass and pulling him closer still.

Tony could feel them both growing aroused, every roll of their hips tearing gasps and groans from their lips, their kisses growing sloppier as their attentions moved lower down. Tony took one hand from Loki's hair and slid it down his chest until he was cupping Loki's arousal through his pants. The groan that pulled from Loki's lips at his touch sounded so pretty that Tony joined it with his own, rubbing at Loki's erection and smiling against his lips as he felt it harden further.

When Tony's eyes opened again, they met with green, rather than the red of before. Loki seemed almost hesitant then, but Tony merely leaned in to kiss him again. He didn't care what Loki looked like, or about the temperature of his skin— Tony only wanted *Loki*, right then and there, in every way that he could.

Despite knowing that the both of them desired each other and had for a while, they hadn't actually had sex yet. It wasn't that they were nervous, or uncertain— they had pleased each other many times over the past few weeks with their hands and mouths, and they'd never felt any loss for it. What they'd had was perfect, and they just hadn't needed that extra step, hadn't felt like it was necessary.

And now that they had reached this point, it didn't feel like something big— though nor was it something small. It was just *them*, the way that it was meant to be. They didn't need to say a thing to know that this was what they both wanted now, they both knew they were ready. They each trusted one another with all that they were, and they loved each other with the kind of depth that would last an age. They didn't *need* the physical affirmation, but fuck— they both *wanted* it.

Loki's mouth was hot against Tony's throat as he felt the familiar rush of Loki's seiðr, and then they were falling through the air before they landed on their mattress.

Tony laughed at the feeling, and Loki grinned at him before slotting their smiles together in another searing kiss, his weight pressing Tony into the bedding with just the right amount of pressure to be stimulating without crushing him.

They didn't waste any time from there, feeling no need to stand on ceremony, no need to go slow. They'd moved so slowly for so very long, but... there was no reason to hold back. They were both ready to take this step. They could *feel* how much they each wanted this, the sensations rolling between them both and echoing through that connection that Tony still didn't really understand, but which he trusted in nonetheless.

Tony wanted more, wanted to feel Loki properly. He shoved at their clothes, but their bodies were pressed close and Loki was showing no signs of moving away— but then the clothes just vanished and their skin slid together, and Tony shuddered with the feel of it.

'I'm sorry, I should have warned—'

'Fuck, Loki, don't apologise, just—'

Tony's thoughts were cut off as Loki's hand gripped the base of Tony's cock and then moved up to the head, swiping over the tip before pumping down once more. Tony pressed his face

into Loki's shoulder, muffling his moan— but Loki shook his head, and brought Tony's chin back up with gentle fingers.

“No,” Loki whispered. “Don't.” *I want to hear you.*’

Tony groaned again at that, and let his head fall back against the bed. Loki was staring down at him with a reverent gaze, like Tony was the single most gorgeous thing he had ever seen. Tony was sure that wasn't actually the truth but... the way Loki looked at him sometimes made him feel like it might be, and that alone was enough to make his breath catch.

Loki kissed his lips, his cheek, his throat, and Tony arched his spine as teeth grazed over one of his nipples. But that was *nothing* compared to the feel of Loki's mouth on his inner thighs, and then the warm fire of Loki's lips pursing over the head of his cock, his tongue flicking over the tip. Loki only stayed there for a moment though— then he moved further down, hands firmly running up the insides of Tony's legs. Tony widened them obediently, not even pausing to think about how fucking eager he must seem, just desperate for Loki to getting a fucking move on. But then Loki's tongue stroked down Tony's cock from the head to the base, and—

“Ah, fuck,” Tony swore, his head slamming back into the pillow again, his hands tugging at dark hair. “Loki—”

“Yes dear?” Loki looked up with a grin like the cat that got the fucking macaw, and Tony swore at him again— which of course only made that grin widen. It was all too much and yet not enough— and Tony actually whimpered as he felt a finger press against his entrance.

But then Loki *stopped again*, and Tony stared down at him with panting breaths. The grin was gone, Loki's eyes turned questioning once more— but Tony just arched his back in response, tilting up his hips and pressing harder against Loki's hand.

There was no need for asking after that.

Tony didn't see where Loki got the lube from — probably magic, whatever, the details weren't important — but when Loki pressed a finger into his entrance, slow and gentle, Tony's eyes closed with the kind of pleasure that left him only wanting more. He'd been with men before, of course he had, but Tony had always taken a while to relax and be comfortable, to start to enjoy it after the initial, instinctive few moments of tension. But with Loki, Tony just... gave over to it.

Loki's fingers moved inside him slowly at first, pulling whimpers and curses from Tony's lips which Loki caught with his own, sliding back up Tony's chest. It changed the angle of his hand and made Tony *gasp*— and then on his next thrust Loki added another finger, curling them inside and pressing against Tony's prostate again with the kind of accuracy which shouldn't be allowed.

“Loki,” Tony gasped, his voice hoarse with need. “Loki, I want—”

“I know,” Loki hushed. “Don't worry Anthony, I've got you.”

The words made Tony ache with anticipation all over again but it seemed like they were a *lie*, because Loki just continued to fuck him with his fingers. Tony's whole body was trembling, the noises coming from him no longer recognisable as words.

He whined and tried to press up onto Loki's fingers again, and when that too proved not enough he moved a hand to reach between them, stroking his own arousal as he tried to give himself the *more* that his body craved. Except then Loki – asshole – actually leaned back, and Tony was about to complain again– but Loki's expression gave him pause.

“You're beautiful, Anthony, I hope you know that,” Loki said. “And you're *mine*.”

Well, *that* was something Tony certainly did know, but there was something about hearing it said in that low voice, Loki's eyes blown wide with desire, that made Tony want to reach for him and beg for more not with words, but with something likely to be far more effective.

So, he pushed up on an elbow to crash their lips together again, kissing Loki with all that he had before tearing away and speaking directly into Loki's ear.

“You're mine too, you know,” he said, though it was barely a whisper. “I'm yours, you're *mine*. And that means you have to do what I say, so hurry up and fuck me already.”

Tony was pretty proud of all those words he'd strung together, even if they came out as more of a whine than the demand he was aiming for. Loki just grinned and kissed him again, though the movements were sloppy– and as Tony felt Loki's hand brush again over the skin of his thighs, he spread his legs a little wider still before lifting one to hook his ankle around Loki's hip, giving Loki better access. Loki didn't slide his fingers back into Tony's entrance, but as he took Tony's leg and pulled it more firmly against him, repositioned himself over Tony's chest, and reached down to take himself in hand– Tony drew in a shuddering breath.

When Loki pushed inside him, Tony's hands first gripped the bedding, but that wasn't enough. Then he moved to scrabble at Loki's back, his fingers digging into smooth skin as if he were trying to pull Loki even closer. His other leg curled around Loki's ass to join the first as Loki pulled out and pressed back in again, the pair groaning together as they set a rhythm that left them both unable to catch their breath.

Loki's pants and gasps and moans were interspersed with words, with whispers of things that Tony forgot the very moment they were said– but the feeling of them remained, warm and perfect and loving. They rocked together with the taste of sweat on their tongues and the scent of passion in the air, and Tony was lost within a moment of it. Loki was all that he knew, for the feel of Loki inside him, the feel of them *together*– it was like nothing else. And when Tony's thighs began to shake, when his muscles clenched and his cock jerked between them as he reached his orgasm, the rush was a thousand times more powerful than falling– because as he felt Loki come inside him they were flying together, holding each other tight and making sure they would never crash down.

They were too high up now, and they wouldn't even risk a glance at the ground.

They curled together after they both fell back onto the bed, not needing to get up when Loki could clean them off with his *seiðr*. They were both still sticky with sweat and Loki's skin

tasted of salt when he kissed it, but Tony didn't think there had ever been a moment when he felt more content.

He could have fallen asleep right then, but forced his eyes to stay open, so that he could keep running his gaze over Loki's relaxed smile. He felt so incredibly comfortable with Loki's head on his shoulder, and he didn't think that he was going to move for about a year. Except... Loki's fingers were stroking lazily over Tony's skin in patterns that he didn't recognise. He might have thought that they were just random shapes, but it felt like there was a certainty to them, a definite order that wasn't chaotic enough for that. He managed quite a while in quiet— long enough that he didn't know how long it was. But so long as he remained awake his mind was still working, and he couldn't just let it go without knowing.

So—

“Is that another language?” he asked.

“Hmm?” Loki's eyes opened sleepily, though his smile turned up just a bit more as he caught Tony's gaze. Tony felt a little guilty for waking him up from what was clearly a peaceful not-quite-nap, but Loki didn't really look like he minded, so Tony just kept going.

“That,” he said, inclining his head to where Loki's fingers were still dancing over his bare waist. “It is, isn't it?”

Loki responded with another purposeful line with his fingertip, and Tony grinned.

“What are you writing?” he asked.

Loki shifted his hand then to cup Tony's cheek, and Tony felt a little disappointed at the loss— though he leaned into Loki's touch, his eyes closing for a moment in contentment before he forced them open once more.

“Maybe I'll tell you, one day,” Loki whispered.

Despite still being incredibly curious, Tony wasn't overly bothered. He would have *liked* to know, but... he didn't need to.

Of course, that didn't mean that he was done asking questions.

“How does that even work?” he asked, tilting his head. “I mean, whenever you speak I hear you in English, though sometimes if I concentrate I can hear Italian. That's easier if you're talking to someone else. I mean, it's that *Allspeak*, right?”

“Yes,” Loki said. “It allows you to hear me in the language you understand, and since you understand more than the one, you are able to move your understanding between them. Though I imagine that would grow confusing.”

“Well, I've never heard you speak in Dari,” Tony muttered, but he didn't bother waiting for a response on that one before continuing. And despite the fact that he'd meant to follow on by asking about how it let Loki read and write in other languages, he couldn't help but shift into

something more personal. “Hang on. What language are you actually speaking then? Right now?”

“Well, most creatures who possess Allspeak lose the ability to speak anything else through lack of practice, but I knew the value of possessing a language that others would not be able to understand. It never mattered when everyone else I knew could understand regardless. So while I normally would just use Allspeak, as I do when speaking to you, I could also speak in Asgardian, if I so wished.” Loki stroked Tony’s cheek again. “However, if I did, you would not be able to understand me.”

Tony didn’t ask, but Loki must have been able to see the curiosity etched across his face. He never had been any good at hiding it. Loki chuckled fondly, but then he began to speak, holding Tony’s gaze all the while— and the words were not any that Tony recognised.

They were... harsher, than Tony would have expected, but still with something light about them, soft sounds mingling with the hard to create a balance which sounded easy. Tony tried to think of something similar, and he thought that it was almost reminiscent of the Scandinavian languages, though not quite the same. Tony wondered if it was anything close to the way the Vikings used to speak, but... then he decided that it didn’t matter whether it was or it wasn’t. He couldn’t compare it to a human language because it *wasn’t one*— and those harsh sounds combined with those lilting light syllables sounded rather beautiful. Then again, that might just have been the fact that Loki was the one talking. Maybe Tony had turned into a sap.

Shaking the thought away, Tony smiled as Loki reached the end of his sentence. He knew better than to ask what Loki had said, so instead— “That’s Asgardian, the language you grew up speaking?”

“Yes,” Loki replied, easily switching back to Allspeak. “And it is the language I hear you speak in, as well. Though I can also choose to hear your own words, I cannot understand them.”

“Maybe I can teach you,” Tony said. “And maybe you can teach me Asgardian. I mean, it wouldn’t matter, because we can understand each other either way, but it’s just a thought, you know?”

Loki’s smile turned soft, and he leaned in to press a kiss to Tony’s lips. It was clearly intended to be quick and chaste, but Tony pressed into it, and it turned into something more.

When they pulled away several long moments later, Loki’s eyes were bright as he whispered, “I think I would like that.”

“Hmm, yes, I think I can tell,” Tony replied. He leaned in to kiss Loki again, pushing Loki back and shifting so that he was hovering over Loki’s chest. Loki’s hands were stroking over his lower back, and Tony felt a rush as Loki’s breathing quickened, recognising the sound. He slid his hand down Loki’s chest to brush against his cock, and his smile widened as he felt it harden further at his touch.

Tony knew that Loki's refractory period was far shorter than his own, something that he was both jealous of and yet found himself enjoying *immensely*. He would never tire of watching Loki as he came, of seeing that expression of pure pleasure and knowing that *he* was the one to put it there.

But even now, just from watching Loki's expression and feeling the growing weight of Loki's cock in his hand, there was a rising need deep inside him, and he knew that it would not take long before he too was ready for another round.

So he kissed Loki again before leaning away, though his hand remained in place as he asked, "Shower?"

Loki's grin turned wicked. "Oh," he said. "Yes, that *is* a good idea."

"I do have those occasionally," Tony teased, stealing another kiss and giving Loki's cock one more firm stroke before pulling away and getting off the mattress entirely, leading the way to the bathroom.

After the many times he'd had to watch Loki step out of that shower, it would be nice to finally put it to proper use.



The next couple weeks were some of the best of Tony's life. He and Loki were more comfortable together than they had ever been, sharing a kind of ease that made everything else feel so much simpler to bear. It felt more like they were spending every moment in each other's arms because they *wanted* to, not just because their hearts would freeze in terror if they didn't. And although they still could not be away from each other for long without growing concern, they were getting *better* at remembering that they were both capable of defending themselves, that they didn't *need* to be close by to know that the other was all right.

They weren't in captivity anymore. They were *free*, and they didn't want to let the Ten Rings' shackles weigh them down any longer.

There was just something lighter about everything, like the Earth was turning more slowly, giving them room to breathe, if only for a moment. Tony noticed Loki smiling more often than he ever had, and he knew that he was the same. Because he and Loki *loved* one another, and even with the whole world trying to tear them apart, there was nothing which could take *that* from them.

Of course, that did not mean that the rest of the world was giving them a pause, and outside of their own little bubble it continued to spin just the same as it always had. But their drive to win had only grown stronger— as had they, and they knew that they would be able to take down everything that came in their path.

However, they still lacked the allies they so sorely needed, though it was not from lack of trying.

Loki had moved the orange ring back up into the attic with the other, and Barnes slowly began to move around the rest of the house. He ate with them sometimes, but not often, preferring his solitude— and Tony had the impression that he wasn't used to having even this much freedom. Tony himself knew how jarring that could be, but the longest he had ever been kept prisoner was a few months. Barnes had suffered decades, and Tony was more than willing to let him have his space. He and Loki had spoken the truth— they weren't going to push, and they weren't going to force him to do something he didn't want to do.

But Barnes, of course, was the least of their problems.

JARVIS had spent a lot of time talking with Rhodey, arranging the meeting that had been promised and reporting his progress – or lack thereof – to Tony. It wasn't easy, because Rhodey was still incredibly hesitant and suspicious, and although he believed Tony was acting of his own will, it was clear he didn't think Tony's decisions were sound. He didn't *understand*, and Tony couldn't help him do so until they had a proper talk— but Rhodey was being difficult with the arrangements.

He wanted Tony to go alone.

That was not happening.

They were at a stalemate, and so, in the meantime, he and Loki were left to take matters into their own hands, something they were not unfamiliar with.

JARVIS, still a godsend, was also keeping tabs on Aldrich Killian's movements, calculating the best place to attack him in relation to how much destruction they would be able to cause and how difficult it would be for them to win. It was a careful balance, because they knew they wouldn't be able to take on too many of those Extremis-enhanced soldiers at once, but they didn't want to leave too much of AIM behind for HYDRA to sweep up, either.

Really, they knew they were only chasing their tails. HYDRA and SHIELD were the root of the problem, and while they were chasing AIM and the Ten Rings they were only pruning back the leaves— but they were still causing trouble, and that was certainly a step forward, right?

The Avengers were another issue. JARVIS said that Bruce was getting suspicious, and Tony knew it was only a matter of time before he talked to the others.

And despite the peace Tony had managed to find, it felt like everything was building up, like this was the dropping pressure before a storm— and all they could do was prepare themselves for the inevitable explosion.

That, of course, did *not* mean that they were idle. They still felt like they were recovering, but recovery is moving toward something better— and for that, they needed to feel like they were moving in the right direction.

They decided to start with the ring on their map that had not moved even *slightly* since they'd found its location. That probably meant that either it was protected, or perhaps it had been put into storage— and they decided to scope out the area first, just in case. But what they found

was something else entirely— an ancient underground temple not yet discovered by archaeologists, protected with wards so old they had started to crumble— wards Loki recognised as the work of that orange ring.

Thankfully, Loki was able to break through the spells without too much difficulty, and despite Tony's jokes about curses on old burial grounds they managed to get in without any ill effects. Inside they found old carvings and etchings and statues and artefacts that any museum would salivate over, and Tony couldn't help but feel like they were trespassers moving through a place that they certainly weren't meant to be.

Then they came upon a statue at the very centre of the temple— a man in Ancient Chinese armour, though his helmet was pointier than even Loki's — would have passed for a decent Shredder cosplay, actually — and on his finger was a gleaming purple stone, etched with a Chinese symbol.

Loki, of course, wouldn't let Tony touch it, but once he had deduced that it was safe to do so Loki began to slowly pry the ring over the stone knuckle.

“You're not going to cut his finger off?” Tony asked innocently.

Loki took the time to reach over and shove playfully at Tony's shoulder before turning back to the ring. Once it was off, they didn't waste any time. Loki twisted it in his hand until it vanished into nothing, and then they began to make their way back to the entrance of the place.

Tony probably should have noticed that something felt off. As it was, he thought the prickle at the back of his neck was just that feeling of trespassing, that knowledge that he was an invader here. Loki seemed to think the same, and he was just in the middle of musing over a protective spell he could put on the temple to make up for the one he had broken when the whole thing tried to cave in on them like something out of fucking Indiana Jones— and when they finally made it back, Tony couldn't help but laugh his ass off.

“I don't see how this is funny,” Loki said, his put-out expression only making Tony laugh all the harder, bending right over himself on the couch with the force of his cackles. Loki was standing in front of him, his arms crossed. “We could have died!”

“But we didn't,” Tony pointed out. “Come on, you can't deny that it was a little bit funny. We just had to run away from a collapsing temple.” Tony laughed again, and had to wipe at his eyes. “We were just like Lara Croft.”

The look on Loki's face made it clear that he had no idea what Tony was talking about, which of *course* meant that they had a new mission.

Tony only gave Loki enough time to go and put the purple ring with the others before he pushed him down onto the couch and forced him to watch the Lara Croft movies, and then the Indiana Jones movies as well for good measure. Tony grinned when he caught Loki starting to chuckle over how often the archaeologists had to escape from collapsing structures.

They made something of a *thing* of it, watching a movie each night until they'd run out. Barnes joined them on some evenings, and while Tony was initially worried at the first mention of Nazis, Barnes hardly reacted, preferring to laugh and grin along with them at the action scenes and cheesy jokes. For a while, on those evenings, the three of them were almost able to feel *normal*— and when they ran out of Lara Croft and Indiana Jones films, it was by unspoken agreement that they moved on to other genres.

So, it wasn't all bad— and every moment Tony spent with Loki was reaffirming, gave him something to hold on to as well as something to *look forward* to. It gave him hope, and he knew that if he didn't have Loki with him through all of this, then hope would have been in very short supply. And in Barnes they *both* managed to find an unlikely friend, though Loki was still frostier with him than Tony was.

In the meantime, Loki was able to work out what the new ring was for when, after a little bit of magical poking — with Tony hiding behind a chair not too far away, *just in case* — Loki accidentally managed to turn the couch into bright orange goo.

“I liked that couch,” Tony pouted.

“I'm sure you can afford a new one,” Loki said haughtily, though the slight pink dusting over his cheeks proved that he hadn't melted it on purpose. Tony decided not to call him out on it, figuring he might as well be nice— at least until the next thing Loki turned to goop was the coffee machine.

That, of course, meant *war*, and Loki greatly appreciated being able to test out his new toy on the various objects Tony hurled in his direction.

It probably wasn't the most efficient research method, but it *did* make Tony smile when he saw the mess it made of Loki's hair— and it helped them work out the limitations. The ring couldn't actually *destroy* anything, it could only change it to something else— like the first law of thermodynamics. Once they'd worked that out, Loki tried turning the kettle into a coffee machine in apology. But apparently it was slightly more difficult than it looked, because... well, Tony wasn't sure *what* they ended up with, but it certainly wasn't a coffee machine.

But hey, it also gave Tony a new idea for his suit, though he refused to use the ring to accomplish it. He was going to work that out on his own.

And, of course, the mess meant that they got another date in Florence when they went out to buy a new coffee machine *and* a new kettle, which *almost* made it worth it.

Although. Shopping for kitchen appliances and furniture with his boyfriend was *not* something Tony had ever imagined for himself, not even before this whole mess. It was weird to even think about, but... maybe a little bit if normalcy was what they needed.

Even if, you know, their reason for needing new stuff in the first place was not the most normal of reasons, but whatever. It was normal for *them*.

After that, they found another ring in London, in a facility located under the Tower of London. It seemed to be HYDRA again, rather than the Rings, and they were masquerading as an organisation called SWORD. Tony had to hold in his laugh at the whole thing—honestly, it really was like a piece out of an action movie.

But he wasn't laughing as they tore through that place and they realised what it was for— the weapons inside looked like they had been based on SHIELD's Phase 2. Tony took it somewhat personally, and charged ahead to make as many pretty explosions as he could manage—

At least until he noticed the frost creeping over his suit, spindling up the black metal to begin coating him in ice.

Tony let out a heavy sigh, and shoved through the open door where JARVIS said the problem was coming from.

“Really?”

The man standing on the other side of the office desk was wearing a ring that shone a pale blue, and he was smirking as the ice grew thicker.

“That's a mistake,” Tony said, his voice calm. He could have got out of it easily. His suits were fitted with heating functions after all, and it would be a simple matter to melt it— and besides, it wasn't even yet thick enough to be able to hold his flaps in place if he wanted to break it that way. But... in that moment, he felt like it would be more fun to merely *wait*.

“Is it?” the man asked, his English accent doing nothing to hide the tremor of fear. “I don't see how—”

“Oh, dear,” Tony interrupted. “You're not actually arrogant enough to think you're the only one who can control ice, are you?”

The man frowned— and then Tony was free from the frost much faster than he had been caught by it, the ice shattering into a thousand pieces and falling to the ground. Rather than taking the opportunity to attack, Tony turned from the man's stunned expression to face the doorway.

Loki was stalking inside, his skin completely blue, his red eyes glinting in the dim light and looking feverishly bright as they were complimented by the splatters of red dripping down his face. He didn't look angry— he raised his brows and lifted his hand, a blade of ice growing over it in the shape of a sword.

Ha. How ironic.

“Oh, bollocks,” the man muttered, starting to back away even as he raised his shaking hand. It seemed that despite his fear — and the wet patch Tony could see forming at the front of the man's trousers — all the fight had not left him yet, for he was able to use the ring to summon a storm of ice that might have put an Arctic storm to shame. Tony's suit was just heavy enough for him to keep his feet, and those heating systems immediately went into overdrive— but

Loki merely stepped into the icy vortex without a care. He, after all, had a grip on ice that no other could match, and the cold did not bother him at all.

Tony could barely see through the swirling mess, but he could see just *enough* to not be surprised that when the storm fell to sudden silence, the man was hanging limp and pale from Loki's hand, his eyes frozen and skin dusted with frost. Tony didn't flinch as Loki dropped him and the man shattered against the ground, pieces of him cracking almost as easily as if he had been made of glass. The denser areas of his body remained intact, of course – Loki hadn't dropped him from much of a height – but Loki had no difficulty in picking the ring up from what was left.

“He tried to use ice against a Frost Giant,” Tony muttered as Loki vanished the ring as he always did. “Idiot.”

“Yes.” Loki turned to Tony with a wicked grin. “Perhaps we should show them what real power is?”

Tony's eyes widened, catching his meaning immediately. It wasn't something he had expected– he knew that Loki still didn't feel totally comfortable in this skin, though... he had certainly grown more so recently. He didn't mind talking about it, and although this was the first time since *the* first time that Loki had turned completely into a Jötunn form, Tony had caught him examining the lines on just his hands a few times. It was clear that he was at least working his way through it.

Even now, Loki was looking at Tony determinately, like there was nothing about this that gave him any reason to pause– and Tony knew he would never say no to that.

“Okay,” he said. “Let's do this.”

They moved through the facility, taking out anyone they had missed on their way in, leaving no survivors. A few had tried to head outside, but got stuck at the doors JARVIS had locked closed– and they killed those a little slower than the others, nothing too horrible, just enough so that their cries would warn all the others away from the exits. And through it all Loki coated the place in ice and snow, freezing every inch and leaving it so very cold that Tony wouldn't even have been able to survive if he hadn't been wearing his suit. The temperature dropped to the point that they began to come upon frozen bodies they had not yet touched, people killed by the temperature alone, their faces white and their eyes closed, as if they had merely fallen asleep on the ground.

Tony knew it was because they were in an enclosed space, that the cold was so very effective because the halls and underground tunnels were working as vents, funnelling the drastic temperature. If they had been out in the open this would not have been nearly as effective, but...

It still took Tony's breath away. Dear god, how had SHIELD ever managed to keep *this* contained?

And then... never mind the *how*... why would they *want* to?

By the time they made it back up to the surface, Tony had long since stopped bothering to fight. There was no need, though he stayed busy watching Loki's back, keeping his eyes alert just in case there was someone who had managed to survive, who was desperate enough to take a shot.

Tony had to blink when they finally stepped out into the light of day, so used to the dark underground and the whiteness of the ice that the sun almost came as a surprise. But the moment they were standing out in the evening light, in the middle of an empty alley on the other side of Tower Hill – the only sounds the sirens from a few blocks over – Loki held out his hand for Tony to take so that they could go back home. Tony still felt a little strange, still shocked by... well, he'd always known that Loki was powerful, but it was the first time he'd seen him do something like this.

“Anthony?” Loki prompted. “Are you all right?” His expression was worried, wary in a way it hadn't been earlier.

“Hey,” Tony said— and he took the risk to retract the gauntlet on his right hand, so that he could entwine his fingers with Loki's properly. “You know that I love you. Right now I'm just... in awe of you.”

Loki grinned at that, and although it was harder to see on the blue skin, Tony recognised the slight purple stain as the blush he was so very fond of. Loki's hand tightened around his, and Tony smiled as he felt the familiar tingle of seiðr—

But then—

“Brother!” Thor landed a few yards in front of them with a crash, Mjölfnir in hand but held loosely, as if he were hoping not to use it. He hadn't landed with lightning either, as Tony would have expected him to. Maybe Thor was trying a different strategy— or maybe he didn't want to scare the people around here anymore than they probably already had been.

Still, Tony expected that Loki would just go – they had been about to, anyway – but instead, Loki let go of his hand and pulled himself up to his full height.

Tony knew why the moment he saw the look of abject horror on Thor's face.

“Brother,” Thor said. “What have you done?”

“You cannot tell me that you're surprised,” Loki replied. “You've known what I am since before I fell from the Bifröst.”

“You have never shown it like this before,” Thor said. “You have never so blatantly flaunted the fact that you are—”

“A monster?” Loki cut in, spreading his hands as if putting his blue skin on display. Then the blue began to fade to the skin Loki usually wore, and he sneered as he asked, “Am I less of a *monster* like this? Is it my heritage, or is it just *me* that you so despise?”

It was that word again, and again it made Tony's teeth grate together. But he was more sure now than he ever had been that this was an issue that was *healing*, because Loki didn't seem to be hoping Thor would hand out a punishment. He had that look in his eye that Tony knew meant Loki was acting out of *pride*.

He wanted to prove Thor wrong about something, to show Thor that he *wasn't* everything everyone thought him to be. This was clearly something that Loki was in need of right now—and Tony would be right there beside him all the way through it, making sure that he was all right.

After all, he could remember the last time Loki had faced Thor as if it were only yesterday. He could picture the pain Loki had been in, could *see* in his mind's eye the broken shape of Loki's chest where Mjölnir had caved in his ribs. Tony could not, *would not* let Loki go through something like that again—whether Loki needed to talk to Thor or not, Tony would be stepping in if necessary.

He remained silent though, not saying a thing. It wasn't that he was afraid of being recognised—JARVIS could disguise his voice well enough. But this was Loki's battle, and until any back up appeared for Thor, or until Loki needed help, Tony would be keeping his mouth shut and his hands to himself.

He stood to the side and just further back, clearly deferring to Loki though not so far behind that he couldn't jump forward if needed.

"I never said that you were a monster," Thor tried, but Loki was not having it.

"You attacked me—"

"*You* have been attacking all of these people—"

"It isn't as if they were innocent," Loki said, his voice sharp and bitter. "Look around you, Thor. Do you think I am killing for sport?"

"Sometimes, I wonder," Thor muttered. "I used to think I understood you, Loki, but in recent times it is as if you are a complete stranger."

"There are a lot of things that you don't understand," Loki snapped. "That you are not even willing to *try* and understand. Perhaps if you did, you would see that *you* are the one who is on the side of the monsters!"

"The Avengers have done nothing wrong," Thor spat.

"Haven't they?" Loki snapped. "Do you not know where I have been this past year, *brother?*" The word was spat with such menace that it even sent a shiver up *Tony's* spine, and he knew the ire was not directed at him.

Thor visibly swallowed, Mjölnir shifting in his hand once again. "Father told me you were serving an appropriate punishment for your crimes," he said.

“Appropriate?” Loki asked, his single laugh reminiscent of a bitter, broken caw. “If my punishment was appropriate, then Asgard has fallen further than I ever imagined. I suppose I should not be surprised.”

“Why are you doing this?” Thor demanded. “Why are you being so... so—”

“Logical?” Loki said.

“Impertinent,” Thor snapped. “Why can’t you just listen?”

Loki didn’t respond to that— at least, not with anything other than a hardening of his expression, his eyes turning icier than any of the bodies lying below in the SWORD facility.

“I don’t want to hurt you, Loki,” Thor said, lifting his hammer and taking a half step forward. “But I know that it’s the only way I’ll be able to bring you to SHIELD— and *that* is the only way that I will be able to make you *listen*.”

Tony didn’t hesitate. He stepped forward with his gauntlet raised, the sound of the charging repulsor cutting through the empty street.

Thor’s eyes narrowed. “Call off your dog,” he snapped. “This is between us.”

“Oh, he’s not my *dog*,” Loki said calmly, tilting his head. “I assure you, he is so much more than that.”

Tony took that as his cue, and fired both repulsors directly at Thor’s chest. It blasted the thunderer backward until he crashed into a far building.

Tony turned immediately to face Loki.

“We need to go,” he said— and Loki nodded firmly. Rather than taking Tony’s hand, Loki stepped close behind him and wrapped an arm around Tony’s waist.

Thor stared as he got back to his feet, his jaw tight and his hair in disarray. “You will not go!” he shouted. “Not until you have given me my answers!”

“If you want to know the truth, Rapunzel, then you need to look into SHIELD,” Tony said, speaking to Thor for the first time since the confrontation started as he trained his repulsor on him again. “Until you do that, leave Loki alone.”

“Iron Man,” Thor said, voice still harsh though with a pleading edge to it which hadn’t been present while he’d spoken to Loki. Somehow, that grated at Tony more than anything else. “If there is anything of you left in there—”

“Iron Man is dead, you know that,” Tony snapped. “I’m something *better*.”

Then Tony fired his repulsor right as Loki wrapped them both in his seiðr and tore them both away.

Chapter End Notes

(I know that in the comics, the British version of SHIELD was actually STRIKE, and SWORD is something else entirely– but since the mcu already has a STRIKE, I just decided to go with SWORD instead. Sorry if there was any confusion on that one.)

Monster of his nightmares

As he sat on his bed back in Avengers Tower after returning from London, Thor felt like his head was about to split open, like someone was hammering Mjöllnir against the inside of his skull. The ring of the repulsors still burned in his ears, and his chest still throbbed from the force of the blows he had been dealt. Iron Man – or, whatever he was calling himself these days – seemed more powerful than he used to be. Or perhaps he had held back on his power before, and was only now showing his true strength at Loki's command.

And oh, by the Norns.

Loki.

Every time Thor thought on it, he gained an ache inside of him that couldn't be soothed, no matter what he tried. He could still remember his happy little brother, the way that he used to be before the mess that was his coronation. Loki had always had his sharp edges, playing jokes that could be seen as malicious, but really were only done in fun. Even just before they had entered the hall for the coronation ceremony, Loki had scared a servant by turning the drink he held into a trio of snakes. But he had only smiled about it– that bright, bright smile that seemed to have disappeared as certainly as the snakes Loki had vanished right afterward.

But nothing Loki had done in the past was harmful or cruel. He had caused mischief and chaos but not destruction, and he never tried to actually *hurt* anybody.

Now, however...

Thor wasn't sure how everything had gone so wrong, but he couldn't help but wonder if it was his fault that Loki turned out this way. After all, had he not wanted to go to Jotunheim that day, then Loki never would have learned the truth of who he was, and even now they might still be up on Asgard, acting like brothers just as they always had been. But even despite that... perhaps if Thor had not always been so outspoken of his hatred for the Frost Giants, or perhaps if he had told Loki more often that he loved him, then maybe Loki would not have acted so rashly to try and prove himself.

Even now, Thor wondered if some of the way Loki was acting was due to Thor's inability to accept who Loki was.

Thor had been in London visiting Jane when they had heard the sirens, the news of the attack, and the rumours of ice beginning to form on the Thames. Thor hadn't been sure that it was his brother, not immediately, but he'd needed to *check*– and when he'd arrived, there was Loki.

It was the first time Thor had seen Loki like that, with his skin a deep blue, his eyes burning the same colour as the blood that was splattered over his face. And in that face, Thor hadn't been able to see his little brother. He'd only seen the monster of his nightmares.

Loki had even noticed, and had made the comment– which had only made Thor all the angrier, though he was angry at *himself*. But even with his skin back to the pale cream Thor was far more used to seeing, Loki's face was still coated in blood, enough of it that it still had yet to dry. And in the heat of the moment, he couldn't help but think that maybe Loki had turned into a monster, regardless of where he was born.

To make matters worse, standing beside him was the twisted reflection of Iron Man, all that was left of Thor's once friend, broken and destroyed and turned into one of Loki's playthings– and Thor could hardly look upon him without growing upset for all that had been done to him.

Perhaps things would have gone better had Thor been able to keep his head, but he had just been so *angry*, so hurt by everything Loki was doing. He truly had only wanted to talk to Loki, but...

It was just so *hard* to remain calm, when nothing about what had happened since he arrived on Midgard made any sense.

At first, it had appeared to be so very simple. The Avengers had shown Thor the footage from the fight in Florence, and he had immediately recognised the seiðr to be Loki's– and the presence of the illusions looking like Sif and Fandral only seemed to confirm that fact. Thor supposed he should himself lucky that Loki hadn't been aware of the way SHIELD kept files on Thor's friends, because it was a slip that Loki would not have made if he had known, and was now unlikely to make again.

At first, Thor had been wary of all the Avengers had told him, because he *knew* his brother and this did not seem like him. This Loki wasn't just out to cause mischief. He was determined in a way that Thor had not seen in a long time– determined like he had not been during the Chitauri invasion. He was a killer now, tearing through human organisations and leaving only blood in his wake. He seemed like a completely different person to the Loki who had promised Thor he would always love him, and Thor couldn't help but think that there might be something more going on here than there appeared to be on the surface. There was something *wrong* with Loki, and Thor could only hope that his brother was still in there, despite everything that had happened to him and everything that he had done over these past couple of years.

But yet *another* problem lay in the fact that Loki was not one to listen when he believed that he was winning. It wasn't that he didn't take advice– he had always been less hot headed than Thor when it came to listening to others' ideas, even Thor could admit that. But Loki was also sly enough to know that when falling behind, others will use manipulation to try and bring someone down, and he did not like to listen to those who were on the opposing side.

Thor had to admit that it was a wise strategy in most cases– but it meant that when Loki was headed down a darker path, it was difficult to turn him from it.

And as things stood, Thor knew that Loki wouldn't listen unless he was pinned down and given no choice, and with someone as powerful as Loki, he needed to be injured for that to even be possible. It pained Thor, every time he had to try and hurt his brother. He did not

want to, he never *wanted* to hurt even a hair on Loki's head, but he hadn't been given a choice.

But it seemed that Loki did not share the same concerns.

Thor's hands clenched into fists, pressing hard against the mattress either side of his legs as he thought once again about all that Loki had done to Iron Man.

Oh, Thor knew that Iron Man was dead— he didn't need the new metal beast to tell him so. The Avengers had been clear on that fact. But to see what Loki had done with all that was left of Thor's once friend, to see Iron Man killing and maiming and even attacking Thor and the other Avengers, including Colonel Rhodes who had once been closer to Iron Man and Stark than any of them... it was ghastly.

Thor had once been the kind of person who killed his enemies without a thought, but the humans had helped him learn that killing without mercy was not the best way of dealing with a problem, and he would always now only kill as a last resort. And when his father had told him that Loki was serving his punishment on Midgard, Thor had hoped that Loki would find himself learning a similar lesson.

But something must have gone wrong, because it seemed that Loki had only come out of his time in Midgard all the *worse*.

What had happened? What had gone so terribly wrong to make Loki into this twisted being who was even more monstrous than the one who had attacked a city with an army of Chitauri?

For at least then, Thor had hope that Loki would be able to see reason. Now, he was not so sure.

If you want to know the truth, Rapunzel, then you need to look into SHIELD.

The words rang loud and clear through his mind, and Thor ran his hands hard over his face and then tugged at his hair, not sure if he wanted to chase them away or examine them further.

The suggestion was worrying alone— because it could just be an invention of Loki's, a manipulation of his own to try and manoeuvre Thor into causing strife amongst the Avengers and their allies.

But then... there was that nickname.

Rapunzel.

Thor had asked Barton about it, just before he came back into his room. It referred to someone with long, blonde hair, which was the same explanation Thor had received when he had asked someone about the 'Point Break' nickname Stark had used for him during Loki's failed invasion.

Iron Man had also used similar nicknames, and at the time Thor had simply assumed that the creator had programmed the creation with the same sense of humour as his own— and later, when Thor realised that Iron Man was not just a robot but also a person, he assumed that the two friends must talk often enough to share their jokes. But now...

Well. Iron Man was dead, yes, but Tony Stark was *not*. The Avengers had a theory that Loki had stolen Stark from the Ten Rings, possibly in Miami, or perhaps in an attack earlier than that— and that he was now forcing Stark to not only build weapons but also maintain the armour, so that Loki would not be facing threats entirely alone.

Thor tried to push away the theory that was worming its way into his mind, because he did not want to consider it as a possibility. Maybe Thor's first thought was right after all, and Stark had just programmed this armour to have the same humour as himself. Except, no— Thor had *seen* the new Iron Man's bare hand holding Loki's when he had arrived, most likely to make it easier for Loki to transport them. There *was* a person inside there, and it was likely the same person who had been posing as Sif in Florence.

The person who fought with Stark's gauntlets— the person who had been seen standing in Loki's arms. And the more Thor thought about it, the more he couldn't help but wonder...

It was a dangerous notion, and one that he didn't think he could share with anyone else, no matter how much he might want to. He wasn't an idiot, and he knew that the mortals still did not trust him entirely, especially not when it came to Loki. They would be more likely to call him insane than believe him, if he suggested such a thing.

Besides. If Thor was wrong about his suspicions regarding Stark's loyalties, he would be setting the humans after a friend, and the result could be tragic. But if he was right... well, it would not make any difference. If Stark was the one in the suit, then he was killing people just as surely as Loki was.

Unless, of course, he *was* being coerced or controlled as the Avengers had theorised, but Thor doubted that. Perhaps it was that he did not know Stark as well as the others, but when he had met the man he seemed cocky and arrogant, the kind to consider any means justifiable by the end result. In fact, Thor had thought him similar to Loki, in a way— if less subtle about getting what he wanted.

It was true that Loki could get inside people's heads, but not to the extent of making them his puppets— not without the Mind Stone, at any rate. Which meant that complete control was out of the question, and given the way that Thor had seen Iron Man stand protectively between Loki and Thor? There was no way he would have done that, if he were under duress. If that were the case, he would have been *glad* for Loki to be taken into custody, surely. So either there was more going on, or Iron Man was there by choice.

If you want to know the truth...

The only way to know for certain was if he confronted the problem head on, and to do that— Thor knew exactly where he needed to go.

As Thor prepared to make his way toward the SHIELD Headquarters, he wondered whether he should ask someone to go with him. The only dealings he'd had with SHIELD in the past had been during his time as a mortal, and when he had come back to retrieve Loki and the Tesseract. He was aware that he did not know much of the inner workings of the organisation, and that while he *was* well versed in politics, things were likely to be different among the humans.

He *would* likely need help, but... who would be best? He considered asking Agent Romanoff, because she knew more about SHIELD than any of the others— but she was also more loyal to them, and if there truly was something there that wasn't right, then she might give the game away. She, after all, did not trust him.

Thor was still thinking it over as he went to the kitchen to grab something to eat— because even for him, it would be a decent flight between New York and Washington DC. He hadn't thought of anyone else by the time he stepped out into the elevator— since Barton was both loyal to SHIELD and hated Loki, and Thor found it difficult to believe Rogers had Stark's best interests at heart after what had happened. But then, as if by intervention of the Norns themselves, Thor found Colonel Rhodes sitting at the kitchen counter.

And, okay, so maybe Thor stared for a moment, but he couldn't help thinking that even though Rhodes also had his duty to think about, his allegiance was not to *SHIELD*. Rhodes *would* want to do what was best for Stark, and if there was something to be found by talking to Fury, then Rhodes might well be on Thor's side for the conversation.

“Thor.”

Thor came out of his thoughts to find Rhodes staring at him expectantly, a brow raised.

“Can I help you with something?” Rhodes asked, his voice sounding far too patient for that patience to be real. But Thor wasn't going to let that stop him, not when he might have finally found someone who *could* actually help.

“Yes,” Thor said. “I'm going to SHIELD, because there is something going on there that is not right, and I need to work out what it is. But I think I would have more luck in my investigation if I had someone with me who knew the workings of human organisations better than I.”

“You want help breaking into SHIELD?” Rhodes asked, surprised. “I'm really not sure *that's* a great idea—”

“No,” Thor said firmly, holding up a hand. Okay, there *was* a time in his youth when he would have stormed right in there and demanded to know the truth under threat of violence, but he had the *smallest* of suspicions that would not be the most effective method in this scenario. He knew better than that, now. “I am not going to break in. I am going to go and have a civil conversation.”

Rhodes did not look impressed. “Uh huh. And have you considered the fact that they might not tell you the truth?”

“Well, yes, that’s why I was hoping that you would be able to—” Thor cut himself off in a moment of realisation, his eyes widening. “You think there’s something going on in SHIELD as well,” he accused. “It isn’t just me—”

“Keep your voice *down*,” Rhodes hissed.

“You think there are eavesdroppers?” Thor glanced around the room, knowing that Barton did have a habit of hiding out of sight.

“There’s always someone listening,” Rhodes muttered. “Especially here.”

Ah. Right. Thor supposed that Stark’s AI was still there, though he still remained silent more often than not.

“Okay, but you do think there’s something wrong, don’t you?” Thor asked, lowering his voice to a loud whisper— though from the way Rhodes sighed, that wasn’t what he had meant. He still answered, though. Sort of.

“Why do *you* think there’s something wrong?” Rhodes shot back, avoiding the question.

And, well, Thor *considered* telling Rhodes what Iron Man had said to him, but without explaining everything he worried that Rhodes would think Thor had simply fallen for a manipulation and would tell him that he needed to let this go. So, instead, he decided to focus on the part of his argument that no one would be able to dispute, simply because no one knew Loki as well as he did.

“I know that Loki wouldn’t do these things unless he had a reason,” Thor said. “He doesn’t just seem angry, he seems vengeful, and I want to know why. I can’t make Loki listen, we can’t talk to him, but... maybe, since SHIELD were the ones who held him captive, Director Fury might know something. I just want to go and talk, and if you came with me, I know that we could discover what is going on.”

Something in Rhodes’ expression changed, then, and when he spoke, he did so quickly and quietly. “What if there *was* a way we could talk to him?” he asked. “If I could get you near him without a fight. Would you be willing to talk to him then?”

“Of course,” Thor said straight away, not needing to think it over. That would be the kind of scenario he had been *trying* to find, but since he could only locate Loki when he attacked somewhere, it was never really the right atmosphere for friendly conversation.

Rhodes’ eyes widened and his lips turned up into a grin that seemed more determined than happy. “Thanks, Thor, that really helps,” he said, immediately moving toward the elevator. “I’ll be in touch.”

And then, without even so much as a “*Good luck with SHIELD*,” Rhodes was gone. He’d been in such a hurry that he’d even left his dirty mug on the counter.

Well then.

Thor sighed, and went to grab a snack from the fridge before moving to the elevator himself.

It looked like he would just have to go to SHIELD alone.

—•—

To his surprise, Thor found that he was able to walk through the Triskelion without question. Perhaps it was his own inner musings which had made him more paranoid, but by the time he landed out the front of the building he had almost expected to be greeted by armed guards.

When he asked someone at the reception desk whether he would be able to speak to Fury, they easily directed him toward the elevator, which took him to the correct floor at a simple spoken request. The door to Fury's office was unlocked, and Thor pushed through it easily.

"Thor," Fury greeted. "This is a surprise. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Thor knew that was a lie— Fury would have been informed of Thor's impending arrival, if not the moment he had chosen to leave Avengers Tower then at least when he had approached the Triskelion from the sky. But he decided not to comment upon it— he was not here to make Fury angry, after all.

But that didn't mean that he had to beat around the bush.

"I want to know what you did with my brother, when he was in your custody after the Battle of New York," Thor said firmly, bypassing the greetings to answer Fury's question directly.

Fury's expression didn't change— he was far too practiced for that. But Thor had lived with Loki for most of his life, and he was able to pick up on the dangerous way Fury's expression hardened. And when Fury leaned back in his chair, Thor knew that he was not just relaxing— he was getting into a position which would give him more room to quickly draw the weapon that was no doubt strapped to his hip.

Thankfully, though, Fury did not appear to take offence at Thor's briskness, and answered just as directly as Thor had. "He was transferred to our maximum-security prison by the STRIKE team," he replied.

Thor narrowed his eyes, and moved across the room to stand directly in front of Fury's desk. He knew Loki had been imprisoned, of course, but... he had pictured something involving rehabilitation. He was now beginning to doubt that was the case. "And where was this maximum-security prison?" Thor asked. "Clearly, it was not maximum *enough*, if they allowed him to escape."

"Sorry, but I can't tell you that," Fury said, not sounding sorry about it in the slightest. And— *there* was that secrecy Thor had been concerned about.

"Do *you* even know?" Thor asked sharply.

"I was told which prison," Fury said. "But I do not know its current location, and I was not given details. There's a reason why it has stayed our most secure, and it's not because we just spread that information around."

"I thought you were the director—"

“I am. But SHIELD runs on the authority of the World Security Council, and I cannot override *them*,” Fury said harshly.

“Then you *don't* know what happened to my brother?” Thor asked. “There must have been something, he was not like this before—”

“He invaded our *planet*—”

“But he was not killing needlessly like this—”

“Do you not remember how many people he killed when he tore through the SHIELD base?” Fury asked. “And when he attacked in Stuttgart?”

“Those attacks served a purpose, and he did not destroy *everything*. Not like he is now. He is leaving no survivors and killing with a viciousness that is unnecessary, and he would not do that without reason. Either there is something he is gaining, or... there is something that he is trying to avenge.”

“His motive doesn't matter,” Fury insisted. “The number of people he has killed calls for retribution, and in his last attack, he destroyed an entire base of SWORD agents—”

“Why will you not tell me where he was being kept?” Thor interrupted. “You're dancing around the issue at hand and you keep changing the subject, and the only reason I can think of as to *why* is if you do not want me to know the truth.” Thor leaned forward over the desk, staring Fury down in a manner that would have had even the most experienced of Asgard's soldiers trembling in their boots. “What did you do to him that you don't want me to know about?”

“I assure you,” Fury said harshly. “He would not have been treated inhumanely.”

“Forgive me if I retain a few doubts,” Thor growled, “but I have seen the way that you treat people you are afraid of. I experienced the cell that you put him in before, the cell that was meant for Banner. Would you really have dropped one of the Avengers from the sky?”

“That was for the good of everyone on the helicarrier. Either of them could have sent us falling to the ground and almost did, if I recall correctly. Which I know that I do.”

Thor shook his head. “I cannot believe that you had an Asgardian in your custody, and that you did nothing but keep him in a cell.”

It was something Thor had tried not to think on, because while he might not know much about the ways of humans, he had seen the way they acted around things that they did not understand. And since hearing the words *maximum security*, Thor hadn't been able to let the thought go.

When the humans had first found Mjölnir in the desert in New Mexico, they had set up such a facility around it that even Thor had trouble breaking inside. Then there was the way that Stark and Banner had studied the sceptre on the helicarrier, and the fact that Thor *knew*

SHIELD had not only studied the Tesseract for decades, but had wished to make weapons from it.

He was *far* from naïve enough to believe that SHIELD had held a mage as powerful as Loki in their grasp for almost a year, and had done nothing but let him rot. No, they would have studied him at the very least— and from the way Loki was acting now, Thor had very little doubt that it had been far from pleasant.

The thought left a horrible, sour taste on his tongue, and it felt even worse when Fury did not answer his question— and instead merely stared him down with a grim look in his eye.

Thor could not tell whether it meant that Fury had been lying, that he *did* know what had been done to Loki and didn't want Thor to know... Or whether he didn't know for sure and had the same suspicions as Thor— but had not done anything about it. But either way, Thor could not stand to remain in the room any longer.

“Thank you for your time, Director Fury,” Thor said, able to hear the stiffness in his own voice. “I shall see myself out.”

Fury looked rather like he was not done with the conversation, but he didn't try to stop Thor as he left. Perhaps he simply knew that he would not be able to.

And as he made the long flight back to Avengers tower, Thor wasn't sure of what to think, let alone of what he would do next. But he *was* now sure that there was something being hidden from him, something crucial as to *why* Loki was acting with such violence and disregard for life. And Thor would not rest until he had learned what it was.

Although... perhaps it was time to be a little more discreet about his actions.

Push back the shadows

Chapter Notes

Shout out to **Rabentochter**, who helped me a lot with this chapter ♥

The tension was palpable in Loki's shoulders as he paced back and forth in front of the windows in their living room. His hands were opening and closing at his sides, and his expression was tight and pinched.

Tony watched for a few moments, debating— because he knew that when *he* got like this, sometimes he just needed a few moments to work through his own thoughts. But he also knew that Loki had a tendency to stew, to let darker thoughts poison the lighter ones— unless there was someone there with him to help push back the shadows.

So, after only those few moments, Tony took those few steps forward and caught Loki by his waist, wrapping his arms firmly around Loki's middle and pressing his forehead into Loki's shoulder. He didn't care that Loki's skin was still caked in dry blood— he didn't care about the smell of iron, or the way that the leather of Loki's clothes stuck a little to his hands. He just drew Loki close and held on tight.

Loki didn't respond immediately— he really was as tense as a bowstring, feeling hard and unmoving in Tony's arms. But then he let out a sigh that ruffled through Tony's hair, and his own arms came up around Tony's shoulders, hands pressing into his back as he pulled Tony closer.

And you know, there's something to be said for silence. They didn't need to talk in those few moments, neither out loud nor through their connection. They said all they needed to in the way they held each other close, in the kiss Tony pressed to Loki's neck, and in the touch of Loki's lips to the top of Tony's head as he slowly began to relax.

They just stood there for several long minutes, holding each other, finding comfort in the solid press of their bodies.

The sound of footfalls caused Tony's eyes to snap open, but when he turned he saw that it was only Barnes, moving from the kitchen toward the hall.

Tony knew that Barnes was more than capable of walking quietly, that he could have crossed the room in complete silence. But Tony also knew Barnes well enough by now to understand that despite the hard exterior, despite everything that he had been through and despite the way that he still appeared to not care about anyone else... he actually cared rather deeply. And to be honest, Tony was quite sure that if they gave him the chance, Barnes would turn into something of a mother hen.

And yeah, it was odd, because Tony did not doubt that Barnes could still look absolutely terrifying if he wanted to— and yet, it was kind of hard to be afraid of him anymore after seeing him sprawled out over a couch, drinking ice tea and fanning himself with the lid of a monopoly box while groaning about the Italian summer heat. It would be hard to be afraid of anyone after seeing that, actually.

So Tony figured that Barnes had let them hear his footsteps so as not to startle them if they saw him out of the corner of their eyes. And when he saw that Tony had noticed him, Barnes offered him a questioning look— which Tony answered with a small smile, a reassurance that they were okay. Then Barnes gave a tiny nod, and continued on his way toward the stairs.

Loki hardly gave any indication that he had noticed Barnes' presence, though Tony didn't doubt that he had. He just stayed wrapped around Tony, his slow breaths tickling the top of Tony's head. He finally seemed like he might be relaxed, and Tony pulled back just enough to cup Loki's still bloody cheek with his hand.

"Better?" he asked— and Loki sighed.

"A little," he admitted, leaning in to Tony's touch. "I just... I wish that there was some way to make him *see*."

"You mean Thor?" Tony asked. "Loki, he's... I know that he's your— well, your *brother*, even if not by blood, but there has to be a point where—"

"I *know*," Loki replied. "I know that he won't listen, he never has. I don't know why I thought I could try."

It was Tony's turn to sigh at that. He knew that he couldn't entirely relate to what Loki was going through. He'd never had a sibling, and he didn't understand why Loki kept *trying* when it was clear that Thor wasn't going to change— because he'd been this way for centuries.

But then, Tony supposed that it might be similar to the way that he currently felt about Rhodey— that sadness for what had been lost, and the yearning desire to return to what once had been, even though he knew that it was impossible.

But... Rhodey had always stood by Tony— or at least, almost always. He had told Tony when he thought he was being an idiot, yeah, but in those instances he had almost always been right. Perhaps Tony was a little biased, but he was quite sure that most of the times Thor had told Loki to stop doing something, it had been out of his own self-interest, rather than any care for Loki's wellbeing.

And, okay, so Tony *could* understand that terrible desire to keep thinking of family in the best light, even when all evidence was pointing toward them having done something terrible. If they had been talking about fathers rather than brothers, well... He knew all too well the desire to try and imagine that they did what they did for your own good, because if that wasn't the case, then it would mean you had to accept that they didn't love you in the way that a parent should. But even if Tony could understand Loki's wish that things could be a little better... despite knowing that Loki's feelings regarding Thor must be seriously complicated, Tony's own were incredibly simple.

Thor had hurt Loki far too many times, and Tony knew that he, personally, would not ever be able to forgive him for it– and he couldn't help wishing that Loki wouldn't, either, that he would hold on to the knowledge that Thor *was not good for him* and let him go.

Every time he thought of Thor, all he could picture was the injury Loki had been dealt in Kiel, and all he could hear was the crunch of Mjölnir against Loki's ribs and the rasp of his laboured breaths. Certainly it was something that Loki had survived, something that he had healed from relatively quickly, but Tony could not forgive Thor for the pain that he had caused. And of course, that was not the only instance, because Tony knew from Loki's stories of their childhood – hell, of their whole *lives* – that Thor often did things thoughtlessly, things that hurt Loki beyond measure.

Thor might have 'just' been trying to get Loki to talk– and maybe he even believed that what he was doing would help Loki in the end. But fuck had he gone about it the wrong way.

Still, Tony knew that Loki saw Thor in a slightly different light, and he tried to rein in the anger he felt as he gave Loki his answer.

"It might have been worth a shot," Tony allowed. "He just thinks that SHIELD are the good guys, and that we're killing people when we don't need to. He's not going to listen to you until he thinks you've listened to him first– because he thinks he's right, and he won't hear otherwise." Tony huffed. "Trust me, I know a few guys like him."

"Rogers?" Loki asked.

"How ever did you guess?"

"Maybe we could just kill them all," Loki suggested– though Tony could tell that he didn't *entirely* mean it. "That might fix a few problems."

"Maybe we could," Tony agreed. "But we still need them, and you know it."

Loki grit his teeth at that reminder, and Tony understood– he didn't much like it, either. But even though much of their plan from the beginning had fallen apart, there were still bits of it that they wanted to hold on to.

And besides, they still did not yet know *exactly* how deep the Avengers were into all this mess.

Until they did, they would just need to grin and bear it.

But, for now, they had a moment of peace, and Tony was quite sure he knew what they both needed. So he untangled himself from Loki's hold and took his hand, and then led him up the stairs.

When they reached the bathroom, it was to find that JARVIS had already started to run a hot bath. Tony helped Loki remove his heavy leather armour, and then Loki seemed to take pleasure from slowly stripping Tony down as well. Then, rather than getting straight into the bath, Tony turned on the shower and took a washcloth from the cupboard.

The water ran red as Tony stroked his hands through Loki's hair, and then he used the cloth to gently start cleaning the blood from Loki's face and hands. Loki seemed to enjoy the attention, his eyes closing and his lips pulling into a smile, almost groaning as Tony scratched his fingers over Loki's scalp. As soon as most of the blood was gone, Tony turned off the shower, and then the pair of them moved toward the tub.

Loki got in first, as he always did— and then Tony climbed on top of him. But rather than lying back against him as he normally would, Tony straddled Loki's lap so that he could still see him, not wanting to look away. Then Tony leaned down to kiss him, not able to help himself— and smiled against Loki's lips when Loki lifted his chin to kiss him back.

The warm water was relaxing, and any remaining tension melted right off them both. Tony kissed Loki again, just because he could, just because he could never get enough. And then he used another clean washcloth to begin washing Loki's chest, and then his arms, because even though all the blood was gone now the movements were soothing.

When he reached Loki's hands, he lifted them to his lips and softly kissed Loki's palm. Loki's head was leaning back against the edge of the bath, his eyes closed and a tender smile upon his lips. He looked perfect, and Tony smiled as well. It was the kind of moment that Tony knew he would be able to hold on to for a very long time.

But then the quiet atmosphere was broken by JARVIS, his voice cutting through the air and ringing with obvious reluctance.

“Sirs,” he said. “I apologise, but there is something you should know regarding Mr Odinson.”

Loki groaned, and shifted so that his head was resting upon Tony's bare shoulder. “What is that oaf doing now?” he asked.

“He is currently speaking with Colonel Rhodes,” JARVIS said— and that caught Tony's attention, his eyes widening.

“Is Rhodey saying anything?”

“No, nothing that would give away anything sensitive,” JARVIS assured them. “But Mr Odinson has indicated that he wishes to break into SHIELD. He seems to believe there is something going on that he doesn't know about.”

Loki lifted his head again, frowning. “Really?” he said disbelievingly. “What has he heard?”

“It would appear that he believes you are acting out of vengeance, Mr Liesmith, rather than pure anger,” JARVIS answered. “And he wishes to find out what reason you would have for seeking revenge.”

“Then he truly doesn't know what happened to me,” Loki whispered. “How could he not know? How could any of them not *realise* what happened to us?”

“I'm just surprised that he's managed to work out even that much, to be honest,” Tony said. “I mean, he's hardly been a paragon of intellectual thought recently.”

“He is far from unintelligent,” Loki muttered. “He just chooses not to use his brain as often as he should.”

Ah. Well, that actually made some level of sense— because of course Loki would grow more frustrated with someone who did not use the intellect they had, than a person who simply had not possessed it in the first place.

“Mr Odinson is leaving to go to SHIELD, now,” JARVIS said. “Colonel Rhodes is speaking with me. He...” JARVIS trailed off, and Tony and Loki exchanged a glance, sure that this would at least be interesting— if not throw a wrench into their current plans.

After a few moments, JARVIS spoke again.

“Colonel Rhodes has another condition,” he said. “He will speak with you when Mr Liesmith is present, providing that Mr Odinson is as well.”

“No,” Tony said immediately. “JARVIS, *no.*”

“Anthony,” Loki said. “Perhaps this is something we should think about before simply dismissing—”

“*No,*” Tony said again, gripping Loki’s upper arms tightly. “Lokes, after all he’s done, I don’t want you to— I can’t—”

“Do you think that I would not be able to handle him?” Loki asked sharply. “I assure you, I am more than capable of—”

“I don’t doubt it,” Tony interrupted— and you know what? He *meant* that. He knew that Loki could handle himself, he really, truly did. But— “*I love you,*” he said, both out loud and with his mind. “And I... he hurt you before, Lokes, he really did. And I can’t let that happen again. If Rhodney brings Thor, I’m not— I’m not going to be able to stay calm, I know it.”

Loki’s expression softened as Tony spoke, and he lifted a hand to run it through Tony’s wet hair. He didn’t promise that Thor would not hurt him again— because they both knew that it wasn’t something they could be sure he could keep.

“*I will be able to stay calm,*” Loki said instead. “I cannot vouch for Thor, but if he is trying, then maybe there is a chance. And you *need* to speak with Rhodes.”

Tony sighed, because yeah— he did. “I know you will,” Tony said, his eyes falling closed. “I just...” *‘I can’t help worrying, even though I know that you can do it.’*

Loki didn’t say anything, but Tony could feel his understanding, his *empathy*.

‘He hurt you,’ Tony continued. *‘So many times. And while I know that you can talk to him civilly because you’re you, he just... he doesn’t deserve it, you hear me?’*

Loki sighed. *‘I hear you, Anthony. But... if this can help us—’*

“Don’t think about what can help us,” Tony said, opening his eyes to meet Loki’s gaze. “Not with this. Just... can you look me in the eye and tell me honestly that right now, you *want* to talk to Thor?”

Loki glanced away at that, and Tony knew that he’d hit the mark. Loki could put on a brave face better than anyone Tony knew, but that wasn’t what Tony wanted. He didn’t want Loki to force himself into a situation with so many risks, when it probably wouldn’t even have that many benefits. *Perhaps* they could get an ally out of it but... they had survived this long by themselves, and if it took putting Loki’s health on the line to achieve then it certainly wasn’t worth it.

“If you wanted to speak with him, I would help you do it,” Tony promised. “But if you don’t... Lokes, it’s not worth the risk.”

Loki didn’t disagree. He just let out a long breath. “I don’t care about his approval, not anymore,” he said— and Tony was glad to see that Loki actually meant it. “After all that he has done... I do not think that it would even be possible to gain, but even so...”

“He’s not worth it,” Tony said again. “He’s not worth your time, or your pain. Loki, you don’t— you don’t see how amazing you are, but you *are*, okay? And if he doesn’t see it then he’s the one that’s missing out. And if he learns what SHIELD’s up to, then, great. But either way, he’s not going to understand what we’ve been through. He won’t *get* it.”

“No,” Loki agreed. “He won’t. And you are right, it doesn’t matter. Because I have everything that I need, right here.” And then, when Loki leaned up and caught Tony’s lips with his own, Tony knew that they were going to be all right.

“J, tell Rhodey we’ll think about it,” Tony said, only leaning back from Loki long enough for his words to be intelligible. “That should buy us a little more time.”

He didn’t even hear JARVIS’ reply. He was far too focused on the feel of Loki’s mouth against his own, and the sensation of Loki’s hands sliding down his sides and over the back of his hips. He gasped as Loki nipped at his lips and brushed his hand over the base of Tony’s spine. Then, when it seemed like Loki was planning on taking his time, Tony ground down onto Loki’s lap, trying to urge him on. Loki moaned into their kiss at the sudden friction, and his hand slipped lower down.

The bath wasn’t small, and Tony was able to shift his knees outward to give Loki better access, looping his arms over Loki’s shoulders to keep his balance. Loki did that magic thing Tony had come to absolutely love, and then his fingers slipped inside Tony already slick with lube. Loki took his time, gently caressing Tony’s back with his free hand while *slowly* moving his fingers in and out of Tony’s entrance. Tony was a moaning mess after only a few seconds of that torturous treatment, but he retained enough control over his faculties to reach between them, taking Loki’s already hard cock in his hand and giving it a firm stroke.

“Anthony,” Loki gasped, his eyes closing and his expression almost going slack.

“Yes, love,” Tony whispered, his voice a little hoarse. “Whatever you need.”

Loki hissed as Tony stroked his cock again, and then Tony almost whined when Loki slid his fingers free. But then Loki gently nudged at Tony's hips, and Tony was more than happy to oblige. He pressed up on his knees, and shifted the hand on Loki's arousal— and when he sunk back down, Loki slid inside him with the kind of moan that went right to Tony's own straining cock. But rather than lifting up again immediately, Tony stayed right where he was, his face pressed into Loki's shoulder, both hands now buried into Loki's hair, just basking in the blissful full feeling of having Loki inside him.

Tony was half tempted to stay where he was a little longer, to draw this out in exchange for how slowly Loki had applied the lube. But he knew that wasn't what either of them needed, and so he shifted his hips, lifting up a little and then sliding back down. It was killer on his knees, but he couldn't bring himself to care— the aching kneecaps and straining muscles hardly registered compared to the soft sounds that Loki was making, and look of pure ecstasy rolling across Loki's face. Tony kept watching him as he moved, their eyes locking as Tony rocked his hips in slow, languid movements.

The water sloshed over the edge of the bath but neither of them cared, losing themselves in the soft pleasure of their bodies and the gentle smiles that warmed through them both. In that moment, the rest of the world fell away, and Loki truly was the only thing Tony saw, the only thing he thought of— the only thing that mattered.



Keeping a hold on pieces of their plan meant that they had to keep themselves up to date on what the media were up to. Or rather, JARVIS did— not particularly wanting to spend time watching news coverage talking about how terrible they were or interviews where the Avengers tried to convince the public that everything was all right, Tony instead just got JARVIS to give them the highlights.

It seemed that some cameras in London had finally picked up on who it was causing all these problems— and the world had finally seen Tony's new suit.

They had started to call him the Iron Shadow, as if he were a dark imitation of his former self— and Tony *hated* that. He was something better now, he was something *more*. They just couldn't see it.

And it just made him want to keep going, so that he and Loki could finally make it through this and could show the world exactly who the *real* villains were.

It helped that there were people who had started to question what Loki was doing, people who had managed to put together a pattern of attacks just as the Avengers had. There had been enough clues now, enough to let people wonder. The attack in London had been hushed up, but more than a few people on social media had speculated that it must have been some kind of secret facility. So despite their few setbacks and the mess in Avengers Tower, things were going just as Tony and Loki had hoped that they would, and it meant that they didn't have to worry quite so much as they had been before.

It also gave Tony an idea of what they should do next.

He chose his moment to tell Loki carefully though, knowing that his lover would worry. So he waited until they were eating dinner— slices of the best Italian pizza, picked up from Florence in disguise. All three of them were sitting at the table, with Loki and Tony beside each other on one side, and Barnes on the other. Tony had a bare foot hooked around one of Loki's ankles under the table, and although they were eating in silence, in their heads they were having quite the serious discussion.

Tony knew what he wanted to do, but — as predicted — Loki was arguing with him. Tony was glad that he had decided to do this now, though, because had they been talking aloud he was sure it would have become heated, but with the connection allowing them to feel each other's emotions, the argument remained calm. Tony *knew* that Loki was only worried, that he was afraid Tony was pushing himself too hard, that he would end up hurting himself. And Loki knew that Tony was sure he would be fine, that *he* had faith in himself— because although water still bothered him, it was *not* the problem it had been before. He had learned to deal with it, and he would be able to hold himself together, to focus the fear into something more productive.

'I'll be okay, Lokes,' he said. *'I promise.'*

It felt like a reverse of their conversation about Thor, and Tony knew that it would not be the last time that this happened. But, then, he supposed that was what happened when you started to care about someone, right?

“You're doing it again, aren't you,” Barnes sighed. “You know, I don't *really* mind, I just hope you're not dream fucking each other or something—”

“Oh, shut up,” Tony said, flicking a bit of cheese at him.

Barnes' interruption broke the tension though, and Loki shifted slightly to press their arms together.

'Very well, then we shall go. I do trust you, Anthony. I just...'

'Worry,' Tony sighed. *'Yeah. I know, you know I do.'*

And then, in an effort to try and lighten the mood, Tony looked back to Barnes.

“Hey, Barnes?” Tony asked. “I don't suppose you want to go on a field trip to Germany?”

“Hard pass,” Barnes said instantly. Tony shrugged, having expected that. He knew that Barnes didn't want to leave the house, and he knew that of all places, Germany was probably one of the *last* places he would want to go, given his history with it.

Ah, well. It was worth a try.

“Then we'll just have to do it alone,” Tony said. “You'll be missing out, I think this might be fun, actually. I've always wanted to storm a castle.”

Loki frowned as if he were still not sure— but before he said anything...

“Perhaps not entirely alone, Sir,” said JARVIS.

Tony blinked, and Barnes raised his brow.

“Did you guys manage to talk to that friend of yours?” Barnes asked.

“Rhodey? No,” Tony said, narrowing his eyes. Did JARVIS mean... oh, fuck *yes*. “JARVIS?” Tony asked, stretching out the ‘a’ in his name. “Did you...”

“I have managed to successfully retrieve two suits, Sir, as per your instructions,” JARVIS confirmed— and Tony’s grin widened. “Do you wish for me to repaint them before they join you in Bavaria? Ms Potts has not returned to your workshop in Malibu in weeks, and likely will not notice their absence— but she might recognise them, if you are seen.”

“JARVIS, buddy,” Tony said, his excitement growing and his smile deepening as he felt Loki’s concern begin to give way to anticipation. “You are the best AI anyone could ask for.”

“I do my best, Sir.”



Okay, Tony had to give this to Germany— the place was pretty freaking spectacular. He had been left with a bit of a sour impression after what had happened in Kiel, but as he hovered over the rolling green expanse of the dense Bavarian forest, staring wide-eyed at the picturesque fairy-tale castle, he had to admit that it was one of the most striking places he had ever seen.

Of course, it would have been a much more pleasing sight again if he hadn’t been aware of what was waiting for them inside.

According to JARVIS, parts of the white, nineteenth century castle had been closed for renovations for *years*. Tony was sure those would be the areas of the castle that they needed to focus upon. And really, it was actually quite clever— since the majority of the visitors were tourists, they wouldn’t notice how long the castle had been under ‘renovation’, and the people who worked there, and the locals, would either not care or just use it as something to complain about.

Tony couldn’t help but wonder how long HYDRA had been in there— and he was quite certain this time that it *was* HYDRA, since he couldn’t see the Ten Rings managing to set up shop here of all places, certainly not without a lot of help, anyway. But on top of that, Tony knew that this castle had been used by the Nazis during World War II. Had HYDRA been here that long? Perhaps the art which had been stored there during the war had actually been a cover story for something else, something far worse?

Well, whatever the case, Tony knew that HYDRA was there now— and that they would not be for much longer.

Steeling himself, Tony flew back down to the ground where Loki was waiting for him, on the edge the river which cut through the mountain at the foot of the castle.

“There aren’t guards on the walls,” Tony said as he folded his helmet away. “There’s nothing suspicious that I can see, actually. I think the castle’s closed for the night.”

“There are no night tours tonight,” JARVIS agreed, his voice coming from the armour.

“Good,” said Loki. “Then there will be no need to worry about harming anyone innocent.”

“We will have to check for night guards,” Tony pointed out. “But otherwise, yeah. Anyone HYDRA deserves what they’re about to get.”

Loki smirked at that, and then he reached out to take Tony’s hand. There was still a touch of his earlier concern, but they knew that JARVIS was waiting in the wings– and they finally had the backup that they so sorely needed.

Of course, it would have been even better if Barnes had come with them as well, but... yeah. Tony definitely understood why he wouldn’t want to face HYDRA.

Getting into the castle was easy– there were even maps on Google for god’s sake, and it was simple enough for Loki to transport them inside the walls without crashing into anything. Then they quietly made their way through the ornate corridors, heading toward the section that JARVIS had flagged. And once they’d found the right area, located the secret door hidden behind a bookcase – *awesome* – and then broken through into the other side... well, it actually wasn’t all that different to any other part of the castle, to be honest. And it was eerily *silent*. It seemed that maybe, by coming in the middle of the night, they had managed to attack when everyone was asleep.

It was odd, because... well, when they’d attacked Kiel it had been night, and that place had been *crawling* with people. But then, perhaps this was like the HYDRA retreat. It would make sense to use it as more of a hidey-hole, since the location of the castle wasn’t particularly great for anything other than defence. Maybe they just weren’t expecting that anyone would be able to find them here?

They did come across the rare few guards patrolling the corridors, though, and every time they did, Loki would flit behind them with his seiðr and quietly slit their throat. Then they would leave the body on the ground, and continue moving forward.

They checked the doors, and found mostly storage– and then as they moved further in, the storage gave way to small dorms, which supported the theory of this being a hideaway. But even though some of the rooms had belongings in them, they only ran into one person, who jumped out of his bed and threw his book to the side when he saw them. He started to yell, but Loki’s dagger silenced him before he had the chance.

But it didn’t make any sense– from what they’d seen, there should have been at least twenty people, perhaps a little more. But unless there was something they didn’t know, the area of the castle wasn’t overly large. They had to be *somewhere*.

Then—

“Wait,” Tony hissed, touching Loki’s arm. “Do you hear that?”

Loki frowned, and tilted his head before giving a nod. “This way.”

They turned a corner and moved toward a door at the end of the corridor— a double door, unlike the smaller ones that they had passed. Tony could hear talking on the other side, but... even though it was German, the voice didn’t sound quite like what he had been expecting. It was a bit... well, Tony couldn’t put his finger on it, but. Something just didn’t seem right.

Loki met Tony’s gaze for a moment, and Tony raised his repulsors in preparation.

Then Loki threw open the doors, and—

“Ah,” said Tony, taking in the two dozen faces that turned away from the large screen playing *Pride & Prejudice* to stare at them in shock. “So *that’s* why this place seemed so quiet.”

Then every single one of the HYDRA agents got to their feet and aimed their weapons right at Tony and Loki. And really? *Really?* Who brings a weapon to movie night? Whatever, to be honest Tony still wasn’t quite over the fact that HYDRA did movie nights at all. Well... at least it meant that they would be able to take them all out in one go, right?

Of course. It also meant that Tony and Loki were *sorely* outnumbered.

The agents weren’t in uniform, but there were a *lot* of them, and Tony was just preparing himself for the fight of his life when—

There was a yell from behind them, and another agent came charging down the corridor, waving his gun about and shouting at the top of his voice.

“Löst den Alarm aus, da ist ein Eindringling! Agenten sind getötet worden, ich habe zwei Leichen gesehen, Richtung—”

The agent cut off as Loki grabbed him around the neck, his words turning into a garbled mess as he gasped for breath.

“Congratulations,” Loki said, baring his teeth in the man’s face. “You found us.”

Then Loki twisted his hand with a *snap*, and the man’s limp body fell to the floor.

That, it seemed, was enough of a signal for the agents to attack. Loki threw a shield up in front of himself as the air filled with the crack of gunfire and a storm of bullets, and then they both charged forward together.

As he fought by Loki’s side, Tony couldn’t help but scan the mess of faces, searching for one in particular. When he didn’t have any luck, he asked JARVIS instead.

“Not here, Sir,” JARVIS replied. “But I have a trace.”

A map appeared in the corner of Tony’s HUD, and he groaned aloud even as he shot an agent in the face with a repulsor blast. It would seem that the one they had come looking for hadn’t been watching the movie with his men, and upon hearing the gunfire had turned tail and fled.

They couldn't afford to let him get away, not *again*— but they couldn't leave all of these agents here, either.

Tony quickly relayed the situation to Loki, whose lips twisted into a snarl as he sliced his blade across an agent's throat with enough force that the man's head came clean off.

“You need to go,” Loki said, sounding angry but not reluctant. “Leave me here, get the ring.”

Tony shook his head. “I can't.”

“Yes, you can— and you *must*—”

Loki was cut off as one of the walls exploded outward in a shower of stone, and one of JARVIS' armours came flying into the room in a cloud of dust. It looked just like Tony's did, black and menacing with lines of silver and repulsors of emerald— the only difference was that the arc reactor glowed white.

Loki's lip curled viciously as he saw it, and then he jerked his head at Tony.

“I will be *fine*,” Loki said. “And so will you. *Go!*”

Loki's renewed confidence and the added backup was all that Tony needed— he threw himself into the air and shot back down the corridor many times faster than when he and Loki had arrived. He didn't bother with the secret door— he shot straight *through* the bookcase, down another corridor, and then smashed through the nearest window and out over the ravine below the castle.

The HUD told him that his target was still heading up, climbing the square-shaped tower which was situated not far from the window Tony had flown out from. So he looped back around and shot up so that he was hovering in front of the main balcony door.

He stayed there for a moment, waiting, thinking that when the agents piled out he would be able to catch them unawares—

Then out of nowhere something struck Tony in the side, and he was sent tumbling though the air, back out over the ravine and almost all the way down to the river. It wasn't quite as bad as when he'd been hit by that tank back in Gulmira though, and he managed to right himself. When he did, he saw a dark grey quinjet flickering into view, its SHIELD issued retroreflective panels that *Tony had designed* folding away as it approached the tower, most likely to pick the officer up.

Oh, hell no.

Tony flew directly at it, firing a missile from his armour as he did so. The explosion pushed the quinjet back but did not destroy it entirely— and Tony was just about to go in for another shot when JARVIS' second suit blasted through one of the windows below and slammed into the side of the quinjet.

Tony grinned. “You all right there, J?” he asked.

“Yes, Sir, I believe I am.”

Leaving the quinjet in JARVIS’ capable hands, Tony flew back to the tower, just in time to see two agents and the guy Tony had come all this way for step out onto the balcony.

This time, Tony didn’t *wait*— he blasted the two agents with enough force that they fell down and did not get back up again. The officer tried to back away, but he wasn’t fast enough, and he’d hardly moved a yard before Tony was slamming him back against the wall.

He looked exactly as Tony remembered— that same silver hair, and the same vicious smile.

“Stark,” he said, somehow managing an arrogant drawl despite the way he was at Tony’s mercy. “Did you forget how easily I can destroy you? How little it takes to tear you apart?”

“No,” Tony said simply. “But you know what? I’m pretty sure I’ve won, this time.”

Tony let go of the man’s shoulders, and reached down to grab his right hand— which had been moving at his side, the ring he was wearing already beginning to glow blue. Tony knew that this was not the time to hesitate, and it was not the time to be squeamish. His gauntlet did not allow for fine movements and he couldn’t get a good enough grip on the ring to slide it off... so he closed his hand around the man’s finger, and he *pulled*.

The scream that tore from the officer’s throat was horrific, but Tony couldn’t help but think that it was nothing compared to those the Ten Rings had managed to steal from him during his time as their prisoner. The man clutching at his hand and staring in horror at the spurting blood was *HYDRA*, and just as Tony had said before— he deserved what he got.

Tony rose up to hover in the air so that he was no longer in arm’s reach and therefore out of harm’s way, and then he retracted the gauntlet on his right hand. That let him finally remove the ring from the bloody finger, and then he let the limp appendage fall to the ground far below.

He stared at the ring for a moment, thinking— and then he turned his head to glance toward the river below, listening to it rushing quickly over the rocks as it cut its curving course around the castle. It was small, but it was moving quickly— and that meant that it held an awful lot of water.

And Tony’s lips curved up into a smile.

He raised his fist, the ring clutched tightly under his thumb so that the glowing stone was facing outward, the colour gleaming almost purple through the blood which still clung to it. Tony could *feel* the water below, and it was almost easy to urge it to do his bidding, to rise up in a wave at his back. The *HYDRA* officer was staring up at him now, defiance shining through the pain as he hunched over his injured hand and spat out his last words.

“Cut off one head—”

“Who cares,” Tony snapped. “At least that one head is *dead*.”

Then he threw his hands forward, and the wave of water crashed down all around him.

Dangerously close to combustion

Chapter Notes

You know, just once, just the *one time*, it would really nice if a chapter could go to plan so I didn't have to cut it in half xD

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

There was a moment as the wave of river water crashed past him that Tony felt his breath catch in his throat. The thundering roar of it blasted in his ears even through the suit, and the sound of it, the *sight* of it, was almost enough to make him want to drop the ring into the river, to fly away and to never come back—

Almost, but not quite.

Because this time, *he* was in control— and he was going to use the water to his advantage.

And as that wave slammed into the HYDRA officer and smashed him back against the wall of the tower with a sickening *crack*, Tony felt a surge of adrenaline that made his lips pull up into a vicious smile.

“JARVIS?” Tony asked lightly, not taking his eyes off the water for even a second. “Where’s Loki?”

“To your right, Sir.”

Tony glanced to the right and then down— and sure enough, there he was, crouched on the roof of the gatehouse and staring up at Tony with a sharp smile.

Knowing that Loki was safe, Tony gave the water one last, final *push*, yelling with exertion as he let as much water as he could muster crash over the square tower. He could hear the smashing of glass and there were even loose pieces of stone that began to fall, and by the time the last of the water was crashing over the walls of the castle and back down the cliff toward the river, even the bodies of the agents had been washed away.

Tony stayed there for a moment to steady his breath before turning in the air and flying back down to Loki.

“That was rather impressive,” Loki said as Tony approached, getting to his feet and balancing atop the roof with ease. Tony could see fresh blood gleaming on Loki’s cheeks again, and he knew he could be sure that none of the HYDRA agents down below had survived. “Shame about the castle, though. It is a rather striking building.”

“I’ll send a donation when I get control of my finances again,” Tony said, the suit giving a soft whir as he shrugged his shoulders. “The castle will be fine— and maybe when they’re fixing it, they’ll find the secret base that was hidden in it.”

Loki didn’t say anything in response to that. He just held out his hand expectantly, as if he were eager to get them home— and Tony did not hesitate to take it.

When they arrived in their bedroom Tony all but fell out of his suit, and his feet had hardly hit the carpet before Loki was pushing Tony against the nearest wall and kissing him with almost as much violence as he’d shown at the castle, his lips and teeth and tongue assaulting Tony’s mouth until Tony’s knees went weak.

And when Loki pulled away, he held Tony’s gaze with green eyes that burned with desire.

“I love you,” Loki said, his voice firm.

“Yeah,” Tony gasped, trying to catch his breath. “Love you too.”

Loki kissed him again, and then again— tugging at Tony’s lower lip as he pulled away, as if he couldn’t get enough. One of his legs pushed between Tony’s so that the whole length of their bodies were pressed together, so that they were standing as close as it was possible to be. And then, when it seemed that wasn’t enough, Loki slid his hands down and under Tony’s thighs, then lifted him so that Tony could wrap his legs around Loki’s waist. And Loki just kept *kissing* him, not letting up until both of their lips were bruised and their breath was coming in harsh pants.

“You beat your fear,” Loki said between kisses, the words a little muffled but easily understood.

“Nah,” Tony replied. “I was fucking terrified.”

Loki paused then, and lightly stroked his fingers over the skin of Tony’s cheek and across the edges of his goatee, the touch soft and gentle and in complete contrast to the kiss moments before. He didn’t say anything else, but Tony could read the pride in Loki’s eyes— and it warmed him all the way through even before Loki leaned in to kiss him once again.

This time, Loki kissed him slowly, and Tony groaned into it as he buried his hands in Loki’s hair. But the softness did not last long before Tony nipped at Loki’s lips, wanting more and urging him on, and Loki’s hands tightened on Tony’s thighs enough that Tony would probably end up with bruises. Their clothes vanished with the familiar feel of Loki’s *seiðr*, and when Loki’s bare skin pressed against his arousal Tony moaned something that might have been a curse, or might have been Loki’s name, but was certainly the sound of his brain shorting out.

What followed was quick and rough and fucking incredible, Loki barely giving Tony any time at all before he was pressing inside him with a low grunt. Loki’s fingers slipped against Tony’s sweaty skin, and the wall was uncomfortable against his shoulder blades, but Tony tightened his legs around Loki’s hips, dug his fingers into Loki’s back, and held on while Loki fucked him hard. It wasn’t long before Tony came with a cry, and Loki followed a few

moments later with his face pressed into Tony's shoulder, his breath harsh pants against hot skin and one hand braced against the wall.

They stayed there for a few moments, Loki somehow managing to support the weight of both of them, lingering together as they caught their breaths. Then Loki slid out and helped Tony back to his feet— and Tony laughed when he saw the cracks in the plaster where Loki had fought to find purchase. Loki just rolled his eyes at that, and pulled Tony toward the bed.

They didn't bother moving the covers— they just curled up on top of them, their limbs tangled together and their heads leaning close. Loki's fingers were drifting over Tony's skin again, like they so often did, though this time it seemed he had something more of a purpose than the usual absent strokes— and Tony realised that at some point Loki had cleaned them both of any grime left over from the fight as well as from their sex.

Tony thought about complaining for a moment, because he felt like he was being deprived of a shower with Loki— but then he remembered that having a shower would require moving, and he didn't feel totally up for such a strenuous task.

But then... Tony realised that it wasn't just the bits of blood and sweat that Loki had been getting rid of. His fingers moved to Tony's upper thigh, where red outlines of those same digits were already beginning to turn into bruises— and when they moved away to the other leg, the bruise was healed as if it had never been there in the first place.

Tony smiled, and turned his head slightly so that he could brush his lips over Loki's collarbone as his lover began to heal the bruise from when he'd been hit in the side by the missile from the HYDRA quinjet. It reminded him a little of the first time Loki had healed him, way back in that cell— back before they'd even really trusted each other. Loki had claimed he'd healed him then out of selfish reasons, but whether that was true or not— Tony knew it certainly wasn't the case now.

So he let Loki have his gratitude with soft brushes of lips and whispers in his mind, and he was rewarded with Loki's soft smile.

And yeah, Tony loved every minute with Loki, but... it was still the quiet moments that Tony thought he appreciated the most.

But quiet moments also meant that Tony's brain took the invitation to start up again, and to begin cycling through everything that had happened in the fight, and everything that could happen next.

He was still reeling a little from what he'd done with the water but... he was *proud* of himself. Loki was right— he had faced that fear, and at least this time, he had finally come out on top.

The blue ring was just on the other side of the room, in one of the pockets of the clothes Loki had left in a pile on the ground after he'd removed them with his seiðr. Tony still didn't like the thought of using the rings himself— *hated* it, even. But in this instance, with that one ring, using it made him feel more like he was sticking it to the Ten Rings rather than falling down the same hole.

And the more he thought about it, the more an idea settled into his mind.

“Hey, Lokes?” Tony said, shifting slightly so that he could look up to meet Loki’s gaze.

Loki hummed in response, looking like he was on the verge of falling asleep– the magic probably having used up what little energy he had left.

“I know where we should go next.”

“Okay, Anthony,” Loki sighed, stopping the soft strokes with his fingers as his arm tightened around Tony’s waist instead, pulling him closer. “Just give me a few hours, first.”

Tony laughed softly, and curled further into his side– perfectly content to wait a little while before riding this high all the way to the end of the line.



Ever since that day at Avengers Tower, JARVIS had been tracking Killian’s movements. The guy was pretty careful and – as much as it pained Tony to admit it – quite tech savvy, so he managed to avoid cameras fairly well. But not well enough, not when the most advanced AI on the planet was following his every move– and especially not when that AI was able to trace the signature of the ring that Killian seemed to keep on him at all times. But in saying that it almost seemed like in the past few weeks Killian had become a little sloppier than before, and JARVIS believed that he had found the base of Killian’s operations. Tony was rather inclined to believe him– even when JARVIS said that it was masquerading as an offshore oil rig.

Sure, whatever, the thing was probably a great place to hide, and not many people would go looking there for illegal human experimentation. It wouldn’t look suspicious to any passing boats, and all Killian would have to do was claim that his own boats and copters were maintenance or inspection crews checking to see when the rig could be up and running again, there would be no second glances.

And if there had been any doubt at all, then it was washed away the moment they arrived and saw that the place was *crawling* with Extremis-enhanced, most of them looking like they were ready for a fight. Perhaps Killian had been smart enough to guess that they were coming.

According to JARVIS, most of the enhanced were military veterans who had been injured in the course of duty, and had not received compensation that they deemed adequate. They were trained fighters, but... that was hardly enough to scare Tony. Not anymore.

Since it seemed that Killian had decided to roll out the welcome mat for them, Tony and Loki did not bother being subtle– and besides, in this arena? They had something of a slight advantage.

Rather than their usual strategy of skywalking into the middle of their target, Loki stood at Tony’s side with his feet atop one of the suit’s inky black boots, one arm around Tony’s waist while the other held a knife at the ready. It affected Tony’s ability to fly, but he didn’t need to

be overly agile— they were moving quickly through the dark, and by the time the enhanced realised they were there Loki was already jumping down the last fifteen yards and burying his blade in an eye-socket.

Loki and Tony flying together

Of course, a knife was not going to do much against someone enhanced with Extremis, but it was enough of a distraction that Loki faced no resistance as he shoved his now blue hands against the woman's chest, his ice overcoming the fire before she even had a chance to properly fight back.

Tony, meanwhile, stayed in the air, protecting Loki from above and keeping them off him with his repulsors while Loki began to freeze them all, one at a time. And when that became impossible, when there were too many orange-glowing bodies crawling over the surface of the rig, already hot enough that each one was taking Loki longer to kill—

Tony raised his hands and felt that tug of the water, using the power of the ring that was strung on a cord around his neck to pull the ocean up and around the sides of the rig.

And it was hard, *god*, he was breathless after only a few seconds. And he still fucking *hated* water, but... there really was something rather poetic about being in control of it, of being able to drown his enemies just as they had tried to drown him.

As the water began to flood over the top of the rig it started to bubble and boil, not cooling quite so well as Tony had hoped that it would—

And Tony worried a little for Loki— because how would heat affect him, when he was biologically suited for sub-zero temperatures?

But then Loki threw out his hands, and the water hissed as it met his cold power. The look in Loki's eyes was intense as he concentrated. His fingers were blue, as was the skin around his red-glowing eyes, but the rest of him that Tony could see under his battle armour was his usual creamy white. The blend meant that he was able to his use his Jötunn-born powers without being overly affected by the heat.

It was a kind of control that Tony knew must have taken practice, and he grinned. Loki was facing one of his fears just as surely as Tony was, and the both of them were *winning*. And with Tony in control of water and Loki able to manipulate ice, the Extremis-enhanced provided little threat.

They worked together to clear the deck, rather practiced now at knowing how to kill the seemingly unkillable— easily cutting through the very thing that had overwhelmed Tony when he had been caught by the Ten Rings all those months ago. They didn't turn the rig into an icefield as they had in London, and they didn't flood it entirely as Tony had the castle tower in Germany. They were controlled, efficient, *deadly*, and it was not long before the top of the rig was clear and they moved to the lower levels, leaving a trail of burned and broken bodies in their wake— as well as JARVIS and his two suits to finish cleaning up anything that was still alive.

The lower decks were quieter— it would seem that most of the enhanced had gone up to the top. Tony stayed on high alert and Loki stayed partially blue, and they made their way deep into the belly of the rig. As they continued, they became aware of screams down below— and when they stepped into the area JARVIS had traced the ring’s signature to, they came across a rather gruesome scene.

“They aren’t quite through the final stages of the process, yet,” Killian said from the middle of the room, not turning to even look at Tony and Loki as they entered but instead keeping his eyes on the line of people strapped onto metal contraptions. There were a good half dozen, and every one of them looked like they were in incredible pain. Some of them had skin already starting to burn red, others looked normal still, but every one of them had twisted expressions and were crying out in obvious agony. They hardly seemed to notice that someone else had entered the room, and Killian seemed fascinated by their torment even as he taunted the two people who had come to end him. “They are... shall we say a little volatile? I wouldn’t go firing your repulsors in here.”

“It’s not my repulsors that you have to worry about,” Tony replied easily, his voice low.

Killian actually snorted at that— but when he turned around, his eyes widened ever so slightly as his gaze landed on Loki, considering his blue skin curiously. “Now, *that’s* interesting,” he said.

“You’re not seriously telling me you didn’t already know about that?” Tony asked, honestly surprised. But his tone was a little taunting as he added— “I thought you knew everything?”

“I know the *truth*,” Killian corrected. “You should know better than most that they are not mutually inclusive concepts. But this... it’s not an illusion, none of it. How are you doing that?”

“The same way that you and your little creations turn black and orange when you get upset,” Loki replied.

For a moment, Tony was confused, because *that* certainly wasn’t true— but Killian’s expression suggested that he thought it was. But then Tony realised what Loki meant— he turned blue the same way Killian turned orange because it wasn’t a spell, or an illusion— it was simply what they *were*.

But Killian seemed to think that Loki meant he’d been experimented on as well, for his grin was positively violent.

“Oh, wow,” Killian said. “I suppose they really did do a number on you.”

“Then you do know what happened to us?” Tony asked. “You know what the Ten Rings did, *why* they did it?”

“I don’t think I’m going to tell you anything,” Killian replied. “Not what I know, not what you *want* to know.”

“Maybe,” Tony muttered, raising his hands. “At least, not unless we *make* you.”

“That would be a mistake,” Killian warned, his eyes already beginning to glow—

But rather than bothering to think of a witty reply, Tony just shot him in the chest with a full-powered blast, burning a hole right through his flesh. Tony even got a glimpse of white ribs and a shattered sternum as Killian stood back up and before his skin knitted back together again, the effect looking not unlike molten rock flowing over the ground.

“Oh well,” Tony said flippantly. “I’ve made a lot of mistakes in my life, but things tend to turn out okay regardless.”

(Okay. So maybe he used the witty reply anyway.)

But if Tony remembered correctly, then Killian was stronger than any of the other enhanced—he still remained the only one they had seen actually *breathe fire*. He wouldn’t have put it past Killian to keep a better version of the serum to himself— but better still didn’t mean perfect, and he hadn’t been lying when he said the process was volatile. It was clear that he was unstable, which... might actually work in their favour.

Of course, there was still the matter of the other people in the room – it was hard to forget them, what with the pained cries echoing over the metal walls like the shrieks of tormented ghouls – and Tony was reluctant to fire again just in case he hit one of them and they... exploded. Or something.

And besides, he’d meant what he said before— he wasn’t the one that Killian should be worrying about.

Loki didn’t move forward quickly, but he had a dagger of ice in his hands which probably wouldn’t have done a whole lot of damage, but certainly worked as an intimidation tactic, because Killian followed the movement with his gaze— but he still seemed too confident for Tony’s liking.

“Why are you doing this, Killian?” Tony asked. “You know you’re not going to win.”

“I could ask you the same. All this death, and for what?”

“Well, I suppose it doesn’t really matter, does it?” Tony replied. “They weren’t going to last long, anyway. We both know that this serum doesn’t heal permanently.”

“It worked for me,” Killian hissed angrily, clearly starting to lose control.

“Did it?” Tony taunted. “Because I might not have remembered meeting you before, but I had JARVIS give me the run down on your history, and it jogged my memory. But the person I remember was full of bright ideas and a desire to make the world *better* with his think tank. You might have cured your body with Hansen’s Extremis, Killian, but you’ve destroyed everything else about you.”

“It’s *my* Extremis,” Killian replied, seeming not to care to comment on anything else that Tony had said. “She didn’t deserve it.” Something in his tone was troubling, and Tony just had to ask—

“What did you do to Maya? Did you kill her? Because if the answer is yes, then which one of us is killing unnecessarily?”

“Her vision was too narrow,” Killian snarled, his teeth bared through burning lips. “She was wasting the potential—”

“She was a good person,” Tony spat. “She wanted to *heal* people, and look what you did with her creation.” He looked at Killian in disgust. “You want to know the truth? Extremis twisted your mind. You’re not sane anymore, Killian, and it’ll be a *mercy* to put you down.”

Somehow, looking at Killian now, it was almost sad. He wasn’t in his right mind, but... Tony didn’t feel pity. He just felt disgust— because for all that he probably hadn’t intended this exact outcome, Killian had still done this to himself with the purpose of becoming more powerful.

Loki was right beside him, and Tony was sure that between the two of them – with Loki in full armour and still with red eyes, and Tony’s suit dark and glowing green – they must look a rather formidable pair. And as Killian looked up at them, still bent over as if the damage Tony had done to his insides hadn’t yet completely healed... his eyes were wild, but he wore the kind of almost-smirk which suggested he still thought there was a chance of getting out of this with his life.

And as he spoke, it was clear he thought that he was going to be able to bargain for it– or, perhaps more likely, to be able to distract them until he could make his move.

“I can tell you the truth,” Killian said, his voice low, like he was trying to tempt them. “I can tell you everything you need to know– and you can take the ring.” He pulled it off his finger, and held it out for them to see. “You’ll know whether I’m lying.”

Tony almost snorted, but he wasn’t the one who answered.

“I am the god of lies,” Loki hissed. “I do not need a *trinket* to know when someone is being dishonest.”

Killian’s eyes widened, as if he suddenly realised the seriousness of his predicament– and then Loki gripped either side of Killian’s head with enough force that the man cried out and the ring went clattering to the ground.

But that didn’t mean that he was about to stop fighting, and his skin burned even hotter than before. Loki’s expression tightened in pain, but Tony didn’t just wait around– he used his own ring to pull more water down the hall, and aimed a thick stream of it directly at Killian’s face. Loki froze it with little more than a thought, encasing Killian’s whole body in ice from the neck down, and it cooled him enough that it no longer hurt Loki to break into the man’s twisted mind.

The moment that the muscles in Killian’s face began to seize, Tony retracted one of his gauntlets and slid his hand over the back of Loki’s neck, under his hair and just below his helm. Tony did his best not to be distracting, because he knew that Loki found this difficult in

more ways than one— but Loki opened up to him easily, and for the first time while Loki was in another's head, Tony was able to see all that was going on without getting in the way.

Killian's mind truly was a mess, full of heat and rage and ambition. He had started this venture with a cooler head on his shoulders, and his plan to use Trevor Slattery to control the war on terror might even have worked if he hadn't become so lost in the power Extremis granted him, and had no longer been able to sit on the side-lines himself.

Unfortunately, though, Killian didn't know a whole lot. Loki's probing found that he had been approached only a few years ago by HYDRA, after he and Maya had begun to make their breakthroughs with the serum. Killian had agreed to the stipulation that they would help to fund his work so long as he allowed them to distribute his results to other parts of their organisation. Killian hadn't known what to do with so many disgruntled and overpowered soldiers anyway, and had been happy to allow them to be sent to the various cells— not just his own in Miami, but locations such as İzmir as well.

When Loki delved a little further, he found that Killian had been telling the truth when he'd said that he had been allowed to choose which of the rings he wanted. Apparently, HYDRA had deemed that the Ten Rings' secret weapons would be of more use spread out, rather than collected in one place as the Ten Rings had wanted. HYDRA'd had the leverage— they'd already been in possession of a few of the 'Makluan Rings', as Killian believed they were called, thanks to the Nazi obsession with the occult during the Second World War. With the ones the Ten Rings' had held on to since ancient times and those HYDRA had found since, they'd amassed a total of eight— which meant that one more was still entirely unaccounted for.

But that was about the extent of new knowledge they could get from him, since he didn't know the locations of HYDRA bases nor even the names of their higher-ups. Tony supposed it made sense— if he were HYDRA, he wouldn't have trusted this guy, either.

"Thank you," Loki said, pulling back from Killian's mind but leaning a little closer to meet his gaze. "For telling us the truth."

"This isn't the end for you," Killian spat, his voice hoarse but not defeated. "Not for either of you. This is so much bigger than you know, than even I know—"

"I swear," Tony groaned, "If I hear one more fucking person say that line about cutting off heads, I will be separating more than just a few necks from shoulders—"

Killian opened his mouth then while Tony eyes were on the ceiling, spewing out fire in a torrent that would have burned Tony to ash— but Loki threw up a shield of green seiðr and redirected the blast to the wall. Killian's teeth snapped together in rage, his eyes still burning orange.

"You can't kill me," Killian cut in, the ice already starting to melt as he fought to release himself from the prison they had trapped him in. "Extremis will—"

It was Loki's turn to roll his eyes as he slashed out with his hand and cut Killian's head clean from his shoulders.

And to think Tony had doubted the usefulness of those ice daggers only minutes before.

“Guess chopping off heads did work,” Tony said simply. “Who’d have thought.”

Loki shook his head in exasperation, then bent down to pluck the white Makluan ring from the floor and tucked it into one of his dimensional pockets.

“Sir,” JARVIS interrupted, a warning in his tone. “Your sensors are detecting that few of those people are growing dangerously close to combustion.”

Tony looked up to see that JARVIS was right— they were all glowing brightly now, their skin looking cracked and broken around the orange fire, and their screams had raised in pitch. Tony wondered if they should have already passed out, but the Extremis was keeping them conscious. The thought was not a pleasant one, but it certainly made what he was about to do a whole lot easier.

Because as Tony had said, they were dead already— but there was a chance that their deaths could help in the long run.

“Honestly,” Tony sighed, even as he relayed his plans to Loki silently, the fingers of his still bare hand entwining with Loki’s. “It might have been a good disguise, but why would you put a whole heap of people who catch on fire inside an *oil rig*? Killian really did go downhill, didn’t he?”

They didn’t spare Killian’s remains a glance as they left. Loki skywalked them both back up to the deck of the rig, and then he stepped into Tony’s arms again. Tony lifted them both up into the air, and then released enough explosives from his suit to level several city blocks—

And as they hovered in the air to watch, the whole rig went up in the prettiest of explosions, the column of smoke large enough to be easily seen from the mainland and the shockwave pushing them back through the air. As planned, the blast sent the rest of the volatile people over the edge, and the subsequent explosions meant that the burning rig did not last long before it slipped down beneath the waves.

“If any of them survived that, then they almost deserve to be let loose on the world,” Tony murmured. There had been an awful lot of people on that rig, but Tony didn’t feel overly regretful.

“Killian definitely did not,” Loki said firmly. “That is the most important thing.”

With that cheerful thought in mind, they headed back home with their new prize in hand. Barnes greeted them with dinner on the table – which was... thoughtful, but Tony still wasn’t quite over the fact that Barnes seemed to be having a one man war on bananas, putting them into absolutely everything he could until he found a way to make them ‘taste as good as they used to.’ And while Tony could appreciate the sentiment, the caramelised bananas on top of the roast chicken were a bit of an acquired taste.

But before they had even showered, Tony and Loki went straight up to the attic, where they had been keeping all the rings. (And maybe it wasn’t the *best* idea to be keeping them all in

the same place, but honestly, Tony wasn't all that keen on keeping them anywhere else in the house.)

“When we're done,” Tony said, staring down at the coloured rings in disdain. “I am never touching any of these fucking things ever again.”

“I know,” Loki agreed. “When we're *done*, we can throw them all into the darkest depths of the universe, so that they can never be *found* again. But for now, we can use them.”

Tony wished that he could get rid of the rings now, because they had caused more than enough pain. But he knew that Loki was right, of course he did— so he put the blue ring next to the white. Still, it left a sour taste in his mouth, and he could not wait for the day when he could... throw them into the darkest depths of the universe, was it? Yes, that sounded rather good, actually.

They currently had six of the blasted things, which meant they had managed to obtain more than half— they were only missing four. They had yet to grab the ring in Afghanistan, the other one in China, the one in Singapore, and... well.

There was one that kept moving around, one which must have been with another person— though currently, it was sitting right in Washington DC.

Tony had a feeling he knew *exactly* who was in possession of that one, and he was looking forward to the look on Fury's face when he arrived to take it from him.

For that, though, they would need allies. They couldn't just break into SHIELD and demand to speak with the director, because as skilled as they were — and despite their current run of victories — Tony doubted that they would be able to get through the whole Triskelion with just the two of them.

Tony sighed as Loki took his hand, and they began to make their way back down to clean themselves up before dinner. Perhaps it really was time to meet Rhodey for a talk— and perhaps... that would mean giving in to one of Rhodey's requests.

He still wasn't going to let Thor talk to Loki, though, not when Loki still didn't want that— and that left only the one option.

Tony would have to agree to go alone.

Chapter End Notes

The art is by **Rabentochter**, and you can find it on tumblr [here!](#)

Clawing out his own heart

In the end, it only took about five minutes for JARVIS to arrange the meeting.

Rhodey agreed the moment that JARVIS told him Tony was willing to come alone, though it was clear he thought it a little suspicious that Tony had gone back on his earlier vehement dismissal of any *thought* of going without Loki. But it seemed that he was willing to put that aside, especially when JARVIS suggested to him that perhaps Tony merely preferred that option to meeting with Thor. The memory of what Thor had done to Loki in Kiel was probably enough to solidify that as a valid excuse.

Loki, however, had not agreed half so easily.

“What if he doesn’t hold to his word?” Loki asked, his eyes blazing with a fire that Tony knew wouldn’t go out without a fight. “What if he brings the rest of the Avengers, and you’re left to fight them alone?”

“Loki,” Tony said gently, taking both of Loki’s hands in his own. “It’s okay, you know it is. JARVIS will be waiting in the wings with three suits, ready to fight if he needs to. And... so will you.”

Loki frowned at that. “But you just said—”

“That I would *speak* to him alone,” Tony cut in. “I never promised that you wouldn’t be hanging around nearby.”

“You lied,” Loki realised.

“Only by omission,” Tony pointed out, as if that made it any different.

“Are you sure that was wise?” Loki asked. “If he learns that I am there, then he will likely *not* respond positively.”

“Well, I’m *not* going without you,” Tony said firmly. “I’m just not. Even if I knew you were here, in the house, safe and sound and with Barnes for company... it’s not just... I want you with me. We’re a team, Loki.”

“I know,” Loki replied softly. He brushed his fingers over Tony’s cheek before letting his hand rest on Tony’s shoulder. “I don’t want you to go alone either. I am merely worried that this will backfire.”

“It won’t,” Tony promised, reaching up to curl his hand around Loki’s. “I mean, look. We know that we need to speak to him, yeah? But compromise is never going to work, because we’re never going to be able to come up with anything that will make all of us happy. We’ll just end up dancing in circles and wasting time. At least this way, we can have the conversation in some shape or form. And look, if it turns out he believes me, if he isn’t with

SHIELD, then he won't mind in the end that I brought you because he'll be on our side. And if he's not, then I'll be glad for the backup. Either way, it can hardly be a bad thing, right?"

Loki still looked like he was wary, like he didn't think that Tony was considering all of the things that could go wrong. But while Loki liked to solve problems by considering the *worst* possible outcome and working from there to make sure that he covered as many bases as possible, Tony preferred to look at things from a more realistic standpoint. Because yeah, sure, there was a *chance* that Rhodey might guess that Loki was there as well, but it was small enough that the benefits of Loki coming along far outweighed that risk.

But that didn't mean that they were just going to go in blind and hope for the best. They had just over a day before they needed to meet with Rhodey, and they used that time to come up with a strategy. Tony wasn't *overly* keen on the final product but, at least by the time they were preparing to leave, they were both comfortable enough to hope that it wouldn't blow up in their faces.

JARVIS sent the three suits off early so that Loki didn't have to worry about transporting them, and then when it was time, Loki skywalked them to where they needed to go. Loki didn't wear his full armour— he was in far lighter gear, with silver-coloured pieces running in two lines over his shoulders as around his forearms, looking a little like scales. And the gorget that sat under his collarbone was also silver, rather than his usual burnished gold.

Tony couldn't help but note that as well as being lighter and stealthier, it complemented Tony's suit even more closely than Loki's battle armour did. It was such a minor thing, but Tony couldn't help but wonder whether Loki had done it on purpose— because he could have simply worn the leather coat with the dark green shirt as he often did when they left the house, but... he'd specifically chosen black and silver.

And knowing what that meant to Loki, Tony just couldn't stop smiling about it, even with what he was about to face.

They arrived a few hundred yards away from where they said that they would meet, so that Tony could approach on his own. The location itself was actually rather beautiful, even in the dark. According to JARVIS, Rhodey had been in London helping with the fallout from Tony and Loki's attack on the SWORD base— which, apparently, people hadn't yet worked out was something other than just the British branch of SHIELD.

London would have been a little too risky though, since the place would be crawling with SHIELD agents— but Scotland seemed far enough away, and Tony told JARVIS to pick anywhere that would provide cover while still being close enough to civilisation to make Rhodey wary of starting a fight.

Tony *had* been expecting that JARVIS would pick somewhere in an out-of-the-way town, but he supposed that... yeah, the Royal Botanic Gardens in Edinburgh fit the criteria well enough. There were plenty of hedges and bushes and trees, enough that Loki would be able to stay close and undetected even without needing to use his *seiðr*— though of course, the added precaution wouldn't hurt. And they went during the night, hours after the gardens had closed to the public so there wouldn't be any collateral, and also making it far easier to remain concealed.

Loki's green eyes were still a little nervous, and before he got into his suit Tony pulled him close and pressed a sweet kiss to his scarred lips, then leaned their foreheads together for a short, lingering moment.

They didn't say anything— they'd already said all that they needed to. But they were so used to each other now that they could feel each other through their connection without hardly needing to try, and the warmth Tony felt from Loki was all the confidence boost that he needed.

Then he stepped away from Loki and into his suit, and took off to fly the short distance to the copse of trees he and Rhodey had agreed to meet in.

Rhodey was already there, sitting on a wooden bench with his hands in tight fists in his lap. He wasn't wearing his uniform, just jeans and dark leather jacket, and when he looked up at the sound of Tony's approach his eyes widened.

Tony and Loki had discussed this carefully, because there was the chance that Rhodey would see Tony showing up in the suit as a threat. After all, the last time Rhodey had seen it, Tony had put Iron Patriot out of commission. (Which, honestly— good riddance.) But on the other hand, this confirmation would be a show of trust that might put them off to the good start they sorely needed.

So yeah, it was a risk, but when Tony landed and stepped out of the suit, Rhodey appeared more surprised than angry— and Tony hoped that it had paid off.

“Rhodey,” Tony said, taking a few steps forward as the suit took off back into the sky, rather than hanging around and possibly putting Rhodey ill at ease.

“Tony,” Rhodey replied as he got to his feet, his expression more than cautious. “You're alone, then?”

“If I wasn't, I wouldn't have come in that,” Tony said, gesturing back up to the rapidly disappearing suit. “Loki has a much more efficient method of travel.”

To Rhodey's credit, his eyes only tightened a little at Loki's name. But before he could say anything, Tony remembered what he had decided to do, and thought it would be a good idea to get it out now rather than wait for things to begin to blow up.

“I have something for you,” Tony said, digging in his pocket for a moment. Rhodey flinched, but he didn't reach for a weapon, and then he relaxed when Tony only held out a ring. “You might recognise this,” Tony said thoughtfully. “I'm not sure how much footage you saw of that day before JARVIS managed to get rid of it all.”

Rhodey frowned. “Killian was wearing that the day he came to see Pepper,” he said. “The day that—”

“Yeah,” Tony interrupted. “That day. But then, you didn't hear what he said it did?”

“I suppose he's dead, then?” Rhodey asked, ignoring Tony's question entirely.

“He was conducting illegal experiments on humans, and trying to artificially create the worst terror threat this country had ever seen,” Tony pointed out. “I don’t really think he was a great loss to humanity.”

“So, you’re saying that you’re *killing* terrorists?” Rhodey asked sharply— and, in Tony’s opinion, completely missing the point. “Do you realise how this all sounds? You’re playing judge, jury, and executioner, and your only support is the guy who wanted to take over the planet last year.”

“I see we’re not wasting any time getting right to the deep stuff,” Tony sighed. “Yeah, hi Rhodey, good to see you, it’s been a long time—”

“It wouldn’t have been if you’d met me when I first asked,” Rhodey snapped. “Tony, it’s been weeks. Is he just not letting you out, or—”

“He doesn’t have to *let* me do anything,” Tony snapped. “He—” Tony cut himself off before he said anything that he might come to regret, and drew in a deep breath. “Okay, hang on. Before we start tearing at each other’s throats—”

“Oh, yeah, that’s optimistic—”

“I want you to take the ring,” Tony continued, shooting Rhodey a hard glare as he held the ring out once again.

Rhodey looked at it dubiously. “Why?”

“Because it lets you see the truth,” Tony said. “It’ll tell you whether I’m lying or not.”

Rhodey instantly narrowed his eyes, and he didn’t take a single step closer. “And why would you give me something like that?” he asked.

“Because I think that’s something that we’re both going to need,” Tony said, trying to keep the *obviously* out of his tone. “I’m going to say some things that are probably going to sound over the top, and I’m going to need you to believe me.”

Rhodey still looked tense. “And what about you?” he asked. “How will you know if *I’m* telling the truth?”

“Are you planning on lying to me?” Tony asked, raising his brows. “Because if you are, then there’s really not much point to this conversation.”

“So you’ll trust that I won’t lie to you, but you don’t trust me to do the same?” Rhodey spoke harshly, and Tony didn’t quite see what the problem was.

“I already know what’s going on,” Tony replied. “There’s not a whole lot that you *could* lie to me about—”

“Are you here alone, Tony?” Rhodey asked again.

“Yes,” Tony replied. And when Rhodey didn’t relax in the slightest, Tony took a step forward and offered him the ring again.

This time, Rhodey did take it– plucking it from Tony’s hand and then stepping back again, a move which hurt a little but, Tony could understand.

“Okay,” Rhodey said. “How does this work?”

“Ask me something, something you know the answer to,” Tony replied.

“What’s your name?” Rhodey asked straight away.

“Tony Stark.”

Rhodey glanced down to his clenched fist, his eyes wide. Tony and Loki had tried the thing out before they had come, and although Loki had dismissed it as crude and limiting – something which had made Tony smile fondly – Tony thought it was actually pretty cool. It didn’t look like it did much, save for the glow it shared with all the other rings, but when you held it you just *knew* the truth. If someone told you a lie, you could see straight through it, and the actual, honest truth would just press against your mind until you were able to understand what was going on. It wasn’t overly complicated– Rhodey would simply know that Tony wasn’t lying.

“Okay,” Rhodey said as he looked back up. “And how old are you?”

“Not a day older than twenty-nine,” Tony replied brightly.

Rhodey *almost* rolled his eyes at that, Tony could tell. The tell-tale flick of the muscle in his cheek was familiar enough that Tony almost smiled in response. And when Rhodey asked the next question, Tony replied with the same answer that he had the first time.

“Tony,” Rhodey repeated. “Are you here alone?”

“Yes.”

Rhodey nodded at that, some of the tension falling from his shoulders– and Tony had to hide his smile.

Limiting, Loki had said– because the truth, after all, is always subjective. Tony certainly felt like he had come to the copse of trees alone, because even though he knew that Loki wasn’t far off, that he was only a few hundred yards away at most and no doubt watching everything, that didn’t make a difference to the itch in the back of Tony’s mind that wished Loki was right by his side.

It wasn’t the same kind of feeling he’d had in Bavaria– not that worry sitting deep in his chest which constantly made him need to know whether Loki was okay. But even though Loki had been in danger at that point, the whole time that the fight had been in progress Tony had JARVIS right with him, and he *knew* JARVIS would tell him if there was something wrong. But JARVIS wasn’t with him in that copse of trees, and Tony could only hope that

Loki was all right— and in the meantime, he just felt like there was a tether around his heart, tugging with an ache that wouldn't let up until Loki was back in his arms.

So yeah, the ring hadn't picked up on the lie— because to Tony, it *was* the truth. He was more alone now than he had been in *months*, and Rhodey's question had not been specific enough to pick up on anything else.

And Rhodey relaxed, thinking that Tony had kept his promise.

“Okay,” Rhodey said. “So Loki let you come alone?”

It was the same kind of thing that he'd said before which had more than rubbed Tony the wrong way, but he just gritted his teeth and gave the best answer he could.

“He didn't like it,” Tony admitted. “He was worried that you would try to hurt me, or— take me away, I think. But we talked about it, and we agreed that this was the best thing to do. We wanted to talk to you, and... I didn't want him talking to Thor.”

Rhodey's frown deepened at that. “Why not?” he asked.

“Because he doesn't want to,” Tony snapped. “And because Thor has a habit of breaking Loki's bones. That's not exactly something that I'm a fan of.”

“Then it's got nothing to do with why Thor went to SHIELD the other day?” Rhodey asked.

“How am I supposed to know why Thor went to SHIELD?” Tony replied, taking his turn to ask a question.

“Well, I would have assumed JARVIS told you,” Rhodey pointed out. “Or did you forget that I *know* he's on your side? He would have heard Thor talking to me, and I know he would have given you the whole story.”

“Then I don't know any more than you do, do I? He wasn't exactly forthcoming, he just said that he thinks there's something wrong with SHIELD.”

Rhodey's voice lowered as he asked his next question. “*Is* there something wrong with SHIELD?”

“What do you think?” Tony asked, jerking his head. “I mean, there are more than enough clues hanging about the place—”

“I didn't come here to make guesses,” Rhodey cut in sternly. “I came so that you could tell me what's going on. Like you *said* you would.”

“Okay,” Tony said, figuring that was kind of fair. “So you know that Steve and Clint left me to the wolves, right?”

“I know they think they were given a choice between a teammate and a beneficiary,” Rhodey said, his voice suddenly going a little stiff. “Between an Avenger and a civilian.”

“Then you know that they chose *wrong*,” Tony said. “They chose to take an empty suit and left me there to—”

“They didn’t know that you’re Iron Man,” Rhodey cut in. “They still don’t.”

“I’m *not* Iron Man,” Tony snapped— and Rhodey glanced down to the ring in surprise before his expression hardened.

“Well, that’s a shame,” Rhodey said. “The world kind of needed him.”

“No,” Tony countered. “The world didn’t need Iron Man at all. Iron Man was a hero. He followed the rules, and he was too *soft*. The world needs someone who’s willing to get shit done and untangle the mess that we’ve all found ourselves in, and... No, you know what? The world is *broken*, Rhodey, it’s so twisted and dark and no one else can even see it. So many people just go on like everything’s fine and all the while, all these terrible things are happening and if *someone* doesn’t do something about it, then everything is just going to get a whole lot worse so— *no*, I don’t think that it’s a shame at all, and if you knew what was going on, then... you wouldn’t, either.”

Rhodey was silent for a few moments, clearly thinking everything through. But when he met Tony’s gaze once again, there was something softer in his eyes which had not been there before.

“What happened?” he asked, his voice firm and leaving no room for Tony to wiggle out of answering the question— not that he wanted to. This was why he had wanted to come, after all. “What happened to you Tony, after the others left?”

Tony drew in a deep breath, and took a few steps forward. For all that he had prepared for this, now that the moment was here— now that Rhodey was right in front of him, he found himself unsure of how to start.

So, to buy himself a few seconds, he moved to sit on the bench Rhodey had been perched on. The wood was still a little warm from the sun that had only gone down an hour or so before— the joys of being so far north in the middle of summer. He lay one hand against it, using the rough feel of the wood beneath his hand to ground him as he began to talk, starting right back at the beginning.

“I don’t know what happened immediately after,” he admitted. “I was unconscious at the time, and I didn’t even know where they took me until much later. I woke up in a cell, and it was...” Tony closed his eyes as he trailed off to a pause, letting the memory flow through him even though it made his fingers press hard down into the bench. “It was white. I was strapped down, and I couldn’t move. I suppose they wanted me afraid, before they even began anything else.”

And from there, Tony just talked, sparing no detail. He wanted Rhodey to hear it, to know *exactly* why Tony was fighting so hard. And by the time he got through recounting those first few... well, he didn’t know if it was days or weeks or even months, because even now that time was a horrible, painful, dark mess inside his mind. Rhodey was pacing in front of him at the beginning of it, but as Tony started talking about the torture, Rhodey sat down on the

other end of the bench with a hard suddenness which suggested he might have fallen over if he hadn't. And once Tony had finished telling Rhodey every detail he could bear and recounted that first time he was brought to the workshop, Rhodey's face was pale and his hands were clenched so tightly, Tony wouldn't have been surprised if the ring was damaged from the pressure.

And Tony had to pause when he reached the point where they had thrown him into the second cell, because the memory of how Loki had looked, wasting away in that awful place and yet—still capable of staring at Tony condescendingly through sunken eyes... it made Tony's words catch in his throat, and his arms curled around his middle to try and fight back some of the ache that threatened to overwhelm.

And, god, what Tony wouldn't give for Loki to be right beside him in that moment.

As if Loki had somehow managed to hear his need, Tony felt pressure on his shoulder which shifted a little until he felt the unmistakable sensation of cool skin brushing against his bare neck. Clearly using his seiðr to mask his presence, Loki had come to join him.

'You're doing so well,' Loki said. *'Keep going.'*

And then, it felt a thousand times easier to get the words past his lips.

"They were starving him," Tony said, his voice hoarse. "Loki. He was still wearing that muzzle Thor slapped on him after the fight with the Chitauri. It had been *months*, and he hadn't eaten a thing."

"How could he still be alive?" Rhodey asked, staring straight ahead.

"Well, he's not human, is he?" Tony reminded him, his lip curling slightly. "Something that they knew very well." He remembered how Loki's cell had been kept warmer than his own, and the way that they had aimed the alien gun at Loki's head.

Loki's thumb brushed comfortingly over Tony's skin, and Tony kept going, telling Rhodey about their plan, about how they'd needed to get close to survive. Rhodey listened in silence, and it didn't seem like he was judging, but his expression was blank— and Tony missed those days when the pair of them had been able to understand each other with just the slightest of looks.

"But then they made a mistake," Tony said, baring his teeth. "They threatened to shoot Loki with a Chitauri weapon, and they would have killed him. And by then, we were ready to fight *back*."

"A Chitauri weapon?" Rhodey asked. "How—"

"Because they weren't just the terrorist organisation we thought they were," Tony muttered. "But hey, I'm getting there. You wanted the whole truth, right? Well, then let me tell it."

He didn't spare any details of how they got out— he told Rhodey about the fight, about the room they'd found where they had wanted to torture Loki's seiðr out of him, and about how

they left no survivors. He told him that Loki had passed out from the exertion, and that Tony only just managed to get them both out and far enough away before the explosion hit.

“Thankfully, Loki woke up long enough to use the ring to keep us hidden,” Tony said. “We’d probably be in a Turkish prison right now otherwise. Or, likely worse.”

“Turkey,” Rhodey muttered. “I was *there*. I knew that explosion seemed fishy—”

“We heard that Iron Patriot was around, but I didn’t know that it was you at the time,” Tony cut in. “And to be honest, I don’t think I would have contacted you either way. It was impossible to know who to trust.” He paused, and caught Rhodey’s eye with a firm stare. “It still isn’t.”

Rhodey actually inclined his head at that, and Tony tried not to wonder whether it was the confirmation from the ring or just Rhodey’s trust in Tony that had made him believe that fact to be the truth.

“We managed to get ourselves away from there, and we got somewhere safe enough,” Tony finished. “But we knew that they would still be looking for us, and we knew that the only way that we would ever be able to stop looking over our shoulder would be to take them *all* out.”

Rhodey was quiet for a few long moments, and once again Tony wished that he could know what Rhodey was thinking.

“Tony...” Rhodey trailed off. “How many people have you killed since all of this started?”

Tony let out a long breath. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “But not one of them didn’t deserve it. We needed to get out of the base in İzmir, and we didn’t care how we did it. And then, later —”

“But you didn’t have to kill them *all*,” Rhodey said.

“Didn’t we?” Tony asked, though his tone wasn’t harsh. “After all that we had been through, we couldn’t risk that we would ever fall back into something like that. Would you have done any different?”

Rhodey sighed at that. “I can’t say that I would, or that I wouldn’t,” he admitted. “Because I wasn’t there, so I don’t know. But I *do* know you, and I know that you’re not lying about any of this.”

“Then you believe me?” Tony whispered, suddenly thrown. “You believe that we’re not the bad guys in this situation?”

“Yes,” Rhodey said, his voice heavy. “Yes, I do.”

Tony’s breath left him in a long exhale, tension bleeding out of his shoulders. Hesitantly, he reached out across the space between them, not sure that Rhodey’s admission of belief meant he trusted Tony again, as well. But Rhodey did not move away, and when Tony’s hand touched Rhodey’s arm, Rhodey leaned in and returned the gesture with a solid hug. The hug

didn't last long, and it was a little tense on both their parts— but it *was* still a hug, and Tony *almost* whined at the feel of it.

Almost, but not quite. In the end, Tony just cleared his throat, and when he leaned back away – and when Loki's hand was back against his collar – he knew that he needed to keep talking. The air would not be cleared between them until Rhodey knew *everything*— and he was now more sure than ever that Rhodey deserved to know the truth.

“If you believe me, then you should know the rest,” Tony started.

“There's more?” Rhodey asked, sounding a little pained.

“Oh yes, quite a bit more. If you really want to know *everything*, then... well. There's a long way to go yet.”

Rhodey seemed to be mentally preparing himself, but Tony didn't give him much time before he started talking. And as Tony talked about what he'd found in the data from the computers in İzmir, the connection between SHIELD and the Ten Rings— and then between SHIELD and everything else, as well as how HYDRA fit into it all... Rhodey's eyes widened in horror.

“They've been there for years,” Tony told him. “Decades, even. Using SHIELD and assassins like the Winter Soldier in order to manipulate events to terrible outcomes. I meant it when I said that there really is no way to know who to trust, and Loki and I are not going to rest until they're *all* dead, every last one of them.” He hardened his gaze and leaned forward as he continued, feeling Loki's hand trail a little down his back as he did so in order to keep some contact, even if it wasn't skin on skin. “You and Thor are right,” Tony continued. “There really *is* something going on here. SHIELD is rotten to the core, and the only way to fix all of this and get the whole *world* back on track is to cut all of them out.”

Tony didn't know when he had stood— but he was standing now, his fists clenched at his sides, his expression burning with anger.

“And look,” he continued. “You don't have to agree to help me. Doing nothing about it is better than actively helping them, but as things stand— if you do nothing, then you're just letting it all last longer.”

“I don't know, Tony,” Rhodey said, looking up at Tony with his hands clenched tightly in his jeans. “I mean, this is... big. You've just told me the people I've been working for are actually fucking *Nazis*, how am I supposed to—”

“Don't you think I know how big this is?” Tony replied. “Rhodey, I'm trying to tell you *this* is why we've needed the secrecy, this is what we've been trying our damndest to beat—”

“Of course, yes,” Rhodey said, “I know, and I'm... shit. I can't even... I think I should take this to my—”

“No,” Tony snapped. “You can't tell anyone about this. Don't you get it? HYDRA isn't just in SHIELD, they're not *just* in that one organisation. They're *everywhere*. They're in the

government, and they're certainly in the military. You can bet that you've been reporting to a few of them in the Air Force. If you tell them that you've spoken to me, then they'll just use you to get to *us*. You might as well just start chanting Hail HYDRA."

Rhodey winced at that, but he didn't dispute it. And it seemed that there was something else he was more interested in regardless.

"'Us' being you and Loki?" Rhodey asked, not able to keep the concern from his tone— if, that is, he had been trying at all.

"Yes," Tony drawled, *daring* Rhodey to say more.

Rhodey swallowed audibly. "Tones, I just suppose I don't understand. You wouldn't come to me for help, but you've been with him now for *months*—"

"He's really not what you think," Tony said. "I meant it when I said he's not *making* me do anything—"

"Then is it just... the enemy of my enemy?" Rhodey asked.

"No—"

"Then what, Tony?" Rhodey asked. "Because I'm struggling to understand. Yeah, you guys went through a lot together, and I get that you're sharing goals right now— and I have to admit that you make a good, if brutally terrifying team. But how do you know that the moment this is all over, he's not just going to turn around and—"

"Because I love him," Tony interrupted. "And because I know he loves me. We're hell of a lot more than just a *team* in this, and we're not just fighting for revenge. Do you want to know *why* we're doing this? Why we've decided to take no quarter and see this through to the very end?"

Rhodey didn't respond— he was staring at Tony like he'd announced that he'd come from another planet, and Tony decided to just take that as his cue to continue.

"It's because I know that the only way to keep *Loki* safe, the only way for us *both* to be safe and *together*, is if we take down all of the people who are trying to hurt us. There isn't anything I wouldn't do to make sure that Loki gets to live a long and happy life."

"Tony, you..." Rhodey drew in a shaky breath. "You mean that. You *really*—"

"Yes," Tony swore. "I really do. So please, stop talking about him like he's the scum of the universe, because it's starting to get on my nerves."

"Oh." Rhodey's eyes were wide. "Oh, *shit*."

"Yeah, oh," Tony replied. "Do you get it now? Do you see why I *can't* stop, and why I can't let a single one of those bastards live?"

“Tony, I thought... I thought that maybe he was controlling you, maybe not like he had with Barton and the others during the invasion but— with some kind of emotional manipulation at least, since it was clear in Avengers Tower that you wanted to be with him, and he wasn’t forcing you. But...” Rhodey trailed off, and got to his feet.

As Rhodey moved closer, Tony watched him cautiously. He could still feel Loki at his side— they weren’t touching anymore, but that didn’t seem to matter, because Tony could feel his apprehension almost as well as he could feel his own. But Rhodey wasn’t moving to attack. His expression was hard, but in thought rather than out of fear or anger— and when he spoke, his voice was firm and unyielding.

“Okay,” Rhodey said, pausing in front of Tony and holding out a hand. “Okay, Tony. I’ll fight with you.”

Tony gripped Rhodey’s upper arm with a sudden barked laugh, which was more a result of surprise than amusement. But he really was pleased that Rhodey was going to be on their side, that they had managed to find an actual *ally*. They had been doing well with the smaller bases, but if they wanted to be able to take out the *Triskelion*, then Rhodey’s help was going to be invaluable.

“Thank you,” Tony said. “Really, *thank* you.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” Rhodey warned. “From what you’ve told me, there’s still a hell of a lot to do.”

“Yes. Yes, there is.”

Tony reached slightly to the side, hoping that Loki would get what he meant and take his hand, so that Tony could ask his opinion on whether or not he tell Rhodey about their plans and the other rings *now*, but—

When Loki’s hand grasped his, the touch was sudden and tight and contained a desperation that didn’t match the offer of alliance Rhodey had just given them.

‘Anthony,’ Loki said quickly. *‘JARVIS says that there is someone else here. He doesn’t have a good viewpoint, but he can see people moving through the trees—’*

“Rhodey,” Tony said, his eyes darting to the side, scanning the area as his hand tightened around Loki’s. “Did *you* come alone?”

“Now, Tony,” Rhodey said slowly, holding up his hands, though there was something in his tone that was a little too worried for Tony’s liking. “I told you, I thought Loki was doing something to you. We were worried—”

“Who’s *we*?” Tony asked, already backing away. *‘Lokes, can you mask your voice from Rhodey, tell JARVIS to get me the suits without him hearing—’*

‘Not without preventing JARVIS from hearing me as well.’

“I didn’t call Thor,” Rhodey said, “Not when you specifically told me not to. But there is someone else that I think you need to talk to—”

“Rhodey,” Tony said, his voice low and his eyes wide. “What did you *do*?”

“Tony!”

The sound of the familiar voice had Tony’s eyes darting to the left, and he saw someone approach through the trees, the white of their blazer and knee-length skirt almost glowing in the relative darkness of the gardens. And Tony took yet another step back, because he recognised her from her hurried gait and her posture and her *hair* before he even caught a glimpse of her face—

And she was *not* supposed to be there.

“Tony!” Pepper called again, her high-heels not worrying her at all as she moved quickly over the damp grass.

“Pepper, it’s okay,” Rhodey said moving to greet her and holding up his hands. “It’s not what we thought.” Then he looked back to Tony. “This isn’t anything to worry about, I promise, Pepper’s still on your side—”

“Really?” Tony snarled, jerking his head back to the trees. “Then what the hell is *that*?”

The treeline was moving, the shadows bulging and writhing like a nest of snakes— and as Tony watched, agents in black and dark, navy blue began to stream out of them and into the middle of the small clearing he and Rhodey had been speaking in. They wore SHIELD insignias on their shoulders, but to Tony— they were all just HYDRA. There were at least three dozen of them, and Tony didn’t have a suit—

But he wasn’t alone.

Loki didn’t appear in a bright flash of green or anything so dramatic— he was simply just *there* from one moment to the next, standing in front of Tony, leaning slightly forward with both elbows bent.

And in the black and silver armour, with his daggers gleaming in his hands and with the green glow of pure rage in his eyes casting shadows across his vicious snarl, Loki certainly looked like he was ready to slice the whole lot of them to bloody pieces.

Tony couldn’t hear the whir of repulsors yet, but he was sure JARVIS wouldn’t be far out. And then, between the two of them, these agents wouldn’t stand a *chance*—

Then one of the agents fired their gun, and the sound of it and all too familiar flash marked the weapons as *Chitauri*. Loki quickly threw up a hand and caught the blast with a shield of green seiðr—

But then another shot came unexpectedly from the right, and it slammed into Loki’s side.

When Loki went down, it was almost like Tony felt the hit as if it were his own. He ran forward without a thought and threw himself down on the ground by Loki's side, his hands scrambling at the blood-slicked leather of Loki's tunic.

"Loki," he gasped, "Loki, no, you're— you're all right—"

Loki's breathing was harsh, but he was far from giving up. He pressed one hand to his side and gripped Tony's arm, and Tony quickly hurried to pull him up to sitting—

Because they had to go, they had to leave *now*—

They were surrounded with far too many agents to count on all sides. But that was okay, that was fine, they had been in far worse positions. They would be able to get out of this, right? No problem at all.

"Lokes, we gotta go," Tony said quickly. "Can you get us out of here?"

Loki didn't talk, but Tony recognised the look of concentration in his eyes— but the moment stretched longer than it should have, and Tony couldn't feel the familiar slide of Loki's magic over his skin.

"Lokes?" he asked, worried.

"No," Loki whispered, his eyes meeting Tony's fearfully. "No, I—" He lifted his hand, and they both stared at the sticky grey substance that was mixed in with Loki's blood. It would seem that the blast from the gun had contained some kind of chemical substance that was somehow blocking Loki's seiðr. In fact, Loki's movements seemed sluggish, and when he spoke again, his voice was a little slurred. "There's something wrong with me—"

"Not so powerful now, are you?" It was one of the SHIELD agents, standing over them with a Chitauri gun pointed at their heads.

"Rumlow, stand *down*," Rhodey shouted, shoving his way through and moving to stand Loki and Tony. "This isn't what we thought—"

"Oh, no," Rumlow snarled, adjusting his grip on his gun. "This is *exactly* what we thought, Rhodes. We should have known we'd find you consorting with terrorists."

Between the bodies of too many agents, Tony could see that Pepper's cheeks were already stained with horrified tears, though she was speaking rapidly into her phone— and Tony could only hope it was to the right people. But any help would be far too late, and— Tony couldn't sure that it would be *help*, regardless. Anyone Pepper could call now would likely only make this whole situation worse. She, after all, had been the one to bring SHIELD here in the first place.

Then a black suit rocketed down from the sky and encased Tony in metal, and he stood up without hesitation, raising his palms—

The Agents fired in the same moment that he did, and although he managed to cut down a few there was nothing he could do about the blast that knocked him back and away from

Loki, straight through the line of agents and into a tree which splintered under him.

The silver lines of Tony's suit began to glow green as Loki's protection spells guarded him from any harm, and his repulsors were already charging again as he rose back in the air, his lips twisting into a snarl that none of the others could see, but which was echoed in the viciousness excluding from the rest of his body.

"Don't try it, Stark," Rumlow told him— and Tony paused in the air when he saw that the muzzle of Rumlow's gun was pressed into Loki's head. Loki seemed even more injured than before— he must have been caught in the same blast that got Tony. And of course, since he wasn't wearing his full battle armour, he was not as protected as he usually was.

"Let him go," Tony snarled, landing on the ground and planting his feet, but not lowering his hands—

But then another black armour landed in front of Tony and grabbed his shoulders, and Tony was about to tell JARVIS to turn around and face the right direction when the faceplate snapped up.

"Tony," Rhodey said— and since when did he get inside one of the suits? JARVIS must have— but that didn't matter, there were more important things— "We need to go. *Now.*"

"No!" Tony snarled, trying to push forward. "*Loki—*"

"They won't kill him," Rhodey insisted. "And you can't help him if you get captured as well!"

Tony was still trying to fight, still trying to push his way to Loki because Loki was all that *mattered*, who cared if Tony didn't get out, Loki was hurt and he needed help—

But it felt like the suit itself was fighting against him, and he couldn't help but wonder if maybe JARVIS was trying to stop him as well. He could see the third suit flying over the agents and shooting repulsor blasts in quick succession, distracting enough of them that they hadn't been able to bother Tony and Rhodey— but not enough to make a difference, and the Chitauri guns were doing enough damage that JARVIS wouldn't be able to keep it up much longer.

Rhodey was right.

They were about to *lose*, there was no way they were all getting out of here—

And it should have been impossible, because they were so far away from each other. But in that moment, through all the pain and desperation Tony heard a single word ring through his mind.

'Anthony.'

When Tony's gaze met Loki's, he let out a tiny agonised whimper. Loki was lying face down on the ground, with Rumlow's foot pressed hard between his shoulder blades and five Chitauri guns pointed at his head. He'd managed to turn his face so he could look at Tony,

and his expression was a little dazed from whatever chemical they had managed to get him with, but his eyes remained sharp and determined— and Tony knew exactly what he was trying to say.

It had been quite some time since they'd had the conversation about what they would do in such a situation, but Tony could still hear the words as if they had only been spoken yesterday.

Promise me that if you can't save me from something, if trying will only get you caught as well...

Promise me that you'll leave.

Tony had said those words himself, but the sentiment had been shared between the two of them. *Leaving* had never truly been an option, and they had both made more than just a few vows to stay together no matter what—

But... if Tony went to Loki now, then they would *both* be right back where they had started.

'Anthony. Go.'

It felt like it was tearing Tony to shreds from the inside out, like he was clawing out his own heart with broken nails and leaving it behind to be crushed into the dirt. But he knew that if he wanted to help Loki, then he did not have a choice.

So, with one final, agonising thought, Tony wrenched his gaze away from the love of his life and shot up into the sky.

'I'll find you, Loki. I promise.'

No apology in the world

Tony could hardly see where he was going as he rocketed through the air, cutting across the sky toward— well, he wasn't sure, but wherever it was they were headed didn't really matter because, he only knew that it was *wrong*.

They *had* to be flying in the wrong direction because Loki was back in Edinburgh, and the distance between them was growing wider by the second, making Tony feel like the whole world was closing in, like he couldn't breathe, like the reactor in his chest was crushing his lungs and yet somehow being torn from his sternum all at the same time.

And as he flew, Tony couldn't help but think about what he'd left behind, the scene playing in his mind over and over and over again and *every time* it ended worse. Reality was bad enough— Loki was in the hands of people who wanted to tear away his power and use him to make the world an even more awful place than it already was, and...

Tony had *run away*.

It was more than enough to make him feel physically sick, his stomach churning and his heart aching, tears stinging at his eyes with such ferocity that all the colours in his HUD bled together into a single blurred mess.

The suit felt too small and the sky felt too big. He was breathing too fast but he wasn't getting enough oxygen, everything was broken and shattered and— it seemed like nothing was ever going to be all right again.

JARVIS was trying to talk to him, already strategising how he was going to try and break into SHIELD's security with a whole new plan of attack— because JARVIS knew that normally, the only thing that would help Tony in situations such as these would be to focus on what came next. But even that was doing nothing to calm him, because it was hard to think about what would happen next when for Loki, *next* meant pain and torture. And this time, Loki would be entirely alone.

Of course, Loki had suffered alone at the hands of the Ten Rings for far longer than Tony had before they'd been thrown together, but that only made Tony feel all the worse.

Loki didn't deserve this. Loki shouldn't have to *suffer* this, and...

Well.

It was all Tony's fault, wasn't it?

Maybe, if Tony hadn't been with him and dragging him down, maybe if Loki had been by himself, then none of this would have happened. Tony was the one who said that Loki should come with him, who'd insisted that they would be fine with just the two of them and JARVIS. He was the one who'd wanted to meet somewhere dark and secluded, he was the

one who'd said far from Italy was better, that away from people was better, that letting Rhodey use the ring rather than using it themselves was *better*—

And, of course, *he* was the one who had wanted to talk to Rhodey in the first place.

Maybe if Tony hadn't been so trusting, maybe if he had listened to the voice inside his head that was screaming at him to fight beside no one other than Loki, or maybe if he'd *recognised* that the only person in the world he could trust *was Loki*—

Maybe then, Loki would still be by his side, home and safe and *here*.

They could have spent the evening curled together on the couch, watching old movies and listening to Barnes' swearing as he tried to make banana smoothies with far too much honey. Maybe they could have spent it in the workshop, working quietly side by side and exchanging brushes of arms or fingers and soft smiles that said far more than words ever needed to. Maybe they could have stayed in their bed, skin pressed to skin as they adored each other with the loving movements of their bodies. They could have been doing anything, they could have been happy— but instead, Tony had wanted to talk to Rhodey, and now... Loki was gone.

Rhodey.

Tony's eyes narrowed at the thought, and he blinked away the tears as he glanced at the corner of his HUD, where JARVIS was keeping a track of the other two suits— one damaged and falling behind as it struggled to keep pace, and the other encasing his once best friend.

Once. It was a harsh word, signalling not only the end of something, but also the shattering of what *once* had been precious.

Perhaps it hadn't entirely been Tony's fault, after all. Perhaps there was someone else to blame.

Rhodey had made promises, Rhodey had *sworn* that he wouldn't tell anyone about Tony and Loki, not until they'd talked. He'd said that he would come alone, and he hadn't— and now Loki was paying the price.

Tony gnashed his teeth with enough force that his jaw ached, and he saw red with the kind of fierce anger that only left room for violent retribution.

And Tony didn't even think about it— he swerved in the sky and shot forward with a sudden pulse of speed, slamming into the other suit's side and knocking him out of the air. He didn't let up even as Rhodey yelled and pleaded, he simply forced all the power into his boots that he could and crashed them both into the ground.

They were in the middle of a field somewhere, perhaps Belgium, or maybe France— though of course, it didn't really matter. They skidded through the plants and the dirt as Tony pressed Rhodey hard into the ground, and even before they had come to a complete stop he was raising a fist and slamming it into the side of Rhodey's helmet.

“Traitor,” he snarled, punching again and again, hardly even seeing that black faceplate behind the image of Loki’s last, pained, *pleading* expression. “You did this, *you* got him caught—”

“Tony, Tony *stop*—”

“This is *your* fault!” Tony shouted, not even bothering with the repulsors as his fists slammed into Rhodey’s helmet. “*You’re* the one who did this, you’re the reason why Loki’s going to be tortured, why he’s going to go through so much pain! You *betrayed* me!”

Tony voice was cracked and hoarse, and his rage was far from muted by the way that Rhodey held his hands up as if in surrender— or perhaps to try and stop Tony from continuing to pummel his head.

Tony knew he was still shouting as he kept fighting, curses and accusations flying as harshly as his fists. He hardly heard Rhodey’s pleas, he didn’t *care* for what the traitor had to say. But unlike the last few times Tony had fought Rhodey in a suit, Rhodey wasn’t fighting back. He was trying to cover his head, yeah, but he wasn’t trying to *stop* Tony’s attacks. It was almost like... Rhodey was just trying to wait him out.

And the longer it went on without a single returned hit, the more Tony’s punches began to slow. He wanted a fight, he wanted something to attack and destroy and force all of his anger upon because Loki had been captured, Tony couldn’t do anything to get him back and— and it wasn’t *fair*.

As Tony’s voice grew hoarse and his shouting petered out, as his arms grew tired and his hits slackened, he became more aware of what Rhodey was saying.

“I’m sorry,” Rhodey murmured, over and over again, even as Tony continued to hit him. “Tony, I’m so sorry.”

“Why did you do it?” Tony asked brokenly, pausing with one hand hard on Rhodey’s shoulder and the other in a fist hovering over Rhodey’s head. “You promised, and I *trusted* you. Even when Loki was wary, even when everyone else in the world was against us and I had no reason to believe that you were any different, I still thought that maybe, you were still my friend—”

“I *am* your friend,” Rhodey cut in—

“Then *why did you do it?*” Tony asked. “Why did you tell SHIELD where we were, even after I told you that there was something wrong? Even after I *told you* that they were the reason why we were doing what we were. Why did you *betray* me?”

“I didn’t,” Rhodey insisted, his faceplate snapping up so that Tony could see his pleading expression. “Tony, I swear to you that I didn’t—”

“Why should I believe you?” Tony asked harshly. “*How* can I?”

“Well—” Rhodey paused a moment, a thousand emotions flickering through his eyes far too quickly for Tony to be able to catch. “Tony, just— please, let up a minute. Let me get something.”

Tony didn't move. Rhodey hadn't fought back yet, but Tony was well past having enough trust to believe he wouldn't snap the moment Tony let down his guard. So he stayed where he was, and he opened his fist so that Rhodey could see the glow of his repulsor aimed at Rhodey's now unprotected face.

Tony wouldn't be afraid to use it, and from the way that Rhodey's head tilted slightly to look at it, it was clear he understood the threat.

“I'm not going to hurt you, Tones. I'm in one of your suits, aren't I?” Rhodey asked. “JARVIS will stop me if I try anything, you know he will. You know you can trust *him*.”

“I will not allow him to hurt you, Sir,” JARVIS confirmed.

And okay, that was something that Tony couldn't argue against, but he was still hesitant as he got to his feet, and he kept his repulsors at the ready.

Rhodey didn't step out of the suit entirely – though he was right, that put Tony at more of an advantage than Rhodey – but one of his gauntlets folded away, and the chest plate opened so that Rhodey could dig into the pocket of his jacket. Then he held out his hand, and... nestled in his palm was the white Makluan ring.

“Take this,” Rhodey said. “I think it's my turn to tell the truth.”

Slowly, Tony folded away his helmet and one of his own gauntlets and then— he reached out to take it. The moment his fingers folded around the ring, Rhodey began to talk.

“The *only* person I told about this meeting was Pepper,” Rhodey started, and Tony knew that it wasn't a lie, though that didn't make it much better. “And I didn't even tell her everything, man. You're right, I promised that I wouldn't tell anyone about SHIELD, and I *didn't*. All I told her was that you were with Loki, and that I was going to meet up with you to talk, to find out the truth of what was going on.”

It was clear that Rhodey had thought that was okay, that even if he was sorry now, at the *time* he had been acting with the best of intentions, with Tony's wellbeing in mind. That was the truth, the ring let Tony see that— but that didn't make it any better, and it didn't mean that Rhodey hadn't made one glaringly stupid mistake.

“You told her I was with Loki, after you promised that you *wouldn't*,” Tony said coarsely. “And did you at least also tell her that Loki wasn't controlling me?”

“I told her that I didn't think you were with him by force, or under threat,” Rhodey replied quickly. “But I didn't say anything else, because yeah, I promised I wouldn't. I know I shouldn't have said anything at all but I needed someone to talk to, and she's the only other person who knows about Iron Man and is one hundred per cent on your side. She understood that I couldn't say more, and when you said you didn't want to talk to Thor we decided that I

would meet you alone, but that she would stay close by, so that she could come and talk to you if needed—”

“If *needed?*” Tony asked with a touch of wounded incredulity. “You mean if I needed more convincing to get away from my *jailor?*”

“I didn’t know the truth,” Rhodey insisted. “I didn’t know you were in love with him, or that he was in love with you. But I know the truth now, and even without that ring— what I just saw, that look you and he shared before we left—”

“He made me go,” Tony hissed. “Loki *told* me to go because he cares more about me than he does about himself, and yet the reason why he had to make that choice in the first place was because *you* told Pepper, and she told SHIELD, like I *told* you she would. If you’d kept your promise and kept your mouth shut then Loki would still be here. He’d be *safe*.”

“No, Tony,” Rhodey said, his voice suddenly low and firm. “I know I screwed up, and I know I hurt you, but the *reason* why you and he had to make that choice is because of all that HYDRA has done to you. And the only way to make it right is to fight *them*.”

Tony grit his teeth, and refused to give in to that— because yes, he *knew* that HYDRA was the enemy here, of course he fucking did. But that didn’t excuse all that Rhodey had done. That didn’t immediately mean that he could just trust Rhodey again.

But Rhodey, it seemed, was far from done.

“I know that I made a mistake,” Rhodey said again. “God, do I know, and Tony I am *so sorry*, I truly am. But there’s no apology in the world that would ever be able to bring him back—”

“I know that,” Tony snapped, cutting in violently, the nails of his bare hand cutting sharp into his palm. “Fuck, don’t you think that I *know* that? We’re standing here talking while he’s suffering from god knows what. Do you know how that feels? To have someone you love torn away from you in the worst way possible, to *know* that they are suffering? To be helpless, *useless*, sitting on the side-lines while your whole body burns because out there, somewhere, they’re *hurting*, and there is not a single thing you can do to stop it.”

“Yes,” Rhodey said quietly. “Yes, I know what that’s like.”

“You *don’t*,” Tony snarled. “Don’t compare it. You didn’t know what I was going through when I was captured. You couldn’t, you— and Rhodey, you were like a brother to me, but Loki is— he’s—”

“You *love* him,” Rhodey said, his voice sounding gentle when compared to the roughness of Tony’s own.

“Yeah,” Tony replied. “I do. And I know *exactly* what they’re going to do to him, because I’ve seen it. I know the slab that they will strap him to, I know the *instruments* that they will use to slice into him. I know the cuffs that will cut into his wrists, and the muzzle that’ll reopen the scars on his lips. I don’t have to imagine because I’ve *seen* it, and that... that’s so much worse.”

“Tony,” Rhodey said, speaking slowly and sounding rather like he was choosing his words with care. “You said yourself that they wanted him so that they can try to take his power. That means they’re not going to kill him, they want him alive more than anything else—”

“No, you still don’t *see*,” Tony cried, tears starting to fall and sobs beginning to distort his words. “Being alive and in their hands is so much *worse* than if they killed him. What they want to do would be enough to make anyone wish for death.”

Rhodey took a step forward, his expression crumpling— and he almost looked like he wanted to give Tony a hug before he thought better of it.

“Tony,” Rhodey started— and Tony supposed he could only be grateful that Rhodey didn’t try to tell him that everything was going to be *all right*. “Listen to me. Loki’s strong, he’s not going to let them break him—”

“That’ll only make them fight him *harder*—”

“Loki has survived this before,” Rhodey continued. “From what you told me it seems he knows to keep his head in. He’ll be able to get through this, he’ll hold on until you’re able to go and get him—”

“That was *before* we went and started attacking them, before we started taking down their operations, killing their people and making them *angry*,” Tony hissed. “It’s not *just* his power that they’re after now, is it? They’re going to want revenge, they’re going to want to break him in every way that they didn’t manage before—”

“Tony, *stop*. You know that thinking of the worst case scenario isn’t going to help.”

And Tony wanted to say that this wasn’t worst case, this was *reality*. But he knew that Rhodey had something of a point, because whatever it was that Loki was facing, there was nothing Tony could do change it. Not right now, anyway, and working himself into a panic attack was not going to do anything to help.

Breathe, Tony. Breathe.

Rhodey was watching him carefully, and it was only once Tony had taken that deep breath and managed to maintain a slower, calmer rhythm that Rhodey continued to speak. “You know Loki better than anyone,” he said. “You know him better than me. And I just want you to ask yourself... in all the time that you’ve known him, and despite all the pain that he’s lived through— have you *ever* known him to give up?”

Tony didn’t even have to think about that— he just shook his head. Even when Loki had been locked in that cell, starved and injured and without hardly a hope, he still hadn’t *given up*. He had bided his time, waiting for a moment when he would be able to regain his strength and fight back with the greatest chance of success.

“Then have faith in him now,” Rhodey said. “And take a moment to gather *your* strength.”

“I can’t leave him there alone,” Tony whispered. “Rhodey, I *can’t*.”

“But you can’t go after him immediately, either, because if you fly back there now, or if you try to attack and break him out before you’re ready, you’ll *lose*,” Rhodey said. “You and him have been destroying bases but you’ve been doing it together, and you’ve been catching them mostly by surprise. Now they *know* you’re coming for him, and they’re going to use that to set a trap. So, trust that Loki will be able to survive long enough for you to come up with a plan, and then tell me... what is it that you need to do *now*?”

Tony’s instinctive answer was still that he needed to get Loki *back*, because he didn’t want Loki to have to spend another *second* with those bastards. Tony knew better than anyone just exactly how much pain could be administered in a second, and just how quickly those seconds could begin to add up when your mind was caught in the shadows.

But... even though every cell in his body was screaming against it, he didn’t need the ring to know that Rhodey was right.

After all, Tony had been worried about attacking the Triskelion even *with* Loki by his side, and even though there was no guarantee that would be where they would take him, there was no doubt that any location they decided upon would be at least equally fortified.

It was going to be the fight of Tony’s life, and the only way that they were *both* going to get out of it was going to be if he had *help*. And now, with Loki gone, Tony needed a hell of lot more of it than he had thought before.

And he didn’t *want* to trust Rhodey again— in a way, he wasn’t sure that he could. But... he also wasn’t sure that he had any choice.

At the very least, that made one thing very, very clear.

“Right now?” he started, his voice going cold and his expression hardening as he focused all of his pain in a direction that was a little more productive. “I need to go *home*.”

“Back to New York?” Rhodey asked, surprised. “I suppose, if you tell them the truth, the Avengers might help but— SHIELD might be able to track you there—”

“Not New York,” Tony replied emotionlessly. “New York hasn’t been home for a long time.”

With deft movements that easily hid the pain that should have been enough to cripple, Tony tucked the ring into a compartment in his armour, and then he straightened and fired up the repulsors, his helmet slamming back down over his head with a sense of finality.

“You said that you would fight with me,” Tony said. “Are you going to hold to that?”

Rhodey’s lips curved up into a grim smile that spoke not of happiness, but fierce determination.

“Yes,” he said. “I’ll help you get Loki back. And while we’re at it, I’ll help you take down those bastards for good. For what they’ve done to you, they deserve all the fires of hell itself raining down on them.”

“Good,” Tony replied stiffly. “Then we’ll make sure they get it.”

They both leapt back into the sky, flying even faster than they had before, and this time with a proper destination in mind.

It still felt like it was the wrong direction— Tony was still flying thousands of miles away from Loki. But now he was sure that this was not the end, because he would fight tooth and nail and do whatever was necessary. He had never broken a promise to Loki, not *once*, and this time would be no different.

Tony was going to get Loki back. That was a simple fact.

And when he did, HYDRA was going to *bleed*.

Not a single doubt

The moment he saw the two black suits land in the garden, Barnes immediately knew that something must have gone horribly wrong.

Whenever Tony and Loki had gone on their violent outings before, they always reappeared either in the living room, or in their bedroom— in which case, JARVIS would always warn him not to go upstairs for a while. But whichever it was, they always arrived through Loki's skywalking powers. They didn't ever fly, not together, not like this— and Loki *never* used one of Tony's armours.

Worried that must mean that Loki was injured, Barnes immediately dropped the wooden spoon he was holding into the cake batter, wiped his hand down on the bright yellow apron he'd found in a drawer and then raced to the front door.

By the time he threw the door open and ran out toward the two dark suits – noting that the third seemed to be worryingly missing – Tony was already getting out of his armour. At first glance, Tony seemed to be mostly all right— a few bruises, perhaps, from the way that he was holding himself, but... Barnes couldn't see any blood, and nothing that was an immediate cause for concern.

But then... Barnes took note of Tony's blotched face, his twisted lips, the slump to his shoulders and the dark, haunted *emptiness* that seemed to radiate from his eyes... and Barnes *knew* that something must have gone horribly wrong.

Then, as if to prove the point, the second suit opened up— and the person who stepped out of it was someone that Barnes had never seen before in his life.

Barnes was immediately put on his guard. He didn't have any weapons— there hadn't been any need for them in the house, not when it was as protected as any fortress and the only people with access were the two that, to be totally honest, he trusted most in the world.

Barnes himself had only managed to find the place by following them from Florence, and even *then* he hadn't been able to even *see* it— he'd walked through the forest around the house for hours before heading back to the city to wait for the impossible pair wearing the faces of Asgardians to show up once more.

This house had to be the safest place on Earth— but now, Barnes found himself one armed and without a single thing to defend himself – or Tony – with other than his own bare hand. Half wishing that he'd brought the wooden spoon with him – it would have been better than nothing – Barnes moved closer, needing to know what had occurred, what had happened to make everything go so very clearly horribly wrong.

“Tony,” the stranger said warily, his voice low and his expression laced with both suspicion and concern. “Who is that?”

Barnes had been about to ask the same thing, along with a question that would be something along the lines of *where the fuck is Loki*– but then he looked back to Tony’s completely *broken* expression, and he realised what must have happened.

Not missing a beat, Barnes strode forward and moved to clasp Tony’s shoulder. Barnes wasn’t really one for physical contact, but he knew that Tony took comfort from it. Of course, there was the possibility that was limited to contact from *Loki*, since he was the only other person Barnes had ever seen Tony interact with– but he only had that thought after he had already executed the movement.

Thankfully, though, Tony didn’t flinch away– he looked up to meet Barnes’ gaze, his whole body trembling despite the warm, morning sunlight that was streaming into the garden from above.

The other man didn’t seem comfortable, however, his eyes narrowing as he watched, and one of his hands reached out as if he were going to try and pull Tony away but was half thinking better of it.

Barnes wasn’t sure he liked it, but Tony – despite everything else that was going on – didn’t seem to be worrying about the stranger. So, Barnes decided to mostly ignore him and focused on his friend instead.

“Come inside,” Barnes said firmly. “Now.”

It seemed like Tony appreciated the clear instruction– he slumped a little into Barnes’ hold, and allowed Barnes to guide him back toward the door. Tony almost seemed to be acting on autopilot, like his body was just going through the motions while his mind was trapped somewhere else... or, perhaps, was working *through* something else.

It didn’t bode well, and by the time Barnes had sat Tony down on the couch and wrapped a blanket around his shoulders – you know, better safe than sorry – he was well and truly *worried*.

It was almost odd, to feel so much concern– it had been a very long time since he’d done so. But over the months that he had been staying here in this house he had become rather fond of both Tony and Loki, and to think of what might have happened to have Tony in such a state had his heart beating too fast and a sick feeling curling through the pit of his stomach.

The only saving grace was that Tony was *here* at all. Barnes knew that if Loki had, god forbid, been killed, then Tony would never have come back– he simply would torn head first through anyone he could reach, ripping and destroying everyone who had hurt the one he loved until Tony had been killed himself.

No, Loki was certainly still alive– but he wasn’t *here*, and sometimes... that could almost be worse.

“I’m only going to ask one more time,” the stranger said, his voice low and harsh as it cut through the silence previously only broken by the sound of Tony’s shallow breaths. “Who the hell are you?”

“JARVIS,” Barnes said, ignoring the man entirely. “Who is this?”

“Colonel Rhodes,” JARVIS answered crisply— and no further explanation was required. Barnes had heard his companions talk about the man often enough for him to have a fair picture.

Although, what Barnes knew from what the others had said would suggest that Rhodes was on their side— at least, it did when combined with the fact that Tony had brought him *here*. But... the fact that Tony had returned with Rhodes but *without* Loki had every nerve in Barnes’ body itching with suspicion, and he couldn’t allow himself to relax.

It was enough, however, for Barnes to turn away from Rhodes and place *almost* his full focus on Tony.

“What happened?” he asked, crouching down in front of Tony and placing a gentle hand on his arm. “Where is he?”

“They took him.” Tony’s voice wasn’t cracked, and it wasn’t broken. It wasn’t rough like Barnes would have expected. It was just... empty.

And oh, god. It really was his worst fears confirmed.

Barnes knew *exactly* how close the pair of them were. He wasn’t blind— he saw the way that their eyes never truly left each other when they were in the same room, and the way that they could never truly relax when they weren’t. He knew that it was something they had been working on, a mountain that they had been *trying* to climb, but it was something he didn’t think they would ever completely be able to summit— not because he didn’t think they would be able to eventually heal from what had happened to them, but simply because of the way that they *felt*.

Because yeah, they had been through a lot together, Barnes knew. He hadn’t been told every detail, but he knew *enough* to recognise the kind of experience that could bind two people together. But even without all of that, they simply loved each other too much to ever stop worrying entirely— because there was nothing harder in the world than to know that the person you loved was in the worst kind of danger, and to not be able to do anything to stop it. Barnes could understand that, even if he had never experienced such a thing himself. But of course, just because Tony hadn’t been able to do anything to stop it then did not mean that there was nothing they could do about it *now*.

A fundamental piece of Tony had been stolen from him, and he wouldn’t ever be all right until they could get it back. With Loki in danger, Tony’s mind was a mess— and pointing that out or trying to tell him that things would be okay was not going to do any good at all.

No.

In that moment, there was only one thing that was going to actually be of help.

“When are we going to start?” Barnes asked.

Tony looked up and met his gaze, a spark of life finally entering his eyes. “We?” he asked, confused.

“Yes,” Barnes said firmly. “*We* are going to get him back, right?”

“Well, yeah, but I—” Tony paused a moment before continuing. “I thought that you didn’t want anything to do with—”

“I didn’t,” Barnes cut in. “Not when you two were perfectly capable of managing by yourselves, and when I was going to be more of a hinderance than a help. But if they’ve taken him, if they’re *hurting* him, then nothing is going to stop me from helping you.”

Tony’s eyes were wide, and Barnes held his gaze without any difficulty at all. He truly *hadn’t* wanted to fight before— he’d shied away from it with such force that the thought of getting back out there and actively hurting people had made his mind begin to close down. But in this moment, his decision was clear.

The way that Barnes had met Tony and Loki was hardly conventional, and sure, they had started out rather hostile— but over the past few months, Loki had done more for Barnes than... well, possibly more than anyone ever had, at least as far as his current memories stretched. And even the thought of fighting again was not enough to want to make Barnes pause for even a *moment* before helping to bring Loki home.

And when he spoke again, it was with complete and utter resolve.

“Get me my arm, and tell me where to go,” Barnes said. “And I’ll help you get him back.”

There was half a second where the world seemed to stand still—

And then Tony threw himself forward and off the couch, wrapping his arms around Barnes’ shoulders and pressing his face into the curve of his neck.

Barnes only just managed to catch him, almost falling backwards under the sudden assault. His muscles tensed, unsure—

Because it was the most contact Barnes’d had in... god, he didn’t even *know* how long. Probably since Steve had embraced him before they’d attacked the train and Bucky had fallen to his death.

Or so he’d believed, anyway.

The thought made Barnes remember what it had been like, to have a friend— to have *Steve* on his side. He had loved Steve like a brother, more than he had ever loved anyone else, but... every time he thought about seeing Steve again, he couldn’t help but recoil.

At first, it had been because he didn’t want Steve to see what he had become— because he had left Bucky Barnes behind him, and he didn’t want to see the look of disappointment in Steve’s expression when he realised that Barnes wasn’t the kid from Brooklyn that he’d known before the war, and never would be again.

Since then, however, Barnes had learned that Steve had played a part in Tony's capture. He didn't believe that Steve had abandoned Tony with any malicious intentions – even Tony seemed to admit that much, from the snippets that Barnes had heard and been able to put together – but he *could* believe that Steve had been blind. That he'd had this brilliant, *selfless* man as a teammate, but hadn't been able to look past the arrogant exterior and the metal mask to see what had lain beneath.

And even before he had come to care for Tony, that had made Barnes want to see Steve even less– because if Steve hadn't been able to see the hero and teammate in Tony Stark, then how would he look at Barnes after all that he had been through?

He knew Steve well enough to *know* that he could be stubborn and thick-headed, and... well. He didn't want to deal with the disappointment, especially not when he wasn't entirely sure that he deserved it.

And *then*, somewhere between the kindness he had been shown, between the forgiveness for killing Tony's parents and the movie nights that almost made Barnes feel like he'd found a family, he had come to really care about Tony and Loki, and he knew then that it would be even more difficult to foster anything toward Steve that wasn't bordering on the edge of hostile.

Oh, Barnes wasn't an idiot– he knew that Tony and Loki had only kept him alive in the beginning to further their own ends. But in the weeks and months that had passed since he had mindlessly tried to kill them, they really had grown close, and Barnes was rather sure that they cared about him just as he cared about them.

He had spent long, *long* hours up in his bedroom, thinking things through. And all the while they hadn't pushed him for answers, not since the very moment they realised that he hadn't been in his right mind. He supposed that they must have seen something familiar in him, something that had reminded them of their capacity for empathy, which likely had almost been stolen away from them by the people who had tried to take everything else.

Of course, they had been held not by HYDRA, but by the Ten Rings– but even if those two organisations had not been cut of the same cloth, Barnes still believed that they would have been able to see eye to eye.

But it didn't matter where they had been, or who it was that caused all their pain. They all knew what it was to have no sense of safety, to be just one violent whim away from unimaginable pain, to live in fear at every moment because you never knew what was coming next.

They *knew*, and now... Loki was in the clutches of the very same people who had torn Barnes to pieces and then put all the bits back together in the wrong order, and there was nothing that Barnes wouldn't do now to try and help him get free. Because, yeah, Barnes *cared* about the two broken people who had found him at the lowest point anyone could go, and then had helped him build himself back up without a single expectation in return.

And right now, with Tony in his arms, trembling under the weight of the world and the fear of what Loki might currently be going through—

Well, Barnes wrapped his arm tightly around Tony and held him close, offering whatever little comfort that he had to give.

The hug did not last long, and yet it felt like it was the longest hug in the world, like they were caught in a timeless bubble where they could not be interrupted. But, unfortunately, the moment was not timeless— for it was tainted with the painful knowledge of the fact that the longer they stayed there, the more Loki would be suffering. And even as Tony clutched tightly to the back of Barnes' shirt, Barnes could feel him trying to pull himself back together.

“We’re going to get him out, Tony,” Barnes said as Tony moved away and perched once more on the edge of the couch. “There’s not a single doubt in my mind about that.”

Tony nodded firmly, and then rubbed his hands hard over his face— as if he were trying to wipe away all the pain so that he could *focus*.

“Right,” Tony said, his voice a little hoarse. “Okay. JARVIS, run a trace, work out where the hell they’re taking him.”

“I’m tracking the quinjet now, Sir,” JARVIS said quickly. “Current trajectory over the Atlantic Ocean indicates that they are heading toward north eastern United States.”

“It’s either going to be New York or DC,” Tony muttered. “And they won’t take him to the tower, they know that would be too easy for us. J, are you in the Triskelion’s network yet?”

“Not yet, Sir,” JARVIS said, sounding frustrated. “But I will be.”

Barnes was aware that the Triskelion had better security than any other building in America. He had a memory of someone bragging about it, just before he had been sent on a mission into the Pentagon himself— a mission during which he had remained entirely undetected.

“Good, keep working at it,” Tony said. “We’re going to have to go in all guns blazing. They know we’re on our way, subtlety isn’t going to cut it—”

“We can’t just attack mindlessly,” Rhodes cut in— and Barnes would have glared at him for making Tony’s expression tighten, if he hadn’t actually agreed with the man.

“Of course not,” he snapped instead. “And we aren’t going to. Tony, you and Loki have been laying the groundwork for this for *months*. How close do you think you were to bringing it all to an end?”

“We still have a long way to go,” Tony muttered. “We don’t have all the rings yet, and we’d planned on that— both to cripple them and to give us the boost in power so that being outnumbered will not be as much of a problem. I still only have the three suits, it’s not enough without more allies.”

“Then we’ll get some more,” Rhodes said. “Tony, you said yourself that Thor is suspicious of SHIELD, and Pepper’s on your side—”

The sound that tore from Tony's throat then was not quite a snarl, but nor was it entirely pained. Half way between angry and tortured, Tony turned a fierce glare on Rhodes as he spat out his livid words.

"On our side? She's the reason all of this is *happening*."

"Tony, we've been over this—"

"And it's no less true," Tony hissed. "I *know* that HYDRA is who I need to fight, I'm not stupid— but if she hadn't told them where we were, if you hadn't told *her*, then Loki would still be with me!"

"What's that?" Barnes asked sharply, turning to Rhodes. "*You* told SHIELD where you were meeting Tony?"

"I still don't even know who the hell you are," Rhodes snapped. "What do you even know about all of this?"

Tony looked like he was about to respond, but Barnes beat him to it.

"I've been given a few names in the past," he said sharply. "Most of my life I have been merely *The Asset*, just a pawn on a board that I never got to see. I was The Winter Solider to those among my masters' enemies who knew of my existence, and a ghost to those who did not. I was born James Buchanan Barnes, and known as Bucky to my friends—"

"Bucky Barnes?" Rhodes whispered under his breath—

"But I am none of those things anymore," he hissed. "Not *one*. I'm not sure who I am, but I do know one thing— I've found something good here with two good people, and I will *not* sit by and just overlook the fact that you are part of the reason why one of them has been caught and is likely now being tortured—" Barnes stopped when Tony made a wounded sound, and glanced to his friend apologetically before looking back to Rhodes. "I have not been part of this fight, but now, to keep them safe, I certainly will be."

Rhodes looked surprised, but Barnes didn't bother to keep watching him for much longer. He didn't know the man, he didn't know the history between him and Tony, and he didn't know much of what might be going through his head— but he *did* know that Tony was suffering, so it was to him that he glanced back to.

Tony's eyes had widened slightly, and Barnes realised that it was probably the most that Tony had ever heard him say.

"Thank you," Tony said, his voice a little softer than before, but regaining some of that blankness that had been lost while he was talking about Pepper Potts, as if he were still just trying to compartmentalise the anguish that was still shining in his brown eyes. "You know, we both see you as part of this family, too."

And then, it was *Barnes'* turn to be surprised, something sparking through his chest that he couldn't quite put a name to.

“Thank you,” he said, feeling a little choked.

“And you know,” Tony said, “If there *is* something that you would rather we call you—”

“Don’t worry about it,” Barnes cut in. “Just ‘Barnes’ is fine.”

Truth was that Barnes wasn’t sure *what* he was anymore, but what he’d told Rhodes was the truth. He felt like he was closer now to finding his place than he had been in decades, and if Barnes was what Tony and Loki had chosen to call him, then that was what he would see himself as, as well.

“Okay,” Rhodes sighed. “This... I don’t know how this is possible, but I can see that you trust him, Tony.”

“And you’re going to trust *me* on that?” Tony asked. “That’s a first.”

Rhodes flinched. “I know that I made a mistake,” he said— and from the tension in his tone, Barnes could tell it was something Rhodes had said before. *Good*. Barnes hoped that Tony was given the heartfelt apology he deserved— and hopefully, if Rhodes realised what it was he’d done, then he truly would give his all. “I told you that I’m here to help you rescue Loki,” he said firmly, “and I mean it. I’m here to *help* you, I’m on your side.”

Tony didn’t look particularly happy, but he *did* look like he believed it— so Barnes said the only thing that he could.

“Good. Then let’s not waste another moment.” He turned to Tony, and noted that Rhodes did the same. “What do you want to do first?”

And as Tony’s expression hardened into a mask of determination, Barnes knew that Tony really would stop at nothing— that he would get back what had been stolen at any cost, or he would die trying.



Pepper Potts was exactly the woman that Barnes had been picturing from all that he had heard about her. She looked as imposing as any army officer Barnes had ever met, like she would be capable of walking right up to any kind of monster without being at all intimidated. And when she answered the video call, the relief in her eyes was palpable, and she immediately began to say how glad she was that her two friends had made it out of the mess unscathed.

Tony didn’t even wait for her to get through a single sentence before he began talking, his voice once again completely empty— and that seemed to hit her harder than any rage could have.

“This is a secure line, JARVIS has made sure of it,” Tony said. “Nothing we or you say will be able to get back to SHIELD— not unless you tell them after the fact, and if you do, rest assured that JARVIS will know.”

There wasn't a single touch of bite in his tone – the words were far too emotionless for that – but Pepper flinched regardless.

“Tony, I am so sorry,” she said, apparently realising her mistake and backtracking on her earlier relief. “I didn't know that Loki was—”

“I don't care,” Tony cut in. “I need your help with something, or I wouldn't be calling. I don't want to trust you, but Rhodey says that you're on my side. And right now, I don't have much of a choice.”

“If there's anything I can do, then I'll do it,” Pepper said. “JARVIS told me what happened —”

“I asked him to,” Tony interrupted. “Rhodey shouldn't have told you anything, but you knowing half the truth did more damage than if you'd only known part of it. Don't think I did it out of *any* kind of trust.”

Pepper paled slightly at that, and Tony just kept going.

“I need my suits,” he said simply. “Do not let SHIELD know that I am taking them. Do not let *anyone* know.”

“I won't,” Pepper promised, clearly knowing what he was talking about without needing to ask.

Barnes, on the other hand, had only learned of the Legion that very day. Tony, apparently, had almost forty operational suits hidden away, but he had not been able to get at them without alerting Pepper to the fact that he was doing so, and he did not want her alerting anyone else to what he was up to. JARVIS had managed to retrieve two without notice, but now– they would need a hell of a lot more than that, and they needed them immediately. There was no longer any time to spare on being subtle, but with Pepper's promise of silence, JARVIS could simply bust them all out en masse.

So there would be forty suits all attacking at once, all of them under JARVIS' command and destroying anything that stood between Tony and Loki.

Looking at Tony now, it was clear that Iron Man was well and truly dead– but his ghost would be attacking the Triskelion.

“I *am* sorry, Tony,” Pepper insisted once she had given her word in full. “I told Fury where you were because I was worried, and he sent the STRIKE team because you and Loki had just attacked one of SHIELD's bases in London—”

“A HYDRA base, you mean,” Tony corrected.

“Yes,” Pepper winced. “Of course, I didn't know that. And I was sure that you were the one behind the grave robbery, and I knew you wouldn't have done that if you weren't acting of your own accord– but then the Iron Shadow was confirmed attacking SHIELD bases, and I thought perhaps that I was wrong.”

She paused, for a moment, as if expecting a response– but Tony didn't seem to have one to give.

“I'm sorry,” she said again, sounding completely defeated. “I didn't know how close you were to Loki. I thought that he must have been stopping you from talking to anyone else.”

Tony's hands curled into fists at that, and Barnes knew exactly why. He knew that Tony had been unsure at times of his decision to keep his old friends in the dark, that there had been moments when Tony had missed them. But Tony had known that the risk of them telling HYDRA was too great– and Pepper's reaction only proved that Tony had been *right* to be wary.

“Loki is being tortured right now,” Tony told her darkly. “And you had best be assured that every mark on his skin will be answered for.”

Then JARVIS disconnected the call, and the three men turned back to each other with grim expressions. Rhodes looked like he didn't believe Tony needed to be so harsh, but thankfully, he didn't say a thing.

With Pepper's silence assured and the Iron Legion immediately getting underway, they moved on to the details of their plan, crowding around the centre of the living room where JARVIS projected holograms to help them with their strategising.

“There are four rings left that are not in your possession,” JARVIS explained, pulling up an image of the globe along with the marks that showed the location of each of the Makluan rings. Most of the pinpoints were in Italy – sitting right in their attic, in fact – while one remained in DC, one in China, one in Singapore, and one... in Afghanistan.

“I'll take that one,” Barnes said, pointing without a single scrap of hesitation.

“No, you're going after *that* one,” Tony said, pointing to a different location entirely. “The last one Loki and I got out of China wasn't even fortified– the Ten Rings hadn't found it yet. That will likely be the safest, even if it *is* in a facility. JARVIS has confirmed that the ring in Singapore is in a SHIELD base, and Afghanistan will be with the Ten Rings. This is your first time out in the field since... well, *since*. Don't push yourself until you *have* to.”

“Do you really want to go to Afghanistan to face the Ten Rings?” Barnes asked him, not even commenting on anything else that Tony had said– and the fact that Tony didn't immediately respond was more than enough of an answer. “I *am* going after that one. You aren't going to change my mind.”

“Are you saying that I couldn't handle it?”

“No,” Barnes said. “I'm saying that you don't need to. Don't push yourself until you have to, Tony.”

Tony considered him for a moment longer before bowing his head, uncharacteristically not even complaining about having his own words used against him. Perhaps it was that he saw

the logic— perhaps it was the knowledge of exactly what hung in the balance, but Tony gave in far more easily than Barnes had ever seen.

“Fine. But you’re going to be flying in one of the suits. JARVIS is already repairing the damage done to the third, and the Legion will be here in time. I’m not going to let you go without backup.”

Normally, the use of that word – *let* – would have rubbed Barnes the wrong way, but... he knew that Tony was only doing this because he wanted Barnes to be *safe*. So, he didn’t argue either— he simply inclined his head, and silently hoped that he wouldn’t have to fly the damn thing for long. It wasn’t that he was worried, he just... wasn’t the biggest fan of heights.

“And *you’ll* go to China,” Tony said, turning his gaze on Rhodes. “I’ll take Singapore. We all hit at the same time, so they don’t have the chance to talk to each other— and so that any attempts by HYDRA to bring in reinforcements will need to be split.”

“Won’t it let them know we’re coming?” Rhodes asked. “It’ll mean less backup for now, but when we attack the Triskelion... won’t this mean that they’ll be ready for us?”

Barnes arched a brow, because— well, Rhodes was right. But when he turned to face Tony, he didn’t see the reaction that he had been expecting.

“Yes,” Tony said, flashing his teeth with the viciousness of his snarl. “Oh yes, it will.”



Barnes did *not* understand how Tony managed to spend more than five minutes in one of these fucking suits without getting a headache.

The numbers and information flickering over the HUD was all just too much at once. Even for someone who had trained to always be alert and on the ball, always taking note of everything around him, the onslaught of information was simply overwhelming. The pinpricks of data and the constant movement required a mind capable of taking in twenty different pieces of information at once, then processing them with a kind of speed that just shouldn’t be possible and *then* making a split-second decision as to what to do next. Well... Barnes supposed it required a mind like Tony’s— which, unfortunately, Barnes did not have.

Thankfully though, JARVIS was more than capable of piloting, so Barnes just closed his eyes and waited for the trip to be over.

It didn’t take as long as Barnes had expected— the suit shot through the air at a speed far quicker than anything else Barnes had ever flown. When JARVIS told him that they were approaching, he opened his eyes and looked past the HUD as best he could.

They were flying over a ruined town, the walls of the broken buildings only half standing and the streets littered with rubble. There didn’t seem to be a person in sight— at least until they reached the outskirts, and then they came across a compound that was teeming with life. There were jeeps filled with weapons, and plenty of men with plenty of guns.

“That’s it, huh?” Barnes asked.

JARVIS confirmed it, and landed far enough away from the compound that they were out of sight– though the three other suits that had flown with them kept going to take position elsewhere.

Barnes got out of the armour immediately, and put on the gauntlets that Tony had given him after fitting his new arm, and then he slid the high-tech glasses over his eyes. The glasses were like a watered-down version of the HUD– not nearly as much information as Tony would receive while fighting, but enough for JARVIS to be able to help out where he could. It also meant that JARVIS would be able to lead Barnes toward the ring.

He had everything he could need to make his move, including far better back-up than he’d ever had in the past, and yet... as he stared down at the grey gauntlets on his hands that had once been used to fight *against* him, and at the black and silver arm he had been gifted... Barnes found himself hesitating.

Over the past *seven decades*, Barnes had been forced to do things that he had no control over. His strings had been pulled like a marionette’s, his mind wiped clean until all that was left was obedience. That was no longer the case, he had escaped from all the violence and blood, and yet... here he was, about to dive right back into it.

But this time, it was *different*.

This would be the first time in far too long that he would be fighting by choice– that he would be fighting for something he *wanted* to fight for.

Loki was in danger, and Barnes... well. He was going to fight right up until the end to make sure that Tony and Loki could be reunited, and could get the long, peaceful life that they deserved.

So, after indicating for JARVIS to spread out as per the plan, he began to move forward.

It was almost too easy, to fall back into this. To stick to the shadows even though the sun was high in the sky– to take down the patrolling guards and the sentries with a quick broken neck, getting over the side wall of the compound with no noise and no fuss. Yet he found that he was right– this wasn’t the same as before. He didn’t feel as empty, as mechanical as he had while he was the Winter Soldier, but... he didn’t feel as he would have before all of that, either. He wasn’t exactly remorseful given the circumstance, but nor was he emotionless– and with every terrorist he cut down, he knew he was getting closer to the ring– and closer to his goal.

He heard the moment JARVIS attacked the front of the compound even before the AI let him know, the sounds of gunfire and screaming erupting explosively– only at the front at first, but then also at the back and around the other side. JARVIS would be going for *damage*, pressing forward with all the power he had and forcing everyone he could back toward Barnes.

It meant that Barnes had a lot more stragglers to deal with before he could reach his goal, but his repulsors cut them all down without prejudice– and if they managed to get close, then he

crushed them with the unbridled power of his new arm.

It didn't take long before the man standing in the corridor before Barnes was the one he was looking for, having been fleeing JARVIS' wrath. He stopped when he saw Barnes, and glanced at the corpse that Barnes had only just dropped at his feet—

Then, without an inch of hesitation, the man lifted his left fist with his elbow locked straight so that his knuckles were pointed directly at Barnes— and then the ring he was wearing glowed a bright green, and a blast of pure energy exploded outward and flew right toward Barnes.

There was no cover to take— nothing to duck behind, nowhere to go. So Barnes did the only thing that he could— he lifted his left arm and fired a repulsor—

But the repulsor just passed straight through it, and the blast kept hurtling forward—

Barnes' eyes widened—

The blast connected with his still outstretched arm—

And then it parted in the middle, the green energy passing by either side of him without harming a single hair on his head— and then it crashed into the wall at the end of the corridor, blowing it to nothing but rubble.

Barnes let go of the heavy breath he had been holding as he stared down at his arm. It had been matte black before, with silver lines in the same pattern as the suit of armour he had flown in— but now there were bright green runes running along those lines, shining brightly with a power that Barnes recognised immediately.

Seiðr, Loki called it—

And as Barnes realised what that meant, he felt something lift up inside him even as he tilted his head to meet the terrorist's terrified gaze with a cocky smirk.

When Tony had started building it, he hadn't even known whether Barnes would say yes to the arm. And yet... not only had Tony built this with his own two hands, but Loki had imbued it with a protective enchantment that would make sure he didn't come to harm from attacks such as these. Barnes wondered if Loki had done it from the start, or if it was something that had been added later, when they had all started to grow a little closer— but hell, it didn't matter, because either way Loki had done something he didn't need to do, and in the process had saved Barnes' life. It wasn't the first time Loki had saved him, and Barnes had the feeling that it wouldn't be the last.

Feeling a sudden surge of determination, Barnes charged forward with a snarl. The terrorist kept shooting energy blasts at him but just like the first, they passed by without even touching him—

And then Barnes slammed the terrorist against the wall, his metal forearm pressing hard against the man's throat. Before he could try to use the ring again, Barnes used his other hand

to grab the man's wrist *hard*, and then he slammed it against the wall above the terrorist's head once, twice, three times—

The man's wrist *cracked* so loudly that Barnes could hear it over the broken scream.

The terrorist was still struggling, but only weakly now. His uninjured hand was tugging at Barnes' metal arm, but Barnes hardly took any notice of it. He didn't say a word as he slid the ring off the now limp finger, and the man's eyes widened further, almost bulging out of his head with the pain.

His lips parted, as if he were going to plead— but before he had the chance Barnes shoved his arm forward in a sudden, hard jerk, crushing carotid, windpipe, and vertebrae in one movement. Then he turned away, leaving the corpse to sink down to the ground.

“How are we going, JARVIS?” he asked, tapping the side of his glasses.

“Almost done, Mr Barnes,” JARVIS replied. “You have the ring, and there are only a few members of the Ten Rings left.”

Barnes nodded, and continued his way through the compound. He didn't encounter anyone else until he came upon the black armour, which opened up for him to step inside.

“Finish up here, JARVIS,” Barnes said. “I'll meet you back at home.”

“Of course,” JARVIS said— and then, because he took after his creator in more ways than one, he added— “Although, I am already there.”

Barnes snorted at that— and then promptly closed his eyes again as the suit took off, soaring over the now still compound and back toward the Italian countryside.

—•—

Barnes was the first to arrive back at the house, and after a warm shower he busied himself with finishing the cake batter that he had left in the fridge. He'd added extra honey to it, hoping to increase the sweetness and perhaps replicate the taste of the bananas that he'd *known*. Honestly, the fact that Tony didn't know what a *real* banana tasted like was almost as much of a tragedy as anything else that had happened.

(Not, of course, that Barnes would ever voice such a thing out loud.)

He was just sliding the cake into the oven when JARVIS let him know that Rhodes had arrived back, and the other man walked into the kitchen just as Barnes was hanging the yellow apron on its hook by the fridge.

When he turned back, Rhodes was staring at him with an odd expression.

Barnes didn't bother saying anything, and simply went to turn on the coffee machine. The silence was a little awkward, but Barnes had the impression that it was bothering the other man more than it was bothering him— and Rhodes finally broke it when Barnes sat down in front of him with two steaming mugs of hot chocolate.

“Why are you doing this?” Rhodes asked, hardly even glancing to the mug that Barnes pushed in his direction.

“Because I thought you might be thirsty?” Barnes said. He knew he was being purposefully obtuse, but he wanted Rhodes to be clear. Barnes wasn’t entirely up on all the details of what had happened between Rhodes and Tony, and he knew that he wouldn’t get anything more by running his mouth.

“You know that isn’t what I meant,” Rhodes tried. “Come on. How did you end up with Tony and Loki?”

“I tried to kill them,” Barnes said simply. Rhodes’ eyes widened at that before setting into a hard stare, and Barnes found himself rather amused. Still, his voice was low as he continued. “Don’t look so offended. You did too, if I recall correctly. There can’t be too many people in the world who haven’t.”

“I didn’t know who Tony was at the time,” Rhodes said defensively.

“Neither did I, really,” Barnes shrugged. “But then, I didn’t know who *I* was, either.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You don’t need to.” Barnes considered him for a moment, taking note of the tightness around Rhodes’ eyes which betrayed his suspicion. He supposed it must be difficult for Rhodes to realise that, at least in the current moment, Tony trusted Barnes more than him—but Barnes didn’t see the need to comment on it. They both knew it was the truth.

“I suppose not,” Rhodes sighed, echoing Barnes’ thoughts. “Tony trusts you.”

“He trusts Loki too,” Barnes pointed out instantly.

“I know,” Rhodes groaned— but Barnes got the impression that Rhodes’ tone wasn’t due to disagreement, or even disdain. It seemed like he wanted to say something else, but wasn’t sure how— so Barnes just took a sip of his drink, and waited.

He was surprised when Rhodes did the same, but... he supposed that Rhodes truly must have made that conscious decision to really trust Tony’s judgement. (Or maybe he just understood that if Barnes was going to kill him, it wouldn’t be by poisoning his hot chocolate. Honestly, what a *waste* that would be.)

They stayed in silence for a while, long enough that Barnes took the cake from the oven in the interim, and then set it out to cool. Rhodes watched his movements with a touch of incredulity, and Barnes couldn’t help but be a little amused. What, did Rhodes think that they spent their time only plotting revenge, and didn’t do things as simple as make food?

Although, to be fair, Barnes supposed it almost surprised himself that he had managed to find something of a life here— because it may be unconventional, but it was still *far* closer to normal than anything that Barnes had ever thought he would be able to have ever again.

“Just tell me,” Rhodes sighed, finally breaking the silence. “Is it... real?”

Barnes frowned, glancing down to his cake. “Is what real?” Honestly, if Rhodes said something about the quality of the bananas, he was going to have another argument on his hands—

“The thing between Tony and Loki,” Rhodes said. *Oh, right.* “I mean— look—” Rhodes stopped himself, and pressed his lips together for a moment in thought before continuing. “I know that Tony loves him, and I know that he loves Tony, I could see that clear as day. But I know Tony, and I know he has a habit of— of doing things for the people he cares about that pushes him beyond his limits, because he doesn’t think that he’s good enough. And I’m not saying we shouldn’t try everything now to get Loki back, I just... wanted to get an outside opinion, I suppose. And maybe *real* was the wrong word to use.”

“What would you use, then?” Barnes asked, honestly curious, now.

“Balanced?” Rhodes winced. “I don’t know, I just... It’s hard for me to take in. I just need to hear that Tony’s all right from someone that isn’t Tony.”

Barnes sighed at that. “If you saw the pair of them together, it wouldn’t take you long at all to see that,” he said. “Those two love each other more than should be healthy for them, but they’re *making* it into something healthy. They love each other enough to want to be the best they can be, and you definitely don’t have to worry about him thinking he isn’t good enough.” The corner of Barnes’ mouth lifted up in half a smile. “I know for a fact that Loki makes sure he *knows* he is.”

Rhodes’ expression softened slightly at that— and even if he did not yet trust Barnes’ word, Barnes was sure he’d at least said enough to assuage him of that concern.

“Well, this is a depressing conversation.”

Barnes and Rhodes both snapped their gaze to the door to see Tony entering, looking a little weary but mostly all right.

“Awesome,” Tony said, slumping down on a stool at the kitchen bench. “You made cake.”

There was a cut on his temple that had already clotted, a small rivulet of blood dried down the side of his face. And Barnes knew that if Loki were here, he would take Tony’s face between his hands and run his fingers over the wound, his skin sparking with healing seiðr.

Tony would complain of course, and Loki would admonish him for getting hurt— but they would both do so in that fond, adoring tone that Barnes had come to know so well. It almost hurt to think about.

From the absent look in Tony’s eye, Barnes couldn’t help but wonder if Tony was thinking about the same thing— or perhaps if he was trying to distance himself from it all.

Deciding that a change of subject was probably needed, Barnes placed the cake onto a plate, grabbed a knife, and then asked about how things had gone in China and Singapore.

Thankfully, it seemed that neither of the others had much trouble collecting their rings. Rhodes had encountered little trouble at all while fetching his— the Ten Rings cell had been small, and they had surrendered the moment they saw five of Tony’s suits landing in front of their warehouse, giving over the red ring without Rhodes even having the chance to work out what it did. Tony, on the other hand, had a slightly more interesting story to tell— even if he told it in a clipped, impatient tone, not even smiling when he explained how the lightning from the yellow ring had given his suit more charge. He had taken more suits than Rhodes and Barnes, and the lightning from the lead agent who had been overly enthusiastic to be the one to take down the Iron Shadow had only made it *easier* for him to destroy the base and retrieve his prize.

“So, we have all the rings, then,” Rhodes said after swallowing down a large bite of banana cake. “All the ones we can get, anyway. Does that mean we’re ready?”

Tony drew in a breath. “JARVIS?”

“The information is collated, Sir, and I am standing by to release it,” JARVIS replied. “I am ready when you are.”

“And the other Avengers?” Tony asked.

“They are all in the Tower. They are being informed of your most recent attacks as we speak.”

Tony’s expression hardened at that, and Barnes knew that they would be leaving without any further delay.

Good.

When Tony rose in his seat, Barnes and Rhodes followed him up to the attic. It was the first time that Barnes had been up there, and his eyes were immediately drawn to the small pile of rings in the middle of the dusty ground. He knew what pain they were capable of causing, but he did not feel as hostile toward them as he knew Tony did. After all, Loki had been able to use the pink ring to help Barnes regain control over his own mind, and to categorise his memories into those that were his own, and those that had been forced upon him first by the Soviets, and then HYDRA. Loki had helped him block out his memory of the trigger words so that he could not be used as an unwilling weapon ever again— so that he could be his own person. It was something that he would be forever grateful for.

“Nine rings,” Tony said, staring down at them all with distaste. “We’re only missing the one, and it’s going to be where we’re going. So I guess... that’s three each.”

“No,” Barnes said instantly, shaking his head and backing away. He didn’t hate them as much as Tony, but the thought still sat the wrong way. “No, I don’t want—”

“I’m not going to make you,” Tony cut in. “But you *know* how outnumbered we’re going to be. Even if we can get some of the others on our side, we’re going up against the whole of SHIELD, the whole of *HYDRA*. If we’re going to win, if we’re going to save Loki, then you *know* we need all the firepower we can get.”

“I thought you didn’t even like these things,” Barnes said.

“I don’t,” Tony replied. “But I... I need to get Loki back, Barnes. I need him to be *safe*.” Tony’s voice finally cracked on that last syllable, and it was *that* which made Barnes’ resolve begin to crumble.

“Tony,” he sighed.

“We’re going to go in there, we’re going to tear HYDRA apart, and we’re going to *get Loki back*,” Tony insisted. “And when that’s done, we can destroy every last one of these bastard rings, okay? But only *then*, when Loki is here and HYDRA is destroyed.”

Barnes held his gaze for a few moments longer, because... yeah, he understood, didn’t he? Tony was in pain, the kind of pain that Barnes couldn’t even imagine– and all he wanted was for the love of his life to be safe again. Barnes would bet all he had that even revenge was on the peripheral now, that Loki was all that mattered.

And, in the face of that, how could he continue to say no?

“Okay, Tony,” Barnes said. “I’ll do it.”

Rhodes gave his agreement as well, his expression tight and his jaw clenched. They spent a few minutes deciding who should have which rings, and then... well, then there was no more reason to delay. They had done all that they said they would need to before attacking. JARVIS was prepared, and the Avengers were where they wanted them. The suits that hadn’t travelled with them had been painted while they were gone, and JARVIS would be hurriedly finishing up the last few that had been with Tony in Singapore as they spoke. They really were *ready*.

And as Barnes closed his metal hand around his three rings – the hand that he hadn’t asked for, but which had been made for him by Tony and Loki just because they *cared* – he knew that Tony was right.

They were going to bring Loki home. They were going to *win*.

And when all was said and done... well. Maybe the world would be a slightly better place.

Play to kill

It only takes a moment for everything to fall apart.

No matter how perfectly engineered your plan, no matter how many hours it took to conceive and no matter how many contingencies you have in place... No matter how ready you think you are, it will only ever take one mistake. Just one thing that you didn't expect, one person to make one single decision that causes a carefully constructed house of cards to come clattering down to the ground.

It's a universal truth. There will *always* be some kind of weakness that will take only a solitary hit before collapse.

Oh, yes.

Loki *knew* that they had grown overconfident.

He and Anthony had too many victories, too many wins in a row where they had taken down scores of soldiers without injury to themselves. And even if they had not consciously believed themselves to be invincible, there was certainly a notion in their minds that they were on the path to victory, that they were mere *inches* from reaching that final goal.

Of course, it's usually right at the end, right when you start to believe that you're almost there— *that's* when you slip and fall.

It wasn't that Loki and Anthony had believed wholeheartedly in Rhodes' word— what they believed was that if Rhodes betrayed them, they would be more than capable of defending themselves from whatever the other man could throw at them.

They hadn't ever considered that this might be something that could actually *happen*, not since the last time that they had lost a fight, when they had to flee from Kiel.

But from one second to the next the discussion with Rhodes turned from calm negotiation to a vicious mess, with agents pouring from the trees and alien weapons aimed directly in their faces.

Loki had acted quickly and with little thought, throwing himself in front of Anthony and raising a shield to catch the blasts.

And perhaps the smart thing to do in that moment would have been to grab Anthony and *go*, to skywalk to safety while JARVIS dealt with the soldiers with a few well-placed explosives from Anthony's suits— to just *leave* and live to fight another day—

But... Loki had thought they could *win*. His instinct in that moment, honed through too many wins in the field, was not to *run*— but to *fight*.

It was something that Thor would have done. It was stupid and reckless and *arrogant* and had Loki been just that little bit wiser, perhaps he would be holding Anthony in his arms right that very moment.

But instead, Loki was held down to the ground with some kind of tranquilliser running through his veins, bleeding from his side and begging Anthony to leave without him.

There was a moment when Loki hadn't thought that Anthony was going to go. Loki couldn't see Anthony's face in that moment, but he hadn't *needed* to. The connection between them had surged in a manner that should have been impossible without contact, and Loki had known Anthony's fear as if it were his own. He had been able to *feel* the terror, the rabid desperation to get closer, to pull the one he loved most in the world away from the danger, to get him somewhere *safe*—

But then one of the other suits had pulled Anthony away, and Loki had managed to find strength enough to force a single word through their connection— a single word that held so much more emotion than it ever had before.

'Anthony.'

When their gazes met across that clearing, Loki knew that Anthony was in agony. But even through the haze of the drug that the SHIELD agents had forced into his system, even though he was being pressed into the ground, even though the pain arcing through his side was almost blinding—

There was one thing stronger than any of it, and that was Loki's desperate need for *Anthony* to get out of this, for him to be free from all harm.

'Anthony. Go.'

So much could be said so short a time— so much could be said with a single look. He and Anthony were so close now that there was no need for further explanation. They both knew what it was that Loki was trying to say, and they both knew, no matter how much it hurt, that Loki was right.

It's all right. I love you. Be safe.

I'll find you, Loki. I promise.'

And then Anthony was gone, tearing away into the sky and taking a shard of Loki's heart with him.

The agents were snarling and shouting at having lost two of their targets, shooting their weapons into the sky. Someone else might have been shouting as well— Anthony's Ms Potts, perhaps, trying to tell SHIELD that they had made a mistake and that they needed to *stop* trying to shoot Anthony out of the sky.

But Loki just let it all go as the drug finally became too much— no longer needing to fight, now that Anthony was gone.

“All right, *monster*,” Rumlow snarled, leaning in so close that Loki could feel drops of spit hitting his face. “Time to take you back to your cage.”

And then, the last thing Loki saw was the butt of Rumlow’s Chitauri weapon heading toward his temple.



When Loki woke up, he was in a cell.

It was a familiar enough situation that it didn’t take Loki too long to get his bearings, even though his head was pounding with the force of a herd of stampeding bilgesnipe. It must have been the lingering effect of the sedative, for it wasn’t unlike the sensation of waking up after a night of too much mead— though the pain felt increased thousandfold.

Still, he forced his eyes to open so that he could see properly where he was, so that there would hopefully be less chance of any unpleasant surprises.

Thankfully, the cell looked entirely different than the one that Loki had spent so very long inside, alone and in pain and starving away to nothing. It wasn’t white to begin with, the walls and floor both a flat grey. The cell itself was just as empty but smaller in size than the one he’d had in Turkey, but it didn’t entirely feel that way, since one of the walls was left open so that any visitors would be able to view inside— much like the cells in Asgard’s dungeons, come to think of it. The window appeared to be glass, but there was a slight shimmer to it which removed any intention Loki had of touching it— even if he had felt capable of moving. He was sure they would not have placed him somewhere which was easy for him to break out of, and for the moment, while he was injured, he would rather remain cautious.

Because yes, the injury was actually rather serious. Loki supposed that at least one good thing about the raging headache was that it was a distraction from the pain in his side. It had already begun to heal, but Loki knew all too well that he would recover from a wound inflicted by Chitauri technology than if the gun had been of Midgardian origin.

His injury was certainly the biggest worry— even more so than the restraints he had been placed in. The manacles around his wrists and ankles were not quite the same as those that had been used by the Ten Rings— there would be no freezing his way out of these. They were inscribed with the same runes which kept his seiðr trapped inside his body, but they were made of a stronger material. A material which, if Loki was correct in his assessment, was the same as that which formed Captain America’s shield. Perhaps Loki could have broken them with full use of his seiðr, but without it, the manacles would have to stay where they were.

But apart from the manacles on his wrists and ankles, Loki was not otherwise restrained— he could move freely enough, so long as the movements didn’t pull at his injury. If he wanted, he could easily have made it over to the barrier— but he didn’t want to risk it, not when there was still blood seeping through the ruined leather of his light armour.

Luckily, though, the way that the manacles worked meant that Loki could use some of his seiðr to fix his wound— at least enough so that he could move around without needing to

worry about puncturing a lung. He had always found it difficult to heal himself, and he was rather low on energy— but it wasn't like he didn't have the time to work on it. There was a chance that he would be sitting in his cell for quite a fair while.

Past experience suggested that they wouldn't try to hurt him directly, not until they believed he could not hurt them back. The camera Loki could see on the other side of the barrier beside a speaker for the comms system seemed to support that fact. They would clearly be keeping a close eye on him, waiting for him to become weak enough so that they could start the real torture without fear of him attacking them in return.

Loki just had to believe that he wouldn't still be in the cell *that* long—

Because while Loki hoped with all his heart that Anthony would not do something reckless, he also knew that Anthony would not allow him to remain abandoned here. Anthony had promised to find him. He would come, and when he did— one way or another, Loki would not be returning to his cell.

So if SHIELD planned on waiting, then Loki wouldn't fight. He would use the time to recuperate, to gather his strength and to *heal* so that he would be prepared to fight when Anthony arrived. And, in the best case scenario... SHIELD would not realise the error in stalling, and Loki would have all the time necessary.

And as he settled back against the wall of the cell, his hands still pressing against his injured side, Loki allowed his gaze to rest on the lens of the camera with what he hoped was an intimidating glare— and then he prepared for a long and — hopefully — boring wait.

—•—

Loki couldn't say how long it was before he received his first visitor. Certainly several hours, and perhaps a day— but likely no more than that. To be honest, he had rather expected that it would be at least a week before he saw his first face. He'd gone several weeks at a time without contact with the Ten Rings, after all.

But the agent who had been the one to knock Loki out — Rumlow, Loki remembered — walked in with a knife in his hands and a dead look in his eyes that Loki met with the same spiteful expression he'd been staring at the camera with since he had arrived.

“Creep,” Rumlow said.

Loki didn't give him the satisfaction of a response— and he even hid his *own* satisfaction at seeing the way that Rumlow looked visibly uncomfortable under Loki's gaze.

Rumlow's jaw tightened as he flicked his knife in his hands— but if the movement was meant to be threatening, then it truly wasn't doing a very good job.

“Where is Tony Stark?” Rumlow asked.

Loki didn't answer.

“Where have you been hiding? Why is he attacking SHIELD bases? What do you *know*?”

With every question, Rumlow seemed to grow angrier— and Loki almost began to wonder if this would be it, if Rumlow would snap and break the mould, would make the mistake of lashing out before Loki was weakened—

But Rumlow only glared at him for a few moments before walking away, leaving Loki alone once more.

Well then.

It would seem it was to be the waiting game, after all.

—•—

The problem with waiting in nothingness is that it gives you far too much time to think. Loki could stare at the camera and try to zone out as much as he wanted, but inside his head he couldn't find peace.

He couldn't continue with a plan to get free beyond what he already had, not when he didn't know what was happening on the outside. And without anything to distract him...

Every part of his body was crying out for Anthony, every fragment of thought laced with the ache of not having Anthony beside him. It really was harder than anything else, a torment all on its own— because Loki had spent so very long knowing every movement Anthony made, that now he felt like he could hardly breathe without him.

To know that Anthony could be danger but, being unable to *see* whether or not he was safe, and spending every moment imaging all manner of terrible things that could have befallen him was worse than any lab table SHIELD could have strapped him to, worse than any length of time they could leave him in madness for.

Yes, Loki knew that Anthony was more than capable of defending himself. He *knew* that. But logic couldn't fight against fear, and it couldn't fight against the crippling knowledge that Anthony *was* in danger— or would be soon, if he wasn't already.

And to make things — well, to be honest, Loki wasn't sure if it *did* make things worse, or if it made things better — Loki could still feel Anthony's fear, like an itch in the back of his mind. It wasn't anything clear or concrete, because they were *much* too far apart for that— but the fact that Loki could feel anything at all from such a distance must mean that it would be near crippling for Anthony himself.

It made Loki want to either curl into a ball and fall apart, or to throw himself at the barrier and try and force his way out no matter the cost, because— if he was without Anthony, then what was the *point* of trying to get out cleanly? What did matter, if being stuck in the cell meant being stuck alone?

Every breath was a trial, every heartbeat a torture.

But that camera was still watching him, so he had to force his expression to remain as unforgiving as possible, even when he felt like his insides were tearing themselves to shreds.

At least... if Loki could feel him, then that meant Anthony was *alive*. So long as that was true, then Loki would withstand anything that SHIELD could do to him— and he would remain strong, because Anthony had promised to come for him.

And Loki would be ready when he did.



Loki could honestly say that he did not expect Thor to come for a visit, but he made sure not to allow his surprise to show on his face. He kept his expression the same as ever, and did not even bother getting to his feet when Thor approached the glass.

“Loki,” Thor said, his voice cracking on the second syllable, his expression forlorn as his gaze panned over Loki’s form— and over the dried blood that still stained the floor.

Loki felt his jaw clench, and he had to look away. How could Thor feel sorry *now*, after everything that he had done?

“Why are you still in those clothes?” Thor asked. “You are—”

“Filthy?” Loki snapped— unable to keep his silence when even just the *sight* of Thor was enough to have anger bubbling up inside his throat. Perhaps he had been a little too hasty when he had told Anthony he would be able to keep his temper when speaking with Thor— but then, he had never considered that he wouldn’t have Anthony by his side. “You don’t think that I’m like this by *choice*, do you?”

Thor’s brow furrowed. “What do you—”

“I have not been out of this cell since I arrived,” Loki hissed. “And I do not have access to my seiðr. How was I supposed to be able to clean myself, Thor?”

“You haven’t... but surely someone brought you clothes?” Thor asked, sounding rather terribly confused.

“Clothes?” Loki scoffed. “They have not even brought me *food*. I suppose they believe that since I went several months without sustenance in the tender care of their allies that they do not need to feed me now until... what is that holiday Midgardians use for examples such as these? Christmas?”

“*What?*” Thor asked again, his eyes going wide. “Loki— what do you mean? Surely they—”

“Do you not believe me?” Loki asked. Then he huffed. “Well, of course you don’t, why would you?”

Thor seemed to think on something for a long moment, his brow furrowing as if it hurt to do so. Then, he moved right up to the edge of the barrier and tapped something into the wall— and a piece of the window slid to the side to allow Thor to enter. Loki watched in surprise— and was a little disappointed when it slid shut again the moment Thor was inside.

“I do not know what to believe,” Thor said, speaking slowly as he held up his hands— and Loki wondered if Thor meant his action of coming into the cell to be a sign of *peace*. “I knew that there was something wrong with all of this, I *knew* it. But Loki... you have been killing mortals.”

“I remember a time when you would have called that a badge of honour,” Loki muttered.

“That time is long past—”

“I thought we told you to go to SHIELD for answers,” Loki hissed. “I suppose you do not think enough of me to try even that.”

Loki, of course, knew that Thor *had*, because JARVIS had told him and Anthony all about it. But Thor wasn't to know that— and he hurried to give his own explanation, just as Loki had hoped he would.

“I spoke with Director Fury,” Thor tried. “I did what your Iron Shadow suggested—”

“And?” Loki asked.

“He would not tell me much, so I decided to look into it myself. Loki, there is something dark in SHIELD, even Colonel Rhodes agrees—”

“Oh, congratulations,” Loki interrupted dryly. “You have uncovered the obvious. *Of course* there is something dark in SHIELD, Thor, what else did you think *we* were trying to fight against? And now that they have me here again, they'll torture me for information, and they'll try to get their hands on my seiðr. And if it breaks me to do it, then they'll see it as all the better.”

Loki tried not to glance at the camera, no matter how much he wanted to. He knew that it likely would not be long before SHIELD decided that this conversation was too dangerous and agents barged in to interrupt. Or perhaps... they were waiting to see what Loki would say, to see how much they knew. But that would mean they didn't mind Thor knowing this information, and that was a little worrying in itself.

“You're here because you have committed crimes by Midgardian law,” Thor said— though he didn't even sound like he was convinced of it himself. “They're not going to torture you—”

“Aren't they?” Loki asked. “I suppose the Midgardian definition for torture must be *vastly* different to our own then, if what they did to me last time does not qualify.”

Thor was frowning again, though there was something new in his gaze now which made Loki wonder if he was actually making headway.

“Loki,” Thor said, his tone one that suggested he actually wanted to *listen*. “What do you mean?”

“They did this to me before, Thor,” Loki hissed. “They know that I am stronger than them. They will keep me in here for as long as is necessary for me to lose all of my strength, leave me to rot without food or water until I am but a husk. Then they will strap me down in a lab

and cut me away piece by piece, taking and *taking* until there is nothing left of me, until I am a mere *conduit* for the power that they wish to steal.”

Thor’s expression was no longer confused– he looked *thunderous*, and Loki knew now that finally, *finally*, Thor believed him.

And yet, Loki almost felt... numb about it.

He was glad that it might be a stepping stone on the route to getting back to Anthony, but otherwise... nothing. He remembered what Anthony had said, about Thor not even deserving Loki’s civility. And Loki had readily admitted then that he did not care about Thor’s approval. But to feel it now was almost a little jarring, and yet Loki couldn’t help but be glad for it as he continued his explanation.

“I know how this works, because I have been through it all before. My only relief is knowing that at least this time, Anthony is not here to suffer through it all with me.”

“Anthony?” Thor asked sharply. “Who do you—”

“Don’t be so naïve, Thor,” Loki snapped. “SHIELD knows who it is that’s been working with me, and surely you do as well.”

“We thought that he must have fixed those armours for you, but we didn’t think that he was ___”

“Fixed them *for* me?” Loki interrupted. “Oh, no. He’s *wearing* them. You’ll see. It’s only a matter of time before he tears this place down to get me out of here.”

“Of course,” Thor muttered. “I should have known the moment he called me Rapunzel.” Then his eyes flashed as he looked up. “What do you mean, tear this place down? Loki, there are good people here—”

“SHIELD isn’t what they seem, Thor,” Loki hissed. “You’re right that there’s something wrong. They have a rot growing inside them, right down to the root, and the *only* way to fix this is to burn them to the ground.”

Thor watched him in silence for a long moment, processing– but when he reached his conclusion, it wasn’t one that Loki could have predicted. And it *certainly* wasn’t one that Loki wanted.

“If that *is* true,” Thor said, his voice low – and Loki felt a stab of annoyance at that *if*, because of course Thor *still* did not entirely trust his judgement – “And given all that you have said has happened... you cannot stay here.”

If Anthony had been there in that moment, Loki knew the exact expression he would have worn in response to such an observation, the exact look of exasperation which would have been paired with an utterance of “*No shit, Sherlock.*” But Loki only rolled his eyes.

“I would love to go back home, Thor, but I’m afraid I’m a little confined at the moment.”

“*Home*,” Thor echoed. “Exactly. Loki, I will go and speak to father, I will make him take back the original deal, *make* the humans send you home. If he knew, I’m sure he would have already put a stop to all of this.”

Loki felt a stab of dread in his gut at that, and he was quick to counter the idea. “Odin *knows* what happened to me,” he said. “Do you really think that over this past year, neither he nor Heimdall have looked down on me *once*? You know how they like to gloat, there is not a chance that they do not know what happened to me when I was with the Ten Rings—”

“The Ten Rings?” Thor asked. “I thought *SHIELD* was holding you prisoner—”

“They handed me off to people who were less worried about getting their image bloodied,” Loki muttered. “*Allies* who would leap at the opportunity to tear me apart and use my seiðr as a battery for their machines.”

Thor shook his head. “Either way, we need to get you away from here. I will make father see, and I will bring you back home to Asgard. Even if you are sent to the dungeons, you will *not* be treated the way that these humans have—”

“I’m not leaving Midgard,” Loki hissed. “You cannot make me. I will rip this place apart with my *fingernails* before I let you take me away from this realm!”

The very thought of being on another realm, of being a whole *universe* away from Anthony, leaving him behind to finish the fight himself—

It ripped and tore and *rent* a hole right through Loki’s soul. He would not go.

He would *not*.

“You’ll be safer on Asgard,” Thor insisted. “No one will hurt you there—”

“I am *not leaving Midgard*—”

“Why not?” Thor asked, growing angry himself as he took a step closer. “Are you still hoping to rule it? Is that your plan? To wait until Stark has helped you destroy SHIELD, and then to turn and stab him in the back—”

“How *dare* you?”

“Loki, this is for the best!” Thor snapped, reaching out to grab Loki’s arm—

Loki snarled and pulled away— and when Thor wouldn’t let go he pushed forward instead, slamming his shoulder into Thor’s chest. Thor gasped as the wind was knocked out of him, and Loki used that opportunity to lash out with the chain between his hands—

But Thor grabbed both of his arms once again and held on tight, shoving Loki backward in a manner that pulled at his still healing injury. And before Loki could recover, there was a cacophony of noise as agents spilled out into the area beyond the cell, and the small door in the barrier was opened again to allow Rumlow and a verifiable *horde* of STRIKE agents inside.

“Hold him,” Rumlow ordered, though his eyes remained on Loki as he lifted the device in his hands—

And Loki took an instinctive step back, every cell in his body recoiling.

“No,” Thor said, angling his body slightly in front of Loki’s— and to be honest, Loki didn’t really mind. “That is not necessary. He already cannot use his seiðr.”

“Orders from above,” Rumlow said firmly. “They don’t want him talking.”

Thor’s eyes flickered to the muzzle Rumlow held in his hands— and then he glanced back to Loki. Loki didn’t know what his face must look like— but it must have been a sight, because something in Thor’s gaze hardened in a way that Loki had not seen in years.

“Step aside, Thor,” Rumlow said. “I won’t ask again.”

For a moment, Loki thought that Thor wasn’t going to do it. After all, if Thor decided now that he was going to stand by Loki’s side, then there wouldn’t be much that Rumlow and the other agents would be able to do to stop him. These men might have been able to take Loki down, but they’d had the element of surprise— and Loki had been more concerned about Anthony’s safety than his own. If they tried to fight Thor now, then Loki was rather sure that the outcome would be very different for all of them.

One decision.

One moment—

And then Thor bowed his head, stepping aside to let the STRIKE team pass.

Loki snapped and snarled as they held his shoulders and brought the muzzle to his face, feeling like a wild animal but— in that moment, he was rather incapable of being anything else.

And when the muzzle clicked into place over his mouth, Loki had to swallow down the bile that was raising up his throat lest it turn into something that he might choke on. He felt like he was back where he had started, like everything that had happened had merely been a dream cooked up in a desperate mind, and that he was still in that first cell—

No.

No, he wasn’t, because Anthony was still out there, Anthony was still safe. He *wasn’t* back at the beginning because everything that had happened in the meantime made a *difference*.

He’d lived through worse than this before. All he had to do was suffer for a little longer, just until they gave him an opportunity— or just until Anthony came to get him.

The worst that they could do right now was hurt him. When he got free, he would be able to do so much worse than that to them.

This was a *game*, that was all. He only had to wait for them to make one, single mistake, and then he could bring everything down around *their* heads.

Although, there was a chance that their mistake had already been made—Loki just had to hope that Thor was capable of realising that if SHIELD didn't want him talking—it was because what Loki had been saying was the *truth*.

And given the way that Thor's fists were clenched tightly enough to turn his knuckles white as he left with the STRIKE team, Loki thought that there was a chance.

—•—

You know what would be nice? If jailors could learn to knock. Loki knew that the method of just barging in worked well enough when they were actively coming to inflict actual torture, but... When the visits involved a few questions, waving a few pieces of food around and then leaving again, it was just... *boring*.

As he'd told Thor, he knew exactly *why* things were going this way— it was how they had the last time, after all. But that didn't mean that it wasn't incredibly tedious, or that he didn't just feel *annoyed* when they charged in just when he had decided to try and settle himself down to sleep.

He had been leaning against the back wall of his cell and was just closing his eyes when the room exploded with the sound of a dozen thundering feet, and Loki had only just looked up in surprise when Rumlow and five other agents came to a stop at his window, all of them holding large guns capable of a *lot* of damage.

And, actually, why was it always Rumlow? Did the STRIKE team not have anything better to do? Or should Loki just be flattered that SHIELD thought it necessary to have their elite force act as his babysitters while they waited for him to grow weak and hungry enough for them to start more physical torture?

Ah yes. How very brave of them that was.

“What are you doing, Loki?” Rumlow snarled by way of greeting, hefting his gun in his hands.

Loki didn't bother getting up, or even attempting to give any kind of answer.

He simply raised his brows.

Rumlow didn't honestly expect a verbal reply, did he? When Loki's mouth was clamped shut under the Nornsorsaken muzzle?

Loki was almost surprised when Rumlow actually seemed to notice the problem. He growled something under his breath as he handed his gun over to one of the other agents, and then he tapped at the wall to the side of Loki's window. Just as it had when Thor had come in, a section of the window slid away— and then the moment that Rumlow was inside it closed up once more.

The agents who remained on the other side of the barrier kept their Chitauri weapons trained on Loki through the glass— which meant... well, either they were doing it as a mere show, or they knew that the weapons would be enough to break through the barrier. *Interesting.*

Rumlow came closer, but he paused before stepping within reaching distance.

“Turn around,” he ordered.

Loki sighed as he got back to his feet, turning around to face the wall so that Rumlow could remove his muzzle. He supposed that he should be glad he was at least being allowed that— perhaps Rumlow just had not thought of giving Loki some writing implements. Either way, Loki wasn’t about to suggest it.

The moment that the muzzle was removed, Rumlow moved back away in a hurry, and Loki turned once more to face him.

“I do not understand what it is you think I have done,” Loki said, his voice a little hoarse and his lips feeling dry and cracked. He inclined his head toward the camera as he said, “You have been watching me.”

“Don’t play with me,” Rumlow snapped. “There have been bursts of green energy that look a lot like your magic along the east bridge, and they have already taken down one quinjet. If it’s not you, then you *know* what it is. So tell me— what are you *doing*?”

“Perhaps that’s my rescue,” Loki said easily. “I believe you *have* seen what the Iron Shadow’s repulsors look like—”

“This is different,” Rumlow snapped. “We know repulsor tech, and this *aint it*. Tell the truth. Now.”

“Asking a god of lies to tell the truth,” Loki mused. “How quaint.”

“I told you to stop playing games,” Rumlow hissed— and despite the way that it pained his damaged lips, Loki couldn’t help an ugly smile.

“If you don’t think you’ve been playing a game, Agent Rumlow,” Loki whispered, his voice so low that Rumlow unconsciously leaned in a little to be able to hear it. “Then you haven’t been paying enough attention.”

Rumlow’s expression hardened, and his hand fell to grip the knife at his belt that he had rather *stupidly* not left outside with his gun—

And Loki just waited.

Go on. Make a mistake.

The air felt heavy, like all present were holding their breaths—

But then the silence was broken by something impossibly brilliant, something that made Loki’s grin widen with the kind of viciousness he had been *waiting* to let out—

It was [the unmistakable sound of an electric guitar](#), blaring through the speaker system in the start of a song that Loki knew well, a song he would have recognised anywhere— for it was the song that had been playing the very first time he met Anthony.

And it seemed that he was not the only one who knew what it meant.

“No,” Rumlow whispered, his eyes widening—

“Good afternoon, SHIELD!” The voice from the speakers was distorted as it shouted over the music, but it made Loki *smile*— and Rumlow turned to shout an order at his men. “I do hope that I have your attention, because this is your first and only warning. You have taken something from me, and I am here to take it back. This message is a courtesy to let you know that there will be no survivors.”

“Someone find out what’s going on!” Rumlow was shouting, gesturing for the other agents to pick up their radios. “We’re under attack, get reinforcements down here with Loki—”

Rumlow’s voice cut off as Loki lunged forward and threw his chain around the human’s throat, pulling it tight enough that he would struggle to breathe— but not tight enough to kill him. Not *yet*.

“Loki, stand down!”

Loki’s eyes flashed to the agents standing outside the window, all of their weapons at the ready.

“Go on,” Loki taunted. “Shoot. Break down the only thing standing between me and you.”

“Shoot, you cowards,” Rumlow hissed— and Loki tightened his chain, turning any further words into a gurgle.

“If any of you want a chance at living,” Loki hissed, “Then there is only one thing that you can do.”

He couldn’t use his seiðr— but as he had already learned in the past, that did not limit him as much as his enemies wished that it would. And so, as he stared down the agents who thought they were so brave with their big Chitauri guns, he let his eyes turn red and the pigment of the skin around them bleed blue as he growled out one more word.

“*Run.*”

The agents skittered over the floor in their hurry to follow Loki’s advice— and Rumlow’s continuing gasped curses were lost to Anthony’s next words.

“You should all be aware by now that certain files have been released to the public, and that there is no such thing as a secret within SHIELD. The whole world knows who you are. So I suppose... that it’s only fair if I offer the same.” There was a pause and a slight sound of static, and even though he could not see them, Loki knew that screens would be flickering— a face appearing with a threatening scowl and a gleam in those brown eyes that Loki knew so very well.

“My name is Tony Stark,” Anthony said. “And I’m not afraid of you.”

Rumlow’s struggles grew more pronounced, writhing against Loki’s chest, kicking and gasping and cursing—

But even injured and tired as Loki was, Rumlow was no match for his strength.

“Hello monster,” Loki whispered, leaning down so that Rumlow would be able to feel Loki’s breath over the side of his neck. “I suppose it’s time to send *you* back to where you belong.”

“Give up,” Rumlow croaked, “You won’t ever—”

Loki jerked both his hands so that the chain tightened, and Rumlow’s neck *cracked*— and then Loki just let the empty corpse slip down to the ground, so that it fell into an ugly heap of flesh.

Rumlow had made a mistake in thinking that just because Loki was cornered and alone, he was helpless. He’d thought Loki beaten, he thought that he’d won— but he should have known better than that. Now he was nothing. But, maybe Rumlow could still prove useful.

Loki reached down to pocket the man’s knife, and then he tore off a piece of Rumlow’s clothing, noting that it was high-end material, likely designed to be resilient against any number of different threats. Yes, it would do nicely.

He wrapped the strip around his hands, and then twisted his arm around so that he could wrap the now bloody vibranium chain on top of that, curling his hand into a fist as he did so. The metal of the chain itself was enchanted to render powerful beings helpless, and hopefully that — along with the material underneath the chain — would be enough to protect Loki’s hand.

That done, Loki stepped up to the edge of his cell, glanced to the camera with a mocking smirk. Then he slammed his chain-wrapped fist into the barrier—

And it came shattering down to the ground.

Shoot to Thrill

Chapter Notes

I just want to say thanks to both **Rabentochter** and **STARSDidathing**, I think I can confidently say that without either of you this chapter would not have been posted today
♥ I love you both

Also, I'm really sorry to anyone whose comments I haven't answered yet on the last chapter, I really do love them and I promise I haven't forgotten you, I've just had a bit of an awful week. I promise, I'll get to them when I can.

Tony didn't want to be stalling. His very being was *itching* with the need to move forward, to just barge straight into the Triskelion and begin the assault. But despite his every desire, despite the fire burning through his veins— there was one thing that was holding him back.

He knew that the attack was already in motion, that the others were already in place. Barnes had certainly started on his part of the plan— Tony could hear the commotion from his position on the bank of the Potomac, and he could see the green flashes along the bridge, drawing out as many agents as SHIELD thought that they would be able to spare.

Rhodey, meanwhile, was over on the west side, on top of a building that would give him a vantage point— waiting for Tony to make his move before he used one of his rings to lock all of SHIELD inside their trap.

And then SHIELD would be caught like flies in Tony's web, and he would be able to take them all out in one fell swoop. The time had finally arrived, the moment that he had been waiting so very long to reach, and yet... Tony's feet felt like lead, and his words were caught in his throat.

Because every time that Tony had pictured this moment in the past, in every dream and plan, Loki had always been at his side.

It didn't feel *right*, to be doing this without him. They had been planning this assault for months, putting all the pieces into place so that they would finally be able to bring all of this to an undoubtable end.

Without Loki there to share the glory of the moment, it just felt like it was sour, empty, *hollow*.

But, despite that single misgiving, Tony knew that this would need all of his concentration. After all, he was only going to help Loki get free if he focused, if he pushed through this on his own.

This was bigger now, more critical than it had been before. This wasn't just about revenge, or even about making sure that no one would be hunting them when they finally decided to settle down. This was about getting Loki back, about making sure that they could never be separated in such a way again. And, well... that was a cause that Tony would be willing to risk everything for.

"All right, JARVIS," Tony finally said, steeling himself and turning to face the suit that had been waiting behind him. As he did so, the new nanotech suit that he had been working on for months with the data from Extremis and the purple ring encased his body in black metal. "Drop my needle."

And the moment he knew that the suit's microphone system was running, Tony got to work.

"Good afternoon, SHIELD!" Tony exclaimed, bright and cheerful and *threatening*. "I do hope that I have your attention, because this is your first and only warning. You have taken something from me, and I am here to take it back. This message is a courtesy to let you know that there will be no survivors."

He allowed a smile to curl up the corner of his lips even though he knew no one would be able to see it quite yet, just imagining the panic that all of the agents inside the Triskelion must be feeling.

"You should all be aware by now that certain files have been released to the public, and that there is no such thing as a secret within SHIELD." JARVIS had seen to that— following the plan that he and Loki had been crafting from the very start, letting the world see *exactly* what SHIELD had been up to— *including* what had been done to Tony and Loki. All the breadcrumbs that they had laid down were coming together to form a picture that was impossible to deny. The whole world knew the truth now, there was no escaping it—

And Tony knew that it was time for the world to know the truth about him, as well.

It was something that he and Loki had discussed at length, had considered from every angle. Keeping Tony's identity a secret certainly had its benefits, but they both agreed that if they wanted this to work without risking it all falling apart with a single misplaced word, then they needed to have transparency. They needed to foster trust, to prove that they weren't the terrorists SHIELD was saying they were— that they had only ever attacked those who deserved it.

And if they were going to sort the lies from the truth, then they needed the world to see *them* for what they were.

Besides, Tony didn't *want* to hide, not anymore. He never really had in the first place, if he were being totally honest— the cover story of Iron Man being his bodyguard was something that Coulson had handed him on a card, something that he'd said to try and protect his friends. Because Stane had already tried to hurt Pepper, and Tony hadn't wanted something like that to happen ever again.

But Tony had other people to protect now, and the best way to do that was to make sure there was *no doubt* as to what he was capable of—

So, he put as much malice into his tone as he could while he finished his message.

“The whole world knows who you are. So I suppose... that it’s only fair if I offer the same.”

Knowing that JARVIS would be recording the video now as well as the audio, Tony let his smirk widen, rather sure that with all the rage flooding through him and the rabid desire for revenge, he must look rather manic as he gave them his final threat.

“My name is Tony Stark. And I’m not afraid of you.” Tony slammed his faceplate back down and leapt into the air, knowing that JARVIS would take the signal for what it was.

The suit that had been doing the recording stopped the transmission and followed, its repulsors glowing bright as it shot upward—

And from all around the Potomac, the Iron Legion flew up from where JARVIS had been hiding them, rising into the air and converging on their target. There were near on forty armours surrounding the Triskelion like a dark curtain, their black paint and green arc reactors forming an eerie combination that Tony hoped would strike terror into the hearts of anyone who called themselves HYDRA. ACDC was still blasting from the speakers of every single one, and Tony knew that JARVIS had it playing inside the building as well.

Tony *had* briefly considered using a different song, but *Shoot to Thrill* was the one that he had played when he’d first met Loki— and he knew that if Loki could hear it, he would know *exactly* what it meant.

So, with the sound of guitars ringing through the air alongside the whirl of his repulsors, Tony began to get to work.

Barnes had caused enough of a commotion that the agents on the bridge had lined up like pigs on their way to the slaughterhouse, and it was a simple matter for Tony to fly over them with his repulsors aimed downward and a flurry of explosives dropping like rain. They yelled and screamed as they tried to avoid him, but any that escaped his path were just cut down by JARVIS as he followed with several suits on Tony’s tail.

Barnes, of course, was nowhere to be seen, but Tony was not surprised— the Winter Soldier had *earned* his reputation of a ghost, after all. Tony would be surprised if he *saw* Barnes for the rest of the fight, but he sure as hell could feel his presence.

Especially when one of the quinjets SHIELD sent out as air support was taken down by a well-aimed repulsor blast to the engine— a blast that had *certainly* come from the ground.

“The aim on those things are nice, aren’t they?” Tony said over their comms.

“They’re all right,” Barnes allowed. “Still would have preferred a rifle, though.”

Tony didn’t bother to respond to that one. Barnes had stated that he was more skilled as a sniper than anything else— Tony just had to hope that he would be able to put those skills to use.

Those on the bridge were like sitting ducks. The quinjets were little match for the combined efforts of Barnes and JARVIS, and Tony had a clear run all the way to the Triskelion's front door. The plan, it seemed, was working, and he knew that he would have just taken out a good chunk of SHIELD's tactical response, but Tony was not naïve enough to believe that there wouldn't be more waiting for them inside.

So he didn't bother being quiet as he crashed right through the window to the lobby, glass flying everywhere in a cascade of clattering crystal.

But there was no moment to take stock of the room, for it was clear that the agents inside had been expecting him— for even though most were on their way out to the bridge, *still* taking the bait that Barnes had laid out, they did not waste any time stepping into formation and aiming their weapons directly at Tony's head.

For a moment, Tony wondered where Rumlow and his STRIKE team were— but then when an answer to that question formed in his head, Tony funnelled the resultant rage that he felt into fighting the ones that *were* in front of him.

He flew high above them, enjoying the flexibility given to him by the high ceilings, shooting down at them with repulsor blasts that left them scrambling. Many of them still held their ground, their guns peppering bullets against the surface of his armour—

But none of them were wielding any weapons capable of piercing Tony's newly designed suit, and it was almost *too* easy.

Tony wanted to get to Loki as fast as he could, so he didn't want to waste time with fighting *pretty*. After all, he already *had* all the theatrics that he could ever need, courtesy of JARVIS hacking into the speaker system. A wise movie villain once said that the most important part of a play like this was the *presentation*, and as *Shoot to Thrill* came to an end and was replaced with the opening bars of *Back in Black*, Tony was quite sure that he had that part of the attack on point.

So, yeah. He hovered above them all and held his two hands together to enhance the strength of the blast, and he tore the fragile flesh of their bodies to pieces.

They still tried to fight back of course. One fired some kind of rocket launcher and managed to knock Tony out of the air— he just managed to catch himself with his repulsors, tackling the man around the waist and snapping his spine against the floor with the force of his fall.

But then Tony was on the ground and the other agents all started to converge on him, falling back into formation and advancing, their weapons flashing as they stepped over the smoking bits of their comrades. Tony could see a few more with launchers, and while they wouldn't be able to hurt him, being knocked down over and over again would be a waste of time. So, instead, Tony stood up straight, held out one arm, and quirked his fingers in the universal gesture for *come at me*.

And oh, they *tried*. When they realised that the conventional guns were causing nothing but ricochets, they turned to using weapons that didn't need to get *through* the metal to work. Though of course... they still weren't going to be even nearly enough.

When Tony saw the first electric baton, he couldn't help but taunt.

"You think *that's* an electric shock?" he asked them. "I'll show you an electric shock."

The yellow ring he was wearing under his gauntlet felt hot against his skin as he called on its power— and then lines of lightning cracked over his armour, and bolts of it snapped out to hit all the pieces of metal around the room, stopping the heart of any agent not clever enough to drop their gun. The lightning had the added effect of charging Tony's armour up, and then he let out an explosive blast from his reactor that caused the ceiling to *crack*.

Well, that wasn't good. Tony wasn't ready to destroy the building *quite* yet— he had a lot to do, first— including, of course, retrieving *Loki*—

And this was taking far longer than Tony had hoped that it would.

"Sir, there is a quinjet approaching from the north," JARVIS said.

"How the hell did they get here so fast?" Tony complained, not breaking step for a moment as he caught an agent's knife with his gauntlet, spun it around then plunged it into the side of the woman's neck, her fingers still curled around the hilt. It would seem that all that time spent watching Loki practicing with his daggers had paid off.

As he shoved her body away and shot a repulsor at the man behind her, he spat out a question.

"Rhodey, are you going to be able to keep them out?"

"I can try to contact them, but I doubt that they're going to listen to me—"

"I mean with the *ring*, Rhodey," Tony cut in frustratedly— his tone only exacerbated as an agent slammed *something* hard into the side of his head. And while his helmet was more than capable of preventing him from suffering any injury, the *sound* of it would likely still be ringing in his ears for days. In retaliation, Tony turned his hand and blew a hole in the guy's chest, and then leapt back into the air to rain blasts down without prejudice while he continued the conversation. "Can't your shield stop them from landing?"

"It's not like this thing came with an instruction manual, okay? And I think I did fairly well to get this far on it. I mean, at first I got the orange one and the red one mixed up and let me tell you, you're lucky I have the blue as well because if I hadn't been right next to the river half of DC would be on fire right now—"

"At least you didn't think you'd been handed the truth ring and then froze guards in the gatehouse to blocks of solid ice," Barnes cut in. "Although, actually, that *was* rather effective —"

"Magic rings, man," Rhodey muttered. "This was not covered in my air force training—"

"*Rhodey*," Tony snapped.

“Sorry Tones,” Rhodey said. “It’s taking a lot of focus just to hold this thing in place. I’m not sure I can make the shield work from both directions without losing my grip on the one we’ve already got.”

Tony swore. “How long do I have?” he asked.

“Not long. They’re coming in now.”

Right.

Tony focused all of that rage on one last attack, firing up the lasers built into his wrists and then *spinning*, cutting down anyone who was left, save for one man who was quick enough to duck—

And the Avengers came charging through the door just in time to see him wrapping his arm around the neck of the last agent left alive.

“Captain Rogers!” The man’s voice was pleading, but Tony cut off any further attempts with a tighter grip.

“Let him go,” Steve ordered harshly— but before Tony could say a single thing in response, someone else was moving forward with a serious kind of expression that gave Tony pause.

“Stark,” said Thor, his voice low and hard— and Steve’s eyes widened in disbelief. Tony supposed they must not have arrived in time to hear his little message— but, knowing that there was hardly any reason to continue hiding his identity, Tony let his faceplate snap up.

“Tony,” Steve gasped. “It *is*— but— why are you—”

“Please, Captain,” the agent struggled, “He’s going to kill me, please—”

“Oh,” Tony crooned, leaning down and tightening his grip a little further, so that the man started to choke. “He’s not going to save you. And if you have any last words... now’s the time.”

The agent was hissing and spitting, but he seemed to realise that Tony was right— because all it would take was a slight *twist*, and then it would all be over. Even if Steve tried — which he seemed reluctant to anyway, perhaps because he didn’t think that Tony had the balls — he wouldn’t be able to get to Tony in time to stop him.

Sure enough, it was only just a few more seconds before — just as Tony had predicted he would — the agent mustered enough energy to spit out two final words.

“Hail HYDRA.”

And then it was with a slight upturn to his lips that Tony snapped the man’s neck.

Steve’s face turned chalk white, and his eyes stared unseeing at the corpse on the ground. Tony, meanwhile, turned his gaze to Thor.

“You worked it out, then?” he asked. “I suppose Loki was right. You *do* have a few brains in that head of yours, when you feel like using them.”

“He told me about you,” Thor replied, not even looking at the man on the ground nor any of the other bodies that littered the lobby.

“You’ve spoken with him?” Tony asked sharply. “Where are they keeping him? Is he all right?”

“You want to know if *Loki* is all right?” Natasha took her turn to step forward. “He’s a killer.”

“Look around you, Natasha,” Tony said, spreading his arms. “I think Loki and I make quite the pair.”

As she pressed her lips together, Tony noted that both Barton and Bruce were not present. He supposed the Avengers didn’t want to risk the Hulk losing control in the middle of the Triskelion, and Barton had probably gone to find a better vantage point.

And it *did* seem like Natasha had something more to say, but Tony didn’t really care.

“Thor?” he prompted. “How *is* he?”

“He is injured,” Thor said, and Tony grit his teeth— but Thor was not done. “I think he has been able to heal himself some, however. And... they are not... he has not been tortured.”

Tony wasn’t entirely sure that he could believe Thor’s word, but *god* he wanted to. And... well, the way that Thor said it, with a touch of pain and a whole helping of regret— well, it would seem there was a chance that Loki had made some headway with Thor during whatever conversation they’d had while Loki was locked up. Tony just had to hope that it hadn’t been too hard on Loki, that he had been all right. But Tony certainly still wouldn’t trust Thor, not even as far as he could throw him while out of the suit.

“Why would you think that Loki might be tortured?” Steve asked. “Tony, this is—”

“You heard what that bastard said,” Tony interrupted. “You know who these people are. Can you really say that you think they’re above torture?”

“HYDRA’s gone,” Steve said weakly.

“I thought so too,” Tony replied. “But it would seem that a lot of things we thought died back in the 1940s are still alive and kicking. You might be surprised.” Steve looked like he still didn’t understand, but there was something hard to his expression which Tony almost thought he might have been able to count on.

Or, at least, he might have in the past. But counting on Steve had bitten him in the ass before, and he wasn’t about to make the same mistake again.

“Well, this has been fun,” Tony said. “But I’m sure you’ve seen the news, and you know exactly what’s going on here, so I’m just going to take my—”

“When you released that intel, you exposed—”

“I can’t express how much I don’t *care* about exposing SHIELD agents,” Tony said, cutting right over the top of Natasha’s complaint. “They fucking deserve what they’re getting. And now, if you’re not going to try and stop me, then I suggest you get out of my way. Or I’ll cut you down just like the rest of them.”

“Tony—”

“No, Steve,” Tony snapped. “Don’t even *try*.” Then he turned back to Thor. “Tell me where they’re keeping Loki.”

“I can take you to him—”

“If you think that I’m letting you within ten yards of him, then you’d be mistaken,” Tony snapped— and Thor frowned.

“I brought the Avengers here to *show* them what Loki is going through,” Thor said. “He was sure that you would come to get him, but I wanted—”

“You’ve tried to kill him far too many times in the past—”

“I have *never*—”

“Do you know how hurt he was after Kiel?” Tony snarled. “Do you know what ribs look like when they’re bent out of shape? Do you know how a person’s breathing sounds when their chest is caved in? When every breath scratches the ends of those broken ribs together? Because I do, and I swear that if you ever try to hurt Loki again, I will make sure that you learn as well.”

By the time Tony took a pause, Thor’s face was a little pale. *Good*.

“There is only one thing that I want to hear you say right now,” Tony snarled, lifting his repulsor and aiming it directly at Thor’s head. “*Where. Is. Loki?*”

“I can show you,” Thor tried again, though a little weaker this time— but Tony wasn’t having any of it.

“*No*,” he snapped. “If you want to help, then you can stay here and hold back the next lot of agents which are no doubt on the way while I go on ahead.”

Thor, to Tony’s surprise, actually nodded at that— but Steve wasn’t so keen to let him go.

“Tony, you shouldn’t do this without us—”

“Why not?” Tony asked. “I already have the only team I need. In case you hadn’t noticed, I’m *not* an Avenger. I never have been, have I?”

That was enough to make Steve flinch— a reminder of just *how* Tony had ended up captured in the first place. And oh, but Tony wondered if Steve had realised yet just *how much* he’d

fucked up, whether he realised that Tony and Iron Man had once been one and the same— or if he merely thought that Tony had taken up the mantle after he'd stolen the suit from the graveyard.

“You're still going to need some back up,” Steve said, his voice a little strained. “You can't do this alone—”

“He's not alone.”

Tony knew that it was wrong, but he couldn't help his smile at the way that Steve's whole expression slackened as he turned to see Barnes striding toward them from the front door.

“*Bucky?*” Steve gasped.

For a moment, Tony was worried— not because he thought Barnes would blow the mission, but because Barnes looked *livid*. But, as Barnes moved past the Avengers to stand by Tony's side, he didn't even spare Steve a glance.

“We need to get moving,” he said. “The outside is clear, and Rhodes is closing in the shield. They're not going to be able to even leave the building anymore.” He paused for half a second, as if considering his next words— but when he spoke, there wasn't any ounce of hesitation in his tone at all. “We need to get to Loki. *Now.*”

Tony agreed, of course— it's what he'd said moments earlier. “Let's go,” he said. “Thor, last chance to be helpful.”

Thor let out a breath. “He is in the cells for enhanced beings, lowest level. He's the only one in there.”

It confirmed what Tony had already suspected, and he turned away and moved toward the correct hallway, his faceplate slipping back into place.

“Tony, *Bucky*—”

“*No.*” Tony rounded on Steve, raising his repulsor once again. “You don't get it, you don't know what's been happening, and I can't trust you not to turn around and attack Loki the moment you see him in his cell—”

“I won't,” Steve said, his eyes darting between Tony and Barnes like he couldn't decide who to look at. “Let me make this up to you, help me understand—”

“We don't have time for this, Steve,” Tony snarled. “I *have* to get to Loki. There's no chance that you can make this up to me, not after all that you've done. But if you want to *understand*, then fight with me now and help me take down these bastards— and then maybe, if I have the time and if I think you fucking deserve it, then *maybe* I'll explain later. Either way, what you decide to do now is going to determine what happens after HYDRA falls.” He lowered his repulsor, and turned away from the Avengers one last time even as he spoke to them over his shoulder. “I suggest you choose wisely.”

He could hear Natasha starting to say something in response, and Steve was trying to call for Barnes' attention again— but Tony was *done*. He lifted back into the air so he could move at a faster pace, knowing that Barnes would be on his six, just because he said that he would be.

And even as Tony hurtled down a hall, into a stairwell, straight through a wall— somehow, Barnes managed to keep up through it all, throwing himself over railings and sprinting with a speed that should have been impossible.

They came upon a group of agents just before the entrance to the cells— but for some reason, they all had their guns pointing in the wrong direction. Tony and Barnes got a few with their repulsors before the agents even realised they were there. Then Barnes ducked behind Tony to avoid the shower of bullets that turned on them before shoving out around him with his hand, blasting them all down with a flash of green from one of the three rings he was wearing on his fingers.

The agents fell backward then, all dead—

But before they could take another step, screaming erupted from some distance away, echoing through the corridors in tortured shrieks that raised the hair on the back of Tony's neck.

And even as more agents came hammering down the hall from that direction, the pure hysterical fear in their eyes making them both less and *more* of a threat, depending on the type of weapon they clutched in their hands— Tony's breath caught in his throat.

“Keep going,” Barnes said immediately, already firing his repulsors in quick succession. “Go and find him. I'll be fine here.”

Tony didn't hesitate— he did as Barnes suggested and continued on, heading toward the source of the noise. After all, he knew that JARVIS wasn't down here yet— the Iron Legion were all terrorising the outside and the upper floors. And if Thor was right, and there was only one person being held in the cells down here, then... there could only be one source of the screams.

Loki was supposed to be locked up of course, but if there was one thing that Tony would never do, it would be underestimating Loki's ability to get himself out of a difficult situation.

His lips curling into a smile, Tony immediately shot down in that direction. He careened around a corner and then—

There he was.

He was still wearing the same clothes that he had been when Tony last saw him, the silver parts of his armour smeared with blood both old and new. He was wearing chains on his wrists and ankles, and despite the snarl on his face, he stood bent slightly forward as if he were in a fair amount of pain. His hair was unkempt and sticking awfully around his face, and he looked like he had not slept properly in *days*. But in that moment, Tony thought that he was the most perfect thing that he ever had the fortune to lay eyes upon.

“Loki,” Tony gasped, stumbling forward with his hands already outstretched, his new nanotech suit melting back into the reactor without any more thought than the simple desire to *touch*.

Loki’s lips parted in shock as he turned, his blade pulling from the side of the corpse he had clearly just dispatched. Neither of them took any notice of the body as it fell to the ground, both only with eyes for each other—

But then Loki’s eyes widened, and he drew back his arms and – even despite the chains on his wrists – launched the knife in his hands toward Tony.

Tony heard it thump solidly into flesh behind him, but he didn’t turn– Loki’s expression relaxed enough afterward that Tony didn’t need to check for himself whether there were any other agents at his back. He simply ran forward and threw himself at his lover, his arms curling around Loki’s shoulders and his face pressing hard into the curve of Loki’s neck.

Loki’s voice was clear in Tony’s mind, just saying Tony’s name over and over– and Tony was half sure that he was doing the same. And even though Loki was in irons, even though they were sticky with blood and there were still-warm corpses at their feet, even though the fight was far from over and Tony could still hear the sound of Barnes’ repulsors not too far away—

It was the fiercest hug that Tony had ever been a part of, and for just that single moment, it was as if the whole world was standing still.

Set phasers to stun

Tony couldn't say how long they stood there, pressed together and whispering each other's names in their minds. It could have been an hour, it could have been a single second— but the amount of time did not matter, because Loki was back in his arms.

The feel of Loki's body against his own was a sensation that he had missed, smoothing over an ache that had been scratching inside him from the very moment he had flown away in Edinburgh, the moment he had left Loki behind. And it felt like a missing piece of his heart was sliding back into place, that piece which had been so painfully torn away— but now, even though the fight was still raging, it was like every wound was being smoothed over, just by the simple comfort of Loki's touch and the soothing sound of his heartbeat.

'Anthony,' Loki whispered, his voice sounding almost raw even as it curled through Tony's mind. *'I knew you would come.'*

'Yeah.' Was it possible to feel a little choked, even when speaking in one's mind? *'Yeah, always.'*

Tony turned his head a little to press his lips to the cool skin of Loki's throat, and then he leaned away so that he could look at Loki properly. He ran his hands over Loki's shoulders, down his sides, back up to his chest— needing to touch every part of him that he could, and relaxing as the fear he had been drowning in the past few days was chased away with solid truth.

“You're here,” Tony whispered. *'And you're all right.'*

“Yes,” Loki promised. “They didn't want to try anything, just like before. They asked me questions, but they wouldn't dare do anything more than wait until they'd weakened me.”

Tony felt a sigh escape him at that, relieved that his worst nightmares had been unfounded— but still, as he studied Loki's face, he could not help but frown in anger and concern. Because apart from the injury he had sustained in Edinburgh which was already healing, there was still one thing Tony noticed that made his blood boil.

Slowly, *carefully*, Tony reached up with one hand and ghosted his fingers over Loki's lips. He didn't touch, not when he could see that touch would be painful— but he didn't need to in order to know what they would feel like. Because the red soreness around Loki's lips and the broken skin that was only *just* not bleeding painted a familiar pattern. Too familiar to the silver scars that still shone deep around Loki's mouth even after all these months to be anything other than what Tony already knew.

How dare they—

“Do not worry,” Loki said softly, catching Tony's hand and curling their fingers together instead. “The muzzle was not on for very long.”

It didn't make Tony feel any better. *Any* time at all was too long, in his opinion.

“If I ever get my hands on the one who put you through that again—”

“He's already dead,” Loki promised— and *then*, Tony smiled.

'Good.'

Of course, the muzzle was not the only thing that Loki had been burdened with— Tony could tell that Loki wanted to embrace him just as he had embraced Loki, but Loki's hands were bound tightly enough together that the most he had managed during their hug was pressing his hands either side of Tony's heart.

Tony glanced down to the manacles that were locked around Loki's wrists, and let go of Loki's hand to pick up the chain instead. He knew that despite the grievousness of Loki's injury from the Chitauri weapon, it shouldn't have been something Loki was still feeling now. He should have been able to heal himself, if not wholly then at least enough for his advanced physiology to do the rest of the work— which meant that these cuffs were blocking his seiðr, just like the ones he had worn while being held in that cell back in Turkey.

They weren't exactly the same, though— and as he rubbed his thumb over the silver metal, he realised something that had him gnashing his teeth.

“Vibranium,” he muttered, the word tasting bitter on his tongue. Oh, he *knew* where SHIELD must have got this from— other than Steve's frisbee, there was only one man who'd had any access to vibranium that Tony knew of. He supposed it shouldn't surprise him that HYDRA was dealing with someone like Klaue, but it did still make him feel a little ill. Even Tony, with all the things that he had done in the past, had never stooped that low. Oh well— that was a problem for another day, another time.

Right now, Tony just wanted to get those manacles the hell *off*.

“Here,” he said, letting go of the chain and putting his hands over the actual cuffs instead. “I'm not as good at this as you, but. It's all we've got right now.”

He hadn't actually used the purple ring before— and perhaps he should have practiced before making his first attempt on something that was touching Loki's *skin*. What if he got it wrong? What if he made a mistake and accidentally melted Loki's flesh off his bones instead of just the manacles?

“Anthony.”

Tony looked up, and saw Loki watching him with a soft smile on his damaged lips.

“I trust you.”

With Loki's faith in him steeling his nerves, Tony drew in a deep breath and focused on the ring. It wasn't unlike the others— it had that same tug in his gut, that feeling of just *pulling* at a piece of string to try and force the world into doing what you wanted. It didn't feel natural, and it almost made his skin crawl, but just a little more of a push and then—

It was like he could *feel* the very makeup of the manacles, the atoms that were vibrating in tandem and holding together only by the force of electricity. He wondered if he might be able to shift them around, to turn them into something else entirely— but in that moment, there really was no need. And it was easy, too *easy* to let the ring do what it wanted, and then the bonds between the atoms loosened and the manacles dissolved into a pile of mush.

The moment that the vibranium melted away from his wrists, Loki's fingers began to spark with green, his seiðr seeping out of him as if it had been held back for too long. His reaction was not as pronounced as it had been the first time Tony had seen Loki's seiðr released this way, but it was in moments like these that it was made abundantly clear just how big a toll such a restriction could have on him.

Loki closed his eyes as a small smile of ecstasy curled at his lips, and when he opened them again they were brighter than normal, the green of his irises almost glowing. And as Tony watched, Loki's bloodied clothes morphed into something much more sturdy— the heavy leather coat plated with gold that he favoured in battles replacing the light armour he had been wearing before. He wasn't wearing his helmet yet, but Tony was sure that it would appear the moment they were ready to head back up to the rest of the fight.

It really was beautiful to watch, but... Loki still wasn't standing quite straight, and Tony frowned as he saw the way Loki touched a hand to his side.

"You're still injured," Tony observed, placing his own hand on top of Loki's. "Are you sure ___"

"I'm *fine*," Loki insisted. "This is what we have been planning. Do not think that I have not noticed that this is not only a rescue mission—"

'Loki.'

Loki paused, and met Tony's gaze as Tony gently cupped his cheek.

'I'm not going to tell you that you can't do this, okay? I'm going to trust your judgement, and if you choose to keep going now I will trust you and fight by your side as always. But if you believe that you're not up for it, then we can stop this. We can go back home. Because if you are not still by my side at the end of this, then there won't have been a point to any of it.' Tony stroked Loki's cheek with his thumb, holding his gaze. *'Whatever we do, it's your choice. But if we move now, then there won't be any going back.'*

Loki leaned into his touch for a moment, before reaching up and curling his fingers around Tony's wrist and drawing his hand away.

'I promise, Anthony,' he said. *'I can do this.'*

And Tony nodded, following through on his own promise and trusting Loki's word. Although, there was one more thing that he couldn't help saying.

'I wish we had some of that stuff you drank last time,' he said— and Loki, of course, knew what he was talking about immediately.

'That came from Alfheim,' Loki said. *'Perhaps, when all of this is over, I will take you there.'*

Tony smiled. *'I like that idea.'*

Somehow, knowing that he and Loki could still make plans for the future was a comfort greater than any other, because they *would* get out of this. They would win this day. They would come out of the other side victorious, and they would live a life *together*, the life that they both deserved.

All that was left was to win the fight, and for that— Tony needed to catch Loki back up to speed.

He told him quickly what he and the others had done in between Loki's capture and the current attack, and that they now had all but one of the Makluan rings. He offered to give one of the three he held to Loki— and half wished he had thought ahead and perhaps given one less to either Barnes or Rhodey so that Loki could have a few more, since he was the most experienced out of the lot of them in this particular area. But, there was no point worrying about that now, because what was done was done— and he handed Loki the yellow ring without any further ado. And Loki seemed amused when Tony told him what it did, so. At least there was that. It also served as a reminder, and Tony asked a quick question.

"Did you talk to Thor?"

"He believes that there's something wrong happening here," Loki confirmed, sliding the yellow ring onto his finger and then twisting his hand through the air, watching almost absently as electricity crackled around his fingers, dancing with the seiðr. "But I don't know to what extent he believes us—"

"He brought the Avengers, to try and show them what SHIELD was doing to you," Tony cut in. "They're on our side, for the moment, but I don't know how long that's going to last."

"Then we had better hurry," Loki replied. The seiðr and lightning dissipated, and he trailed his hand along Tony's side one last time before he moved down the hall in the direction Tony had come from. When he reached the corpse of the man that had tried to attack Tony from behind, he bent down and tugged the knife from the body's chest with the sound of a dull *squelch* before wiping it on the dead man's shirt. Tony almost smiled when he recognised the weapon.

"That's a SHIELD issued knife," he said.

Loki smiled as well as he gave his answer, a sharp and vicious thing that left no doubt as to what had happened. "Yes. I suppose you could say it was a gift from someone who didn't need it anymore."

Tony grinned. "And I suppose you didn't need to be rescued, in the end."

"Perhaps not," Loki allowed with a smirk. "But I do appreciate the effort nonetheless."

Despite Loki's teasing tone, Tony knew him well enough to recognise the underlying emotion that coursed through those words. And he understood, because he felt the same way.

They had been apart for far too long, but they hadn't *broken*. Even separated, even in pain and alone, they had still fought hard enough to make it back to one another— and they were all the stronger now for it. They knew that they could survive when they were alone, but together? No one would be able to stand in their way.

Earlier, when Tony had been preparing to attack the base, everything had felt so very, very wrong. But now, with Loki standing at his side, Tony *finally* felt like everything was falling into place, just the way that it should. They made the perfect team— they both knew that they would always come for each other, that they would never leave the other behind, not for anything. And they knew that they would come out of this on top.

“JARVIS and the Avengers are keeping SHIELD agents busy, and Rhodey is stopping anyone from leaving,” Tony said, continuing his earlier explanation. Loki's expression pinched a little at the mention of Rhodey, but he didn't make a comment on it, and Tony was grateful for that show of trust no matter how small. “Oh, and Barnes is—”

“Right here.”

Tony turned at the sound of Barnes' voice, glad to see the ex-assassin walking toward them unharmed.

Barnes arched a brow at the pair of them, as if he were thinking *Really? And you couldn't have waited until things calmed down for a long reunion?* But his smile was soft enough that Tony knew he wasn't *really* mad at them.

“It is good to see you well, Loki,” he said. His eyes flashed to Tony for a moment before moving back. “We were worried.”

Loki inclined his head slightly. “I see you have accepted our gift?”

“Yes. And... thank you,” Barnes said, lifting his prosthetic arm just slightly. “It's sure come in handy.”

Tony had to roll his eyes a little at that, but Loki took no notice. Tony had to wonder if it was another Allspeak thing, because... *honestly*.

“Thank *you*,” Loki said. “For helping Anthony when I could not.”

Barnes ducked his head for a moment— but only for a moment. Then he looked back up, his expression a little more controlled. “We can continue this later,” he said. “They will be coming down here soon, looking for where we went— and I'm sure they know you're out,” he added, glancing to Loki. “I doubt that you did it quietly?”

“I saw no reason to be quiet when Anthony already seemed to be hosting a concert,” Loki replied dryly. Tony grinned, but he knew that Barnes was right. As much as he wanted to stay in peace with Loki forever, they *had* to get a move on— or they might never see peace again.

“Hopefully the music blocked their comms, but we’ve got no way to say for sure until JARVIS can get all the way in,” Tony said. “But, okay. They have to know that we’re down here. J, what are the Avengers up to?”

“I explained the situation to them as best as I could, Sir,” JARVIS answered. “Agent Romanoff argued that the best way for them to help will be to get more information from the computers, and that while the Triskelion is under attack, they will likely not be as guarded. I believe that her plan will be beneficial, and I am currently aiding her and Agent Barton through the stairwell and up to the data banks.”

Tony nodded— he trusted JARVIS’ judgement on that one. “And Steve?”

“Captain Rogers is also moving to the upper levels, but on the opposite corner of the building. I believe he wishes to speak to Director Fury.”

“Well then, I suppose we’re just going to have to beat him to the punch.” Tony smirked. “Quite literally.”

“I think I will enjoy meeting the Captain again,” Loki said, his green eyes gleaming.

“Well then, Lokes,” Tony said. “How do you fancy making a trip up to the top?”

“I think that I would love nothing more.”

“And Barnes?” Tony turned to meet his friend’s expectant gaze. “You try to catch up to Natasha and Clint, make sure that you get the intel before she does— or at least get it off her. We don’t want it tampered with, or— well, I don’t think the Avengers would do anything stupid with it, but we can’t be too sure.”

Barnes nodded, and dashed back down the corridor in the direction that he and Tony had come in.

“Right,” Tony said, turning to Loki. “Let’s do this.”

Loki stepped closer, his hands outstretched in a manner that Tony easily recognised. But when Tony stepped into Loki’s arms, Loki didn’t immediately pull them through the space between worlds and to the upper levels— instead, he leaned down and pulled Tony into a kiss.

Loki’s lips were dry and cracked, and the kiss wasn’t deep due to his injury— but the simple pressure held more emotion than any passionate embrace, and when the kiss broke, they lingered with their foreheads pressed together for just one more, stolen moment as Loki’s voice washed through Tony’s mind.

‘Stay by me.’

‘I promise.’

When Tony and Loki appeared on the tenth floor of the Triskelion, it was to a mess of complete and utter chaos. It was clear that the only reason why they had been granted such a grace period down in the basement was because JARVIS had been hassling the agents above within an inch of their lives— and more often than not, of course, he'd pushed right past that line. Some of the suits had been taken down, but there were still enough of them swarming about that the agents couldn't keep up.

The building itself was clearly a mastery of engineering purely on the basis that it had yet to entirely collapse. The structure had been damaged by Tony's earlier lightning strike, and JARVIS had been absolutely *hammering* the outside walls and the inside hallways ever since.

The steady *thrump thrump* of more than a single helicopter could be heard over the din, although of course Tony had no way of knowing whether they were from a news station or the military. Honestly, it could have been either. And somewhere in the distance, Tony could hear the roar of the Hulk, though he couldn't see him— and there was a flash of lightning outside followed by the sound of an explosion which suggested that Thor had taken it upon himself to help JARVIS with the quinjets, striking down the few that still remained inside Rhodey's shrinking orange shield. It would seem that Tony's speech had *finally* helped the Avengers see the truth of what was going on, and they were taking an active approach against those who had caused so much damage.

And through the chaos, Tony and Loki found the balance that they had been missing over those days apart— coming together as the partners that they always would be. They moved like they were two pieces of a well oiled machine, twisting around each other without getting in each other's way. Tony could *feel* Loki's movements before they happened, and he was sure that it was the same for Loki as well. They watched each other's backs, *trusted* that the other would protect them while they launched a risky attack. And perhaps the distance had strengthened them, or perhaps the potential had always been there, and they had just needed to be thrown into this kind of situation for it be brought to the surface. But whatever it was, it was the best kind of cohesive teamwork that Tony had ever been part of, made possible by a connection that burned brighter than it ever had before.

And in the face of that? No one else stood a chance.

They moved side by side up the stairs and down the hallways, not needing to ever pause. They weren't holding hands, but they were still talking in their heads, still *feeling* each other's emotions and flowing together as two parts of a single entity— and yet still distinctly their own. Scores of agents were cut down in their path, and it was not long before they made it to the higher levels of the building.

They stepped inside one of the larger control rooms, hoping that they would be able to get something off the computers before continuing— but it looked like most of them were already wiped, a few even smoking, and a few with bullet holes in them. There were two bodies on the floor— both agents, both dead.

Oh, well. They would just have to hope that Barnes — or even Natasha — managed to get something out of the data banks in the more secure areas.

Knowing that there was nothing else they could gain, they went to continue on to their actual target— but then Tony heard an unmistakable sound.

Immediately on their guard, they moved through to the other side of the room, where the floor had been concealed by the desks and computers. And there, all cowering under the row of desks that sat along the far wall, they found maybe half a dozen SHIELD agents. Tony had to give it to them— he likely would not have even noticed them had one not started to cough.

They didn't look like combat specialists, more along the lines of tech department— and they didn't seem like they posed much of a threat, but Tony was beyond the point of leaving enemies alive at his back. They were HYDRA, they were all cogs in the machine, and the whole organisation *needed* to be obliterated. So he raised his hand, and he prepared to fire—

“Stay where you are.”

Tony spun on the spot, knowing JARVIS would keep a little eye out of the back of his head as he turned his repulsor on the newcomer.

The agent was young for being at this level of security clearance— perhaps late twenties. She had a round face and blonde hair that swept to her shoulders, and she eyed the pair of them off with the kind of determination which proved she didn't know whether she could win this fight, but that she was going to try her damndest regardless.

But it wasn't her determination or her guts that had Tony pausing for a split second— because SHIELD had plenty of gutsy agents, after all. It was the fact that Tony almost thought that he... recognised her from somewhere.

And even though he had a weapon at the ready, even though Loki was already drawing back his arm to throw his knife – not the one he had started with, but another that had been plucked from a corpse – that pause gave the agent a moment to speak.

“I've seen the files, Stark, I saw what was released,” she said. “I know who you say you're fighting, but you're still killing the wrong people.”

“I don't think I am,” Tony replied. “You're all HYDRA—”

“We're *not*,” she hissed, raising her weapon slightly. “SHIELD might be poisoned, but that doesn't mean that all of the people here are on HYDRA's side.”

Tony wasn't touching Loki in that moment – of course he wasn't, since he was wearing the suit – but he felt so connected to him that he knew all he had to do was reach out with his mind.

'Wait a moment.'

Loki didn't even flinch, his knife remaining pulled back over his shoulder— but he didn't throw it either, and Tony knew that he had heard. So he kept his eyes on the agent, and he tilted his head.

“Who are you?” Tony asked, despite the fact that her SHIELD ID was already on his HUD—and it seemed that she was able to pick up on something in his voice that gave it away. Or perhaps it was that they had met before, a *long* time ago.

“If you haven’t worked that out yet, then you are not the man you claim to be,” she replied, her eyes sharp and focused, her gun still steady.

“Well, I must admit that I do wonder what your Aunt Peg would say,” he taunted— and even that didn’t make her falter. “Now that you’ve joined the organisation she nearly lost *everything* trying to eradicate.”

“I *never* joined HYDRA,” Agent Carter growled. “Surely you can see what’s happening here? Look around you.” She gestured to the two dead agents that Tony had noticed on the ground earlier. “Who do you think did that?”

“And how do we know that was you?” Loki asked. “Why should we believe you?”

“Because they tried to shoot *us* when we wouldn’t do as they said,” Carter snapped. “They are our enemy as much as they are yours.”

Another agent stood up then, a man around the same age as Carter, with dark messy hair, his skin ghastly pale. “She’s right. They ordered us to use the defences to shoot down the Avengers’ quinjet,” he said, his voice shaking and his expression terrified— but his eyes were defiant nonetheless. “We wouldn’t do it.”

Tony’s hand was tightly clenched, and one of the rings he wore on his fingers was telling him that they were all speaking the *truth*.

Jesus Christ.

‘Loki—’

‘I know.’ Loki’s voice was a little flat, and Tony knew that he didn’t really care either way. After all, whether Carter and the others were HYDRA or not, they were still *SHIELD*, and that meant that they had still played a part in what had happened to Loki.

And for that, Tony would have torn them apart—

But he still couldn’t help but *wonder*. These people had signed up for SHIELD because they thought that they would be able to do some good in the world. They’d all believed the lie—the same lie that even *Tony* had been misled by. Hadn’t he helped SHIELD before he knew? Hadn’t he helped them with their designs for the arc reactor tech on their new helicarriers? With parts of their security and the *goddamn Avengers Initiative*?

And what if... what if Carter was right? What if not *everyone* in here was HYDRA? What if not everyone in the SWORD base back in London were HYDRA, or the SHIELD base in Singapore, or—

No.

Tony couldn't afford to start thinking like that, not *now*, not when they were so very close.

Maybe Carter *was* right— maybe there were a few good agents scattered here and there. But in the long run, did that really... matter?

He and Loki had clawed their way up to this moment, they had fought to the bone for every single *inch* of ground. They had made it all the way up to the precipice, so close that their fingernails might as well have been scratching at the very top of the cliff— and if they glanced down at the ground now, then they would fail right at the very last moment.

They couldn't *afford* to look down, they couldn't afford a single moment of doubt. They had to keep climbing *up*.

But at the same time... when it came down to the final line? Tony knew that killing innocent people was *not* what he had signed up for when he started this crusade, and when he caught Loki's gaze, Loki's expression softened just slightly.

'This time, Anthony, it's your call. Just make sure that you think about what we're trying to achieve.'

It wasn't said as a warning, or a chastisement, and Tony knew that Loki really would stand by him on his decision. It lowered the pressure a little, but— Tony knew that he couldn't afford to make a mistake here. It was too big a risk for them to leave an enemy at their back, that much was more than clear— and Tony and Loki had already cut through all the agents on the lower levels, though this was the first group they had encountered who *hadn't* fought them back. But on the other hand, if there really were innocents in this building, and they killed all of them indiscriminately — especially now that they had been warned about it — then it would hurt their ability to finish their plan the way that they had envisioned.

So.

“Guys, set phasers to stun,” Tony said so that only those connected to the comms would be able to hear, the words hard to get past his throat but— he knew that it needed to happen. “They aren't all HYDRA, there are some legit SHIELD agents in here. It would seem that things are a little more complicated than we first thought.”

Rhodey started cursing, but Barnes merely gave a quick affirmative. That done, Tony looked back to Carter, who still had her gun up.

“We are *not* going to let you stop us,” Tony said firmly. “We are going to finish this—”

“Tony!”

Tony honestly could have *strangled* Steve as he came into the room. Though perhaps he shouldn't have been surprised— he knew that Steve had been heading in the same direction, though clearly, he had been making slower progress than Tony and Loki.

“Don't worry,” Tony said. “We're not hurting them. We're just about to go on our way.”

As if to back up Tony's point, Loki flipped his knife in his hand and stepped toward the exit that would bring them toward the executive area— and finally toward where the higher-ups were hopefully cowering.

“Tony,” Steve said again. “Listen. I believe you, and I'm not going to try and capture Loki —”

“Shame,” Loki murmured. “That could have been fun.”

“I told you that I wanted to help,” Steve said through gritted teeth, his eyes narrowing as he glared first at Loki, then Tony. “I want to speak to Fury, sort this out—”

“No, if you want to help, and this goes for *any* of you, then stay down here and keep them off our backs,” Tony snapped. “Let *us* deal with the final head of the fucking hydra.”

Carter narrowed her eyes. “I won't kill my fellow agents—”

“Would you, if you *knew* they were HYDRA?” Tony asked. “Would you if you knew that they tortured innocents, if you knew that they had been manipulating SHIELD from day dot, changing the course of history to suit *their* needs with the help of brainwashed innocents forced to do terrible things?”

Carter looked far more agreeable after that, but Steve still seemed unsure.

“There are a lot of good people here. And I do believe you about HYDRA, but we also have to believe that there's more good than bad. And if we hurt the wrong people—”

“Steve, you don't know what happened to Barnes, and it is not my place to say. But reserve judgement until you talk to him, because if I think anything might change your mind, then... that's going to be it. It's clear you never cared about me enough for what they did to me to have made a difference.”

Steve winced at that, but he didn't try to deny it. “It's not just Bucky,” he said. “I am always ready to fight them, and if it was actually HYDRA who killed Iron Man—”

“Oh, no,” Tony said, baring his teeth even though he knew that Steve would not be able to see it. “*You* killed Iron Man, *Captain*. And I hope that's something you never forget.”

Steve looked about to say something else, but Loki cut in first.

“There is no *time* for this,” Loki snapped— and hey, that could almost be the slogan of this campaign. “We must find Fury. Rogers, if you wish to help, then bring these agents to the lobby— as well as any others who are SHIELD.”

Tony frowned at that. “*There is no way to tell these agents apart, someone loyal to HYDRA could claim to be otherwise—*”

“*I know,*” Loki cut in. “*But that will not be our problem, at least not until this is over. And then, if you must, you can offer them the white ring. But for now this is our best option.*”

Tony had to agree with that, and he didn't say anything more.

"I hope you realise how lucky you are," Loki said, his voice more than a little menacing as he turned back to the others. "Personally, I probably would have just killed you both. But Anthony would rather we come out of this with the ability to remain in Midgardian society *without* being arrested. *He* is the only reason that you are still alive. Remember that."

Carter raised her weapon once again— but it was just a standard issue handgun, and it certainly wasn't going to do any damage at all to Loki's thick skin. And Loki merely smiled, before turning his back on her and moving toward the exit once again— and Tony followed only half a step behind.

As they continued, they began to attack with non-lethal measures, though if someone truly was trying to kill them then they still did not hesitate. As they neared the executive offices, it seemed that there were more agents willing to surrender than there had been down below. Any that did, they sent down to meet the Avengers in the lobby— and JARVIS relayed a message to all of those heroes about the situation.

Tony supposed that the increased numbers of *actual* SHIELD agents made sense— he told himself that it was rational, not just that they were all HYDRA and were lying their way to safety.

After all, it would have been a good strategy for HYDRA to send their own loyalists in the first initial wave— because that move made tactical sense. Once the actual agents had witnessed Tony, Barnes, and JARVIS mowing down people they *thought* to be their comrades, they likely would not have needed much more encouraging to go out and join the fight.

But regardless of the reason, the fact that more of the agents in the upper levels of the building *did* actually appear to be SHIELD meant that Tony and Loki had a clearer run up to the top of the Triskelion, and it was not long before they were, *finally*, standing in front of the door that they had been wanting to reach for such a very long time now— the door with the nameplate of *Director Nicholas J Fury*.

Of course, there was very little chance that the director was in there. The plan had always been to push up from the bottom floors, to force the leaders to the top with no hope of escape, since the shield that Rhodey was maintaining with the orange ring would keep them from leaving by quinjet, helicopter, or any other kind of aircraft. Tony expected that Fury would be up with the other leaders, since they hadn't seen him fighting down below. They'd still needed to check the office of course, just in case, as well as to see whether there was any information inside that they would be able to use at a later date.

"JARVIS?" Tony asked. "I don't suppose you can tell if there's anyone in there?"

JARVIS still didn't have total access into the system, Tony knew that— to get all the way through would have been too much to hope for, but—

"Fury is inside, Sir," JARVIS said. "Of that, I have little doubt."

Tony and Loki exchanged a glance. They didn't need words, verbal or otherwise, to know that they were both thinking the same thing.

It didn't seem right that Fury would just be sitting tight in his office. Surely he must have *known* that Tony and Loki would be coming for him? So why would he be *waiting*?

There was every chance that this was a trap, of course, but— they were not about to back down now. This was their *moment*.

“Would you like the honour?” Tony asked, glancing to his partner.

“Oh, no,” Loki said, spreading out one hand. “The honour's all yours.”

And then, not wasting another moment, Tony raised his hand and *fired*.

Loki threw up one of his shimmering green shields as the door shattered at the blast, preparing to catch any attacks that came through the doorway— but none were forthcoming. So they moved forward, still a little hesitant. Tony went first, his repulsors raised, and then Loki followed behind, still ready with a shield.

But when they walked in, they weren't met with a shower of bullets as Tony had been expecting— and nor did they come face to face with a dozen agents ready to blow their brains out with alien guns.

Oh, no.

Fury was alone, sitting at his desk, his back straight, his hands folded neatly in front of him. He watched them carefully as they entered, looking completely and utterly... relaxed.

It put Tony's teeth on edge.

“Good afternoon, Mr Stark,” Fury said. “Mr... Odinson.”

“I prefer Liesmith,” Loki corrected, voice hard.

Fury raised his brow. “Seems like there might be a few issues, there. Interesting.”

“Careful,” Tony said, raising his hand a little more in a move that was a very clear threat. “I'm sure you know why we're here, and what we're capable of. Don't overstep more than you already have.”

“I do know why,” Fury said, speaking his words with a near exaggerated slowness. “But I don't think you understand the entirety of this situation—”

“Oh, we *understand* all right,” Tony snapped. “Though I can see why you think we don't. You're the one that's been holding all the cards all along, aren't you? And you know what, it is *interesting* that you're hiding away up here, while your agents are being slaughtered.”

“I know you're not killing all of them. I know you realised that they aren't all HYDRA.”

Tony scoffed. “You aren’t even claiming ignorance. If you’re hoping to deny your involvement—”

“I only found out about this yesterday, when *he* was talking to Thor in his cell,” Fury cut in harshly. “I’ve known for a while that there must have been something strange, and when Thor came by the other day it only made me more certain. So I kept my eye on him when he went to visit his brother—”

“Don’t play like this was some kind of plan,” Tony growled. “You put Loki in that cell. You sent the STRIKE team, I know you’re the one that Pepper told.”

“Well, yes. Admittedly, at the time I did not realise that the STRIKE team was—”

“Did not realise? You sent them to kill me and capture Loki—”

“Not to kill you, but even if I had, you have been *killing SHIELD agents*, Stark—”

“And you have known who I am from the *very* start,” Tony snarled. “You’re the one who *decided that Iron Man should be caught*. I saw the emails! My kidnapping was ordered by SHIELD. You *wanted* me kidnapped, tortured, *forced* into building *your* organisation the weapons they would need to take over the world!”

Fury frowned at that. “Stark—”

“No,” Loki said simply, his body flickering for a moment— and then he reappeared behind Fury, his knife at the man’s throat. “You have said *enough*.”

Fury held up his hands in the universal signal for surrender.

“*You* are the reason why we have suffered so much,” Tony continued. “I thought you were a good one— *an asshole*, yeah, but an asshole who wanted to do right by the world. But this whole time, you’ve been HYDRA. You’ve been working for the very people that SHIELD was *formed* to destroy.”

“Stark, use your *head*,” Fury snapped— and when Loki snarled and pressed his knife harder into Fury’s throat, he actually leaned forward *into* it, as if he were daring Loki to go the rest of the way. “Why would I do that? Why would I have ordered you caught when you had *just* signed a contract for those three helicarriers? Since you were gone we had to make do with the old engine design—”

“They wanted me to make them armours,” Tony cut in. “With a fleet of Iron Soldiers, there would be no need for eyes in the sky.”

“That still would have been killing the golden goose,” Fury replied. “It would never have been as beneficial as having you *willingly on our side*.”

Tony narrowed his eyes, because that— that was *logical*. But he wasn’t about to be derailed, not when they had come so far. Loki was watching Tony carefully, his knife still at the ready, just waiting for his say so. But Tony could tell that he wasn’t sure either— that he too was starting to doubt. Because Fury... was making actual *sense*.

“But you’ve got a Makluan ring,” Tony said, frowning. It was the most solid piece of all this Tony had to hold on to— the fact that Fury had one of the Makluan rings, which meant that he *had* to be a part of it all.

“A Maka-what?” Fury asked, frowning as well.

“Don’t play dumb,” Tony said. “JARVIS tracked a ring to this location, I *know* you must have one—”

“I have never played dumb in my *life*,” Fury snapped. “I honestly don’t know what you’re talking about.”

And Tony went to try again, getting annoyed now— raising a repulsor because *this didn’t make any sense—*

‘Anthony.’ Tony glanced up to Loki, who looked even more uncertain now than he had before. ‘Use your own ring. He’s not lying.’

What? No, he— he *had* to be, because if Fury wasn’t lying then—

It really didn’t make any sense at all.

But Loki seemed sure, and Tony knew that if Loki said so, then... it had to be the truth.

So once again, Tony focused his attention the white ring he was wearing, and he met Fury’s gaze.

“Say it again,” he said. “Tell me the truth.”

Fury’s voice was firm. “I am not HYDRA,” he said. “I never have been, and I only realised what was going on when Loki spoke with Thor. I had nothing to do with your kidnapping, and I have been searching along with the Air Force to try and *find* you. I have no clue what rings you’re talking about, and... Tony? I’m actually *glad* that you’re still alive.”

And Tony’s eyes widened, because... every single thing Fury said, every single *word* was the *truth*.

“But... if you’re not the one who ordered my capture...” Tony whispered, “Then... who was?”

He had spent all this time believing that Fury was the one behind all of this, had focused his rage and desire for revenge on that one recognisable face— but now it would seem that the true villain was *someone else entirely*.

And Tony didn’t know *who*.

“Anthony,” Loki said sharply, suddenly moving away from Fury and stepping around the desk— but Tony felt like he was caught in a loop. He couldn’t think of even a single person to suspect, which meant that it was either someone he hadn’t considered or, someone he didn’t even know.

Tony wasn't sure which option was *worse*—

“Anthony,” Loki said again, urgently this time as he gripped Tony's shoulder— ‘*Anthony, focus, there's something coming—*’

Tony spun as Loki pulled him around, *making* him look at the other side of the room where literal *darkness* had begun to seep under the door. It wasn't like the lights were dimming, or like someone was approaching from the other side of the door— this was as if someone had bottled pitch black and had poured it over the floor, a pool of it burrowing through the air and flooding into the room, consuming all that it touched until all that was left was just... nothingness.

It wasn't like anything that Tony had ever seen. He drew in a breath that didn't quite feel deep enough, and he could feel his heart beginning to race in his chest—

And as the pure shadow began to swallow everything, turning the whole room to complete and utter darkness— Tony retracted his gauntlet, and reached out with trembling fingers to take Loki's hand.

Monsters are real

Chapter Notes

So, I split this one again, which makes it the second chapter of this fight that had to be. Ah well, I guess the end just gets put off a bit longer xD

If there was one sensation that Tony was used to feeling— one emotion that he knew to be all encompassing, something which he had known his whole life and had so very often felt a slave to, it was the cloying crawl of fear as it bubbled up his throat. Oh yes, fear was something that he knew intimately, something that he had fought against, fallen prey to, been bitten by.

There were so many different fears, so many he had felt. His fear of water was something he had forced to bend to his will, while his fear of separation was a beast he had coaxed and smoothed until it became— not *tame*, but at least manageable.

But... a fear of the dark is not something so easily beaten.

Unlike those other fears, that of darkness was not born of trauma, or of something from his past. It's a fear that *every* person has experienced at some point in their lives— that fear of the unknown, fear of those monsters that lurk in the corner of your eye, in the depths of the shadows where no one can venture without going mad.

Such a fear can be managed, or ignored. It can be shoved to the back of the mind, forced into a corner where it no longer casts a shadow. Because fear of the dark, usually, can be defeated by logic— because any sane person knows that the monsters are a figment of imagination, the result of instincts formed thousands of years ago, instincts that have long since gone out of date.

Most people say such a fear is irrational, but. It isn't.

Because sometimes... the monsters are real.

When the darkness first began to seep under the door and into Fury's office, Tony truly did try his utmost to stay calm. His fingers were trembling, and his breath was coming a little faster than it was before— but he and Loki had faced so much worse than this and had managed to stay strong.

But as the darkness washed over them, Tony knew that it wasn't the normal absence of light. This was something else entirely— it was complete and utter *nothingness*. Tony could have waved his hand in front of his face and he wouldn't have been able to see it— even his HUD couldn't make any sense of anything that was going on around him.

In order to ground himself in the now, Tony had to focus on the rest of his senses— on the soft metallic whir of his suit, and the steady weight of Loki’s hand in his own. Their fingers curled tightly together to try and make sure that they did not let go, as there wasn’t another clear way of knowing where the other was.

“JARVIS?” Tony asked, his voice no more than a whisper.

“Sir.”

Tony nearly sighed in relief at the answer— he wasn’t sure why, but there was something about the darkness that had given him the irrational concern that JARVIS might have been cut off. And speaking of *irrational*—

‘Loki?’

‘Anthony.’

Oh, thank god. *‘Can you see anything?’*

‘No. I—’ Loki paused for a moment. Then— *‘I have tried to form a light with my seiðr, and I know that it is working because I can feel it. But I cannot see a thing.’*

Tony could hear real concern mixed with the worry in Loki’s voice, and even despite the urgency of the situation they had found themselves in, Tony couldn’t not try to comfort him.

‘They haven’t done anything to our eyes. I can see my HUD.’

‘Then it’s in the air,’ Loki said, sounding firmer now.

‘If this darkness can stop even your seiðr—’

‘It’s not stopping it. It is just... heavier than the light that I can create.’

The words themselves didn’t make a whole lot of sense to Tony, but he could *feel* enough of Loki’s concern to know what he meant. The ring wasn’t blocking Loki’s seiðr, it was just smothering the light before their eyes could catch it.

The darkness wasn’t doing anything *to* them. It just meant they couldn’t see—

But when they knew they were surrounded by enemies, when Fury was still in the same room somewhere and they were not entirely familiar with the space they were in, that was more than enough.

Tony was just about to ask Loki if he had a plan when he heard the click of the door, and the whirr of a weapon—

And Loki said— *‘I can hear something—’*

—in the same moment that JARVIS exclaimed— “Sir!”

It was odd to hear the sound of a weapon without being able to see the corresponding flash—and it was only because Loki yanked Tony to the side that he avoided being hit by something that detonated to his right.

And Tony realised that in their initial shock and confusion from the darkness, he and Loki had made one vital mistake—

They hadn't *moved*—

And it was clear that whoever was attacking them knew exactly where they were.

Noise *exploded* along with something to the left as more weapons began to be fired, and Tony was willing to *bet* that they would all be Chitauri guns. He wasn't sure if it was better or worse that it seemed like whoever was firing them couldn't see very well either, because it meant that their aim was off but it also meant that there were shots screeching through the entire room.

Loki's hand jerked suddenly in his, and Tony only just managed to hang on to him. Tony raised his other hand but he didn't dare fire, since he had no way of knowing for *sure* that he wouldn't hit Loki by accident—

Tony had a fleeting thought for Fury, but the man was on his own. He was going to have to find some kind of cover himself.

Tony wondered how the HYDRA agents – for surely, they *must* have been HYDRA agents no matter if Tony couldn't see them – were managing through the darkness. He knew that this had to be the work of the final Makluan ring, it *had* to be, but that would mean that only one person was controlling it. Or were the soldiers just as blind as Tony and Loki?

Hoping that was the case, the pair moved forward together, sure that they would be able to get out of the situation before it grew a whole lot worse. As they dodged the blasts from the guns and tried to make their way toward the door, Tony finally heard word from the others over the comms.

“Tony, what's going on?” Steve asked. “We're trying to get to you but there's something black coming down the stairwell, we're not going to be able to see—”

“No, don't come up here,” Tony snapped. “If you do, you won't be able to see us and we might end up catching each other in the crossfire!”

“Tony, there has to be a way.” This time, Tony recognised the voice as Barnes'. “I won't leave you two knuckleheads by yourselves—”

“Then try to find a way to counteract the darkness. Otherwise, you can't help and you're going to have to wait, now shut up and let me *think*,” Tony snarled into his comms. “J, unless they say something important, mute them all.”

Tony had no time to wait and see whether JARVIS would actually do it– they were still under fire, they were still stumbling through the darkness, trying to find something to hit without

losing track of each other or getting hit by something worse.

Tony could still hear the tell-tale sound of Chitauri guns, a melody that he knew all too well for it had haunted his nightmares during the little sleep he had managed these past couple of days. The heat of the blasts exploded far too close for comfort, causing he and Loki to duck and scurry, feeling like rats in a trap. They almost ran into a wall at one point, and that gave them something to put their backs to— but it *also* gave them the perception of being cornered. Loki tried to hold a shield of seiðr in place while Tony led them along the wall in the direction that he could only hope was correct. They did manage to get through a doorway and then they kept on going, aiming to get *away*, to get to the edge of the darkness and find a place where they would be able to see what they were doing.

And as they moved, there was one thought curling through Tony's mind that he just had to give voice to.

'Should we get out of here?'

Loki seemed to hesitate— and Tony knew exactly why. It was a mistake that they had made in the past, a mistake that had almost cost them dearly— because they *had* the means to simply leave, and no one would be able to stop them. And yet, as their fingers tightened together and they ducked down under yet another blast, Tony knew that they were both thinking exactly the same thing.

They couldn't leave now, not when this was their chance to end things for *good*. There wouldn't be another opportunity like this, and they both knew it. They'd arranged everything exactly the way that they'd needed to, making sure that as much of HYDRA as they could manage was all in the same place, and they'd had more help in the attack than they'd ever thought they would be able to count on. All they needed to do was find a way around this darkness, and in the grand scheme of things? That surely wasn't going to be too hard.

As the decision to stay became more and more clear, so too did the need for a strategy— because they still could not *see*, and it was all they could do to try and keep from getting struck down.

And through it all, Tony kept his tight grip on Loki's hand, not wanting to let go, afraid that if he did amongst this impervious darkness, he would never be able to find Loki again.

And maybe that was an irrational fear as well, but... then again, maybe not—

There was an explosion that was *far* too close, the heat from the gun searing Tony's bare hand. Tony jumped away from the pain instinctively—

And Loki's fingers slipped from his.

Tony tried to make a grab back to the side, but it was already too late—

'Loki!'

'I'm here—'

‘Where—?’

There was a flash of, of *something* through the air, sharp and bright and—

It looked a little like electricity, and Tony wondered if it might have been Thor—

But it couldn’t have been, because Steve had agreed that the Avengers would stay put, would wait for Tony and Loki to find a way to get out of the darkness before coming up to join the final charge.

However, Thor was not the only person currently in the Triskelion with power over static electricity. Because Loki had the yellow ring— so the lightning must have been him.

Somehow, strangely, it would seem that the yellow ring was enough to break through the darkness.

So far, it was the only thing that seemed to have worked. The darkness felt so thick as to be heavy, and even JARVIS couldn’t sense anything through it. It seemed like everything had been consumed by it, so that even the sensors on Tony’s suit couldn’t get a reading. Tony could still see his HUD right in front of him, but every single gauge and monitor and stat was coming up with entirely nothing.

And thus Tony would have felt entirely, completely *lost*—

If not for one small detail, just one single piece of logic that he was able to grab hold of and use to force his way through to a solution.

Because if Loki was using the yellow ring, and the flash of the lighting was cutting through the darkness when even Loki’s seiðr could not, then that must mean that the rings themselves were able to counteract the powers of the *other* rings.

Unfortunately, though, Tony didn’t have the fire ring— that one was with Rhodey. The ring that powered the green energy blasts was with Barnes, and Loki had the lightning ring. Tony had only the purple and the white, neither of which were particularly conducive to creating light—

Except, what was that one thing that was more *enlightening* than anything else?

Tony might not have had any of the rings that could have lit up the room, but he *did* have a ring that would allow him to *see*. After all, the white Makluan ring had allowed Killian to be able to see through Loki’s illusions that day they had visited Stark Tower— so why wouldn’t it allow Tony to see through this darkness?

It wasn’t like anything Tony had tried to accomplish with the rings before. He was used to just letting them do their thing, letting the white ring tell him when someone was lying, or allowing the purple to make the molecules of Loki’s manacles fall apart rather than trying to shift them into something else. The one time that he had pushed at a ring to *make* it do what he wanted was when he had used the blue ring to flood Neuschwanstein Castle—

But he was just as angry now as he had been then, and just as determined – if not more so – to see all this reach its fucking finale. So with that perfect kick of adrenaline that made everything so very clear, he closed his eyes and thought hard about how much he wanted to *win* this day, how much he *needed* both he and Loki to be entirely safe.

It was such an odd sensation, because– it wasn't like he could actually *see* what was going on. It was more like he *knew* where everything was, like there was just an impression in his mind.

And... oh god.

Somehow, impossibly, it was *worse* than Tony had thought it was.

He and Loki were surrounded on all sides. They weren't in Fury's office anymore– in their attempt to get clear – or, as Tony now realised, while they were being *herded* – they had ended up in an almost entirely empty office space, larger and more open than even Pepper's in SI. There were floor-to-ceiling windows all along one wall, looking out over the Potomac. The sheen of Rhodey's shield pressed right up against the window, which explained why JARVIS hadn't been able to get through yet from the outside—

But for now, their surroundings did not matter– what *did* was the people that he and Loki were surrounded *by*.

There were several dozen agents spread around them, all with their weapons aimed at Loki. They appeared to be wearing some kind of gear on their heads, something that the bearer of the final ring must have been using to let them see through the darkness. There were more of them than Tony had thought there should be, given the numbers that had surrendered, as well as those that had been slaughtered out on the bridge and down on the lower levels. They seemed to be the remains of the STRIKE team, along with some others in suits who must have been the other HYDRA leaders. It would appear that the heads of the beast had gathered together to deal with the clustered attacks on the other bases and the release of information, which had gone exactly to Tony and Loki's plan—

But they should have planned for the Chitauri weapons that were all aimed at Loki's head. Because while Tony was on the fringe of the group– Loki was right in the thick of it all, the main target for the majority of the guns.

It was a situation that was *far* too familiar for Tony's liking. He had only just got Loki back, he couldn't lose him *again*—

“Loki!” Tony cried out—

And Loki actually turned toward his voice, his eyes flashing wildly as he tried to find Tony, as he tried to see through the impenetrable darkness.

Tony wanted to call out again, but then someone shot him in the gut– not with an alien weapon, thankfully, but it was enough to cause him to jolt to the side before he was able to turn and *fire*.

Because now, he could *see*— so he raised his hands and began to fight back, repulsors cutting through the dark and striking the agents down without needing to fear about catching Loki in the crossfire. Tony ‘saw’ Loki’s expression shift as he heard the sound of the repulsors, and then he too began fighting in earnest— no doubt hoping that whatever Tony had done would be enough for him to stay out of Loki’s way.

Even as he continued firing, Tony focused on the connection between them, linking their minds and trying to *show* Loki what he knew, what the white ring was telling him—

And when Loki suddenly raised his hands and threw out several blasts of lightning that went dancing from person to person, sending a good four clattering down to the ground in a matter of seconds, Tony knew with a vicious grin that it had worked.

Loki was not in the best position— ‘seeing’ himself through Tony’s eyes and then fighting with that information must have felt rather like controlling an avatar in a video game, and yet it allowed him to at least know where to aim. They still were not close to one another, but it gave them the only edge they needed—

And then, the tide of the battle began to change.

It was a testament to Loki’s skill that he was able to fight as well as he was, the blades of his knives flashing through the air. It was clear his movements were not flowing half so well as they normally would have, but he was still more than a match for the agents around him. Tony’s eyes remained closed as he let the white ring tell him where his opponents would be, his repulsors cutting down any agent who came after him as he tried to fight his way toward Loki—

But then someone threw themselves bodily at him rather than bothering with their weapon, knocking him to the side and sending a blast from his repulsors off course. Tony fought them off, pushing and shoving, releasing flares and spurts of coolant even as his hands grappled for purchase on the person’s body. His nanotech suit was a force to be reckoned with—

But then one of the agent’s hands began to glow a bright orange, and the suit started to groan at the rising temperature.

Goddamn it, not this, not *again*—

“I thought we got all of you,” Tony snarled, tearing his hand free from the agent’s grasp and then shooting the guy right through the head.

“Oh, you got *most of them*,” a voice replied— low and amused, as if he thought there was nothing to be worried about. Tony began to turn with a snarl, ready to *destroy* the cocky bastard—

But then he heard Loki cry out in pain, and Tony realised that his distraction had cut Loki off from his eyes. Unable to see, Loki hadn’t moved out of the way of an attack quick enough, and he had been hit in his already injured side.

Tony charged forward to help, not even thinking straight—

But before he'd flown even a meter he was knocked down to the ground, his distraction having caught him out *again*—

Then a hand slammed down on top of the arc reactor, a gleaming ring as black as obsidian resting on one of the fingers—

And then Tony's bright green reactor went as dark as the rest of the room, and his suit became no more useful than a hunk of scrap metal strapped over his body.

It should have been impossible— even older versions of his reactor had withstood the power of Loki's sceptre in the past, and his suit was protected by Loki's seiðr. But... he knew that those rings could do incredible things with a clear enough directive— and it would seem that this person had managed to twist the concept of darkness well enough to dim the power of Tony's armour.

And then... there was nothing Tony could do.

He could struggle and he could fight, but he was still only one guy— and now, the suit was hindering more than it was helping, weighing him down as his hands were dragged behind his back and a Chitauri gun was pressed to his head.

His breathing was heavy as he tugged at his arms, but any attempt was useless. He was *stuck*, and there was nothing he could do but meet Loki's gaze as the darkness *finally* began to dissipate.

There were two agents holding Tony down— both of them injected with Extremis, remnants of the deal Killian had made with HYDRA. The rest of the agents all lifted the gear on their heads as the darkness melted back into the shadows, and Tony had to blink as the room was suddenly full of orange light from the setting sun. As well as the two Extremis-enhanced, there was also another man behind Tony— the one who was wearing the ring. And it was *he* who Tony spoke to.

“You're the one who's behind all this, aren't you?” Tony asked. “All this pain, all this time... it's been *you*. And I don't even know who the *fuck* you are.”

“I suppose the fact that you don't know only proves the depth of your failure,” the man replied.

“And yet, you could not resist showing your face now,” Loki said sharply. He was still several yards away from Tony— close enough that Tony could see the anger in his gaze, but far enough away that he would not be able to get to Tony before the agent holding the Chitauri gun could pull the trigger.

And while Tony couldn't see the man behind him — though he was willing to *swear* he knew that voice from somewhere — Loki, standing where he was, would have full view. And from his expression, it looked like Loki knew him, too.

“You could have hidden your identity with your ring, even if you lightened the rest of the room,” Loki said. “You *want* us to know who you are.”

There was a pause, as if the man was thinking about it. But, then—

“No,” he said simply. “I merely do not care. After today, you will not be getting free ever again. It doesn’t matter whether you have seen my face or not.”

And Tony fucking *knew* that voice—

It was someone high up in SHIELD, obviously, someone that Tony must have spoken to at some point, just— probably not more than once or twice. And as Tony’s gaze slid over the large room once again, he realised... he *did* recognise it. This was where a person would go if they were meeting with someone even higher up than the Director of SHIELD. Someone like... the Secretary of the World Security Council.

And as the man came around Tony’s side to stand slightly in front of him, Tony saw that he had been right— he did know that voice.

Alexander Pierce was not a person that Tony had run into often, but he had met him on a day that was rather ingrained into Tony’s memory— the day that Loki had attacked New York.

Pierce had tried to take Loki then, as well as the Tesseract. He and the STRIKE team had managed to hold on to the sceptre, but Thor had taken both Loki and the Tesseract back to Asgard— though of course, it was clear that he had only managed to hold on to *one* of those things. Pierce, it would seem, had succeeded in getting his hands on Loki after all.

And it was... a little anticlimactic, to be honest. Because after all those months of expecting the one behind it all to be *Fury*, it turned out to be someone that Tony hadn’t even considered. Plus, the fact that all of this didn’t even seem to be personal, that it really was that they had been caught up in a web so much bigger than what anyone else had realised— that was a little... humbling.

HYDRA were on their way to bringing down the rest of the world, and they didn’t care about the destruction they wrought in their path. All the people who had died, from Yinsen to Tony’s mother— all the pain and suffering, from the way that he and Loki had been treated in their cells to the way that Barnes had been brainwashed and forced into a life he did not want— *all* of it was because of HYDRA.

The organisation named after a mythological monster... was worse than the monster itself.

“I do have to ask,” Tony said, grasping at straws and— yeah, stalling, because— well, because he was freaking *terrified*, and stalling is his go-to reaction to these kinds of situations. “How *did* you get your hands on the Makluan rings? It doesn’t seem a stretch to work out that the ten rings belonged to— well, the *Ten Rings*, so how did HYDRA get them? I thought you’d all have chosen little mini Red Skull earrings, that seems more up your alley.”

“These?” Pierce said, turning his hand slightly so that the black ring – no longer gleaming quite so menacingly – glinted slightly in the orange light that was streaming in through the window. “Oh, these are relics. HYDRA has been in possession of this one for decades, and when we learned that there were more we knew that we had to have them. They originally all belonged to the legendary leader of the Ten Rings, but that once proud organisation is hardly

anything now. They fell apart to greed and disorganisation, and they lapped up anything we were willing to give them.”

Pierce, it seemed, was a fan of the good old monologue. Unfortunately, Tony couldn't see a way to take advantage of it— he was pinned, and Loki wouldn't be able to make a move any faster than the HYDRA agent could pull the trigger.

“So you stole their rings and gave them scraps in return,” Tony said, still buying for time regardless as he glanced to the corner of his HUD. JARVIS was quiet, clearly trying not to distract him, but... Tony was counting the minutes since the darkness had dissipated.

“We gave them *power* in return,” Pierce countered. “If not for HYDRA, the Ten Rings and AIM would have been *nothing*—”

“Well, they're nothing *now*,” Tony interjected. “We destroyed them—”

“But you haven't destroyed us. There is no point in continuing to fight, Stark. You've lost.”

“You know... you're not the first person to tell me that,” Tony pointed out. He glanced over to Loki, and saw his partner watching all of it with a sharp gaze. *Waiting*. Tony could only hope that an opportunity would present itself, because right now— things were looking pretty fucking dire.

“But I will be the last,” Pierce said. “Don't waste your breath.”

“What if it's not a waste?” Tony taunted, infusing his voice with all the confidence that he certainly was *not* feeling. “Maybe I'm not fighting. Maybe, I'm just stalling.”

“If you are, I am not certain what you're hoping to achieve,” Pierce said, his voice still almost pleasant. “I already told you. There is no way that you're going to come back from this.”

He turned away from Tony, then, and jerked his head at the agent who was still holding a Chitauri gun to Tony's temple.

“You have a choice now, Loki,” Pierce said, apparently done dealing with Tony's bullshit. *Damn*. “Either you *submit*, you lay down your weapons and you swear that you will not fight back— or we will kill Tony Stark right here and right now.”

Loki's expression didn't change— it was clear that he had been expecting this. And while Tony had hope that maybe, they *might* be able to get out of it, since JARVIS was still monitoring everything and displaying the results on Tony's HUD— there *was* no guarantee. But what Tony did know was that if HYDRA took Loki now, if they locked him back in chains and forced him onto one of those metal slabs he and Loki had seen in Turkey— if they ripped Loki apart and tore out his seiðr, then... Loki wouldn't be coming back from it. Most likely at *all*, if undoubtedly not in one piece.

So if there was one thing now that Tony was certain of, it was that Loki needed to *go*.

Tony had left Loki in Edinburgh. It had been the hardest thing he had ever done, but it had been his only choice— just like it was Loki’s only choice now. It had to be.

But the emotions swirling through their connection were impossible to misinterpret— and Tony stared at his partner with a desperate plea.

‘Lokes.’

Loki’s eyes finally flashed up to meet Tony’s then— and Tony did the only thing he could.

‘Remember our promise.’

But Tony knew what was going through Loki’s head without even needing to be told— for it felt like Tony’s own words from less than an hour before were bouncing between them, crackling through the air.

If you are not still by my side at the end of this, then there won’t have been a point to any of it.

And this... this was what it all came down to. All of their fighting, all of their preparation— all of the killing and all of the pain. It all came down to this moment, where they would have to decide— would one of them live, or would they *both* die trying?

Tony knew which one he would prefer it to be— but he wasn’t sure that Loki agreed.

‘Please.’

“No.”

For a moment, Tony thought that Loki had been talking to him— that he was telling Tony he would not leave, that he was going to stay and fight and possibly send them *both* to their deaths, when it only *needed* to be one of them. It was no less than what he had expected, and yet it still sent a shard of ice splitting through Tony’s heart, as if Loki had shifted into his Jötunn skin and was slicing into his chest.

But then he realised that the word had not been spoken in his head— it had been spoken *out loud*, a refusal of Pierce’s final offer.

Tony could feel the man behind him pause as the tension in the air grew thick enough to cut.

“I beg your pardon?”

“I said *no*,” Loki repeated, lifting his bloodied SHIELD-issue knife and baring his teeth as he did so. “I will not submit to you.”

“Then Stark will die,” Pierce said, sounding entirely unapologetic, but— perhaps a little confused.

“Go ahead,” Loki snapped. “Kill him. I don’t care.”

And... Tony knew the truth. He could feel it with the ring that still graced his finger, but he didn't need the ring to be sure— he *knew* that Loki was lying. Of course he did, because he knew that Loki loved him more than anything, and he knew that Loki wouldn't want to see him dead.

But... he *couldn't* be pleased, because he also knew that Loki wasn't planning on leaving. Because if that were the case, Loki would have done so already— he would have gathered his seiðr and stepped onto the branches of Yggdrasil, and let the World Tree carry him away to safety.

But Loki hadn't, because Loki *wouldn't*—

...right?

It seemed that Pierce, too, was a little doubtful.

“Do not think that I am bluffing,” he said. “Stark might have been a— what was the term? A *golden goose*, but he is far more trouble than he's worth. *You* are the one we want alive, Loki, and if you do not come quietly, then Stark is going to meet his end in an incredibly painful way.” It was clear now that *Pierce* was the one hesitating, because— Tony was all HYDRA had.

Pierce's intention with this move couldn't be more obvious— because HYDRA had known right from the very start that they couldn't beat Loki. They'd known it when they had locked him up, bound and muzzled and with no food— because they knew that unless Loki was broken down, there was no way that they would ever be able to force him into submission. They could cut off his words, and they could weaken his body— but even then they could not *break* him. But now they thought that they had been able to isolate a weakness— that by getting hold of Tony and threatening *him*, they would be able to make Loki do whatever he wanted.

And maybe it might seem that way, after all that had occurred— and after all that HYDRA had witnessed.

But... truth is. He and Loki didn't make each other weak.

They made each other *stronger*—

“I will *never* surrender to you,” Loki snarled— and he raised his hand to throw out a blast of power— but rather than a flash of green, there was instead a bright *crack* of yellow—

And then multiple bolts of lightning came splitting through the air.

Pierce threw himself out of the way with a yelp, but he was not the intended target. It struck Tony directly in the centre of his chest, the electricity arcing through Tony's suit and sparking at the dead circuitry, bringing it all back to life as the power of Loki's ring counteracted the darkness.

Tony hunched over— and the agents holding him let go with a yell as they were electrocuted —

The man who had been *stupid* enough to press his gun directly against Tony's temple suffered the same, the metal conducting the electricity like a *dream*—

And then Loki was charging forward, the blade of the stolen knife swirling with his green seiðr as he stepped over the bodies of the agents who had fallen to his lightning.

Tony used the purple ring to nudge his nanotech along, reforging connections that the black ring had forced to go dark—

And by the time he straightened, his suit was back online with power at 400% capacity— and his lips curved up into a vicious smile of anticipation.

Dead before hitting the ground

Chapter Notes

I just want to thank **Rabentochter** again if only because I haven't in a while and she's been reading through all these chapters for me before I post them and assuring me they're all right whenever I get anxious xD So, thank you Sesil! ♥

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

There's nothing quite like the feeling of so much power— it's a heady thing, *knowing* that with a simple thought and the flick of a finger you could be the cause of so much destruction.

Tony had felt it before— the first time he was in the suit, the first time he'd flown, the first time he'd fired one of the repulsors. Hell, the first time Thor had hit him with lightning. But, this time, with the nanotech suit that far outstripped any of the others, with not only a mage at his back and power in his hand but also the presence of a *target*, a direction to aim that destruction in without any need to hold back—

There was a chance that he could have felt drunk on it— it would have been all too easy to let it go to his head. But he'd learned that lesson, he knew that was something he couldn't afford to risk.

So rather than just letting the power explode outward, Tony focused on where he could see Loki already fighting, his knife and eyes glowing green as he cut down agent after agent. There was a green shield of seiðr flickering around him, keeping the Chitauri weapons at bay— and although he remained a little stilted from the injury on his side, his movements were still powerful enough to appear otherworldly, and Tony caught himself smirking as he moved to follow Loki's lead.

He charged forward, his feet lifting up from the ground as he fired his repulsors and complementary weapons systems in quick succession, knowing that this time, they had an actual *fighting chance*—

But of course, things were not going to be that *easy*. One does not simply win a fight with HYDRA after a single power-up— they were still in force, they still had their guns, and Pierce still had his ring.

And as Tony turned his gaze on Pierce — Pierce, who was now separated from Tony by the agents who had started to close further in — the man lifted his hand so that the ring on his finger glinted black, clearly planning on bringing back the darkness—

And Tony was too far away, there were too many others between them— even as he raised his own hand to fire a repulsor he was forced to redirect the shot at an agent instead. There were too many of them— he had no doubt that he and Loki would win eventually, but if they

wanted a chance at doing so without having to face the dark once again then they were going to have to be quick, quicker than they *could* be—

But then, just before Pierce was able to call on the power of the ring, he was struck in the back by a blast from a repulsor— a repulsor that Tony had not fired.

Tony fired at another agent to give himself a second's respite, and turned to face the direction the shot had come from—

Barnes was standing in the doorway, his hand raised and his lips twisted into a snarl. And as he ran forward, preparing to engage in the fight, the other Avengers *all* ran in with him. Every single one of them— Steve, Natasha, Clint, Thor, *and* Hulk, all of them going straight for the HYDRA agents. Tony's grin was back in an instant, finally *pleased* to see them as they came in to join the fray.

The fighting was brutal, none of the Avengers holding back— it was clear after all that these were HYDRA, not a single person loyal to *SHIELD* among them. The room was erupting with noise but even so, everyone's head turned when the windows burst into a shower of glass—

And then JARVIS stormed inside, several of the black suits swarming through the windows to join the fray, repulsors blaring at such a rate now that the flash of them was near blinding.

Rhodey followed on JARVIS' tail, wearing the same suit that he had worn in Edinburgh and then China. And he didn't hesitate, either— his hands were already blazing when he flew through the window, and then he was at Tony's side in moments.

“Hey Tones, how're things?”


“Oh, not bad— you know, same old—”

Rhodey stayed by Tony for a few moments, and they fought side by side, spinning in the air with their hands outstretched. Rhodey's armour also occasionally spat out torrents of fire that Tony was rather sure had nothing whatsoever to do with anything he had built into that suit, but Tony didn't mind so long as he was able to stay out of the way. But the agents below were forced to deal with the flames, and while the few that were Extremis-enhanced had no problems, it was certainly effective on the others.

They were pulled apart by the tide of the battle, and then Tony found himself fighting beside Barnes instead, twisting around him and watching his back while the ex-assassin fought his way through a pile of agents, forcing his way forward in the direction of Pierce—

Then Tony flew up high to get a better vantage point before charging back down, tackling an agent that was trying to sneak around Loki's flank and smashing him into the ground. Loki turned to him with a short grin before they put their backs to each other, Tony's hands and Loki's blade raised, seiðr and repulsor blasts entwining through the air and keeping back anyone who even *tried* to get close. They moved together in perfect unison, once again just as aware of the other's body as they were of their own. There was no risk of tripping over each other's feet, no accidentally catching the other in the crossfire— they knew where to be, how

to watch the other's blind spots, how to *move* in a way that they were fighting as a perfect team.

fighting back to back

And they weren't the only two pieces of the puzzle— the Avengers were fighting all around them as well, keeping Tony and Loki from growing overwhelmed. Tony could see Thor was smashing things with Mjölnir, causing just as much damage as Hulk was with his fists. The pair of them were sending the HYDRA agents running while Clint picked them off from a vantage point on top of a desk, covered by Rhodey's orange shield and a torrent of repulsors— while Nat and Steve were defending the doorway. Barnes was still in the thick of it while JARVIS ducked in and out of it all, his suits taking hits for those that needed protection from the alien guns.

So while the Avengers and— and the Loki Retrieval Squad (plus Loki) were not quite working as a perfect team, they were certainly on the same side— and it was beginning to grow clearer by the moment as to which way the battle was going to turn.

But the Chitauri weapons were doing damage. JARVIS couldn't throw a suit in the way of every single shot, and in the hands of trained agents they were causing even the Hulk to call out in pain. And unless there was something they could do about them—

'Anthony,' Loki said, his voice cutting through Tony's thoughts. '*The ring.*'

Tony realised what Loki meant immediately— and he wasted no time focusing on the purple ring on his hand. He saw a glimmer of orange and trusted that Rhodey would cover he and Loki as he allowed his eyes to fall closed— and then the power of it exploded out from him and *all* of the Chitauri weapons in the room melted down to nothing.

The agents holding one of the weapons all cried out in surprise as the guns turned to goop in their hands. That done, it didn't take long for JARVIS and the Avengers to make quick work of them, bringing the HYDRA agents down to their knees and forcing them into submission —

And with the rest of the agents on the ropes, Tony and Loki moved in tandem toward the man who had been the *root cause* of all of this, preparing to finally strike the final blow—

But someone else beat them to it.

Just as they reached him, Barnes crouched down beside the unconscious Pierce, and he gripped Pierce's hand in the one that Tony and Loki had made for him— and then he *crushed* it in his grasp.

Pierce woke with a scream as his bones shattered— and when Barnes let go, he took the time to pull the ring from Pierce's broken finger before raising his gauntleted right hand and aiming at Pierce's head.

Tony hadn't seen this kind of rage on Barnes' face before— not even before he had come back into himself. As the Winter Soldier, his expression had remained either blank, or the wild

snap of a cornered animal—

But now, his face was twisted with such an incredible fury that it had *Tony's* hair prickling, and he even knew that it wasn't directed at him.

Pierce was obviously in a hell of a lot of pain— his breathing was heavy, but he still managed to spit out a word that Tony did not recognise as anything other than simply *Russian*—

“Желание.”

“*No*,” Barnes snarled, and the sudden spike in his already heightened anger was all Tony needed to understand exactly *what* Pierce was trying to do—

But—

“Семнадцать!” Pierce tried—

“That will *not* work on me—”

“*Ржавый*—”

Barnes didn't wait to hear any more. He wrapped his metal arm around Pierce's throat, and then pulled tight enough to choke off his words— but not enough to cut off his air entirely.

Then Barnes looked up to Loki, holding out his right hand— and despite the myriad of things that had happened in those last few moments, he didn't have to say anything. The look in his eyes was enough. This wasn't something that he was *telling* Loki to do, it was an offer— because he knew that Loki disliked mind magic, but... all three of them knew it *needed* to be done.

And Loki's expression was pinched as he stepped forward to slide the pink ring off Barnes' finger from under the gauntlet — taking far more care than Loki usually had in the past while taking a ring from someone, Tony might add — and then he turned to face Pierce.

Pierce looked like he wanted to say something, but Barnes held him tight— and then Loki's hand slammed down upon his forehead.

Tony watched as Loki's expression clouded in concentration, and as Pierce's glazed over with yet more pain. For a moment he wondered what Pierce must be thinking, to have his mind invaded in such a terrible way— and yet not nearly so terrible as what he had done to Barnes. But only for a moment, because the truth was that Tony didn't really care. He only cared about how Loki was doing, and he prepared himself to comfort his partner the moment he pulled himself out of Pierce's no doubt horrible mind—

“Tony.”

Tony didn't want to turn away from Loki— not when this was *it*, when this was the moment they had come so very far to reach. But as he heard footsteps approach behind him, he knew that he had no choice.

Steve was the one who had spoken, and he was flanked by both Thor and Clint. Natasha was speaking quickly into her comms a few yards back, though she did glance over every now and then— and Hulk was distracted, holding several HYDRA agents upside-down by the ankles.

“Can this wait?” Tony asked. “I’m kind of in the middle of—”

“I’m not going to try and stop you,” Steve said. “But just... Tony, *Bucky*, think about this. You don’t want to become just like them—”

“You’ve killed before, Steve,” Tony cut in, his voice more than harsh. The Ten Rings – *HYDRA* – had used Steve before to try and force Tony into breaking. It hadn’t worked then, and Steve sure as hell wasn’t going to make him stop now. “And so have I. One more isn’t going to make a difference.”

“I know.” Steve spread his hands. “But this is—”

“We’re not going to change our mind.”

It wasn’t Tony who had spoken, and Steve’s gaze shifted to Barnes.

“You’ve won,” Steve said. “There is no need to—”

“Steve, we promised we’d stand together until the end of the line,” Barnes said, his voice a little tight. “But I’m not even asking you for that. I’m just asking you to step down while we rid the world of these Nazi bastards.”

Steve seemed to turn that over in his head for a while, but then— he gave Barnes a firm nod, and both Barnes and Tony turned back to the matter at hand.

Loki’s brow was furrowed, his lips turned down— and so Tony stepped closer, sliding his hand under Loki’s coat and against his back, mirroring the way they had done this so many times before. His presence provided Loki with that little bit of extra support, and it wasn’t much longer before Loki’s lips pressed together in a tight line, his eyes opened, and he took a step back from Pierce.

“Got it?” Tony asked, his fingers pressing into Loki’s back a little more firmly, his heart feeling like it was half lodged in his throat—

“Oh yes,” Loki replied, his gaze turning to meet Tony’s, his green eyes blazing with long-awaited triumph. “I most certainly did.”

They turned to Pierce together then, Tony’s hand shifting so it rested lightly on Loki’s waist— and Tony could see in Pierce’s eyes that he knew he had lost. He wasn’t going to be one of those that tried to talk his way out of this, or who was arrogant enough to believe that he could still get out of this alive.

It was clear that Pierce could see the inevitability of his situation—

But that didn't mean that he was done. It seemed that, despite this being the end for him, Pierce was going to try and hurt Tony right up to the very last moment—

For his expression was burning with conviction, and when he spoke, his voice was without any kind of fear.

“They still don't know who you are, do they?” he asked, clearly trying to provoke Tony into doing something stupid, or at the very least trying to goad the Avengers into being curious and therefore causing problems later on. But—

“I am *Tony fucking Stark*,” Tony snarled. “And *that's* all that should matter.”

Steve took a lurching step forward. “Tony, think about this, he doesn't need to—”

Tony fired his repulsor, and it silenced Steve just as surely as it burned right through Pierce's ribcage. And then, for good measure— Barnes shifted his arm, and Loki slashed out with his knife and sliced straight across Pierce's throat.

Pierce was dead before hitting the ground, blood seeping from the ruined remains of his throat, but none from the smouldering flesh of his chest.

“Grow another head now, you bastard,” Tony spat.

And then, without another glance, Barnes, Loki, and Tony all turned their backs.

Pierce didn't deserve any more bothering with. He was gone, he couldn't hurt them again— and the information Loki had taken from him would hopefully be more than enough to bring down the *rest* of HYDRA.

Loki seemed to think that it was— and Tony trusted his judgement.

Despite the fact that there were still a few agents groaning on the floor, and a few more struggling as the Avengers and JARVIS restrained them, there was no longer any kind of threat. They were still on high alert of course, they were too used to things going wrong not to be— but it was enough that they were able to turn to each other with sighs which proved they *knew* that this chapter, at least, was coming to a close. And as Tony stepped further into Loki's space and Loki wrapped his arms tightly around Tony's back and shoulders, Tony finally allowed himself to take a breath.

“We did it,” Loki whispered, his lips brushing over the top of Tony's ear.

“Yeah,” Tony replied softly, tightening his hold around Loki's shoulders and pressing a kiss under his ear before leaning back with a small smile. “Yeah, we did.”

But that didn't mean that it was over—

And it was clear that Tony wasn't the only one with that thought running through his mind.

“Now what?” Barnes asked— but his voice was soft as his gaze skimmed over the way that Tony and Loki stayed pressed close, even as they turned to face him.

And, okay, there were a few things Tony could have said in answer to that question. He could have mentioned all the pieces of their plan that would now hopefully all fall into place, or he could have said something about needing to speak to the media, or dealing with the Avengers, or with the inevitable fallout from all they'd done. But, to be totally honest?

They had just brought down the organisation that had been the base cause of all their pain and suffering— they finally had not only their revenge, but the hope that they could live free from needing to continually look over their shoulder. That they could be *safe*. Because while there might be a few branches left here and there, they had *finally* ripped out the roots— and all that was left would wither away and die.

And in the face of that achievement, Tony thought that they probably deserved a bit of a break—

Not to mention after everything else they had suffered. Loki was still injured, and he had only *just* come out of captivity— and even if Tony hadn't been told by Thor, he would have been able to guess that HYDRA hadn't offered Loki even a single scrap of food.

So rather than mentioning anything about plans or interviews or yet more violence, Tony instead glanced between Bucky and Loki with a specific kind of groan.

“I vote we find something to *eat*,” he said. “I don't suppose anyone knows if there's a shawarma joint around here? It really is good after a fight, and I'm *starving*. ”

“That does sound like a good idea,” Loki agreed, leaning a little more into Tony's side— and Tony curled his arm more tightly around Loki's waist, recognising that Loki was looking for some support just as much as he wanted the closeness. Still, Tony turned his head and pressed a kiss to Loki's cheek, giving off the impression that it was *just* so that they could be close, and not for any other reason. The Avengers might have fought on their side, but that didn't mean that things between them were fine and dandy. Especially not with what they all *still* seemed to think about Loki— and Tony instinctively *flinched* away from the thought of letting them see any weakness at all on Loki's part.

And besides, it wasn't like it was even that much of a lie— because Tony knew that neither of them would be letting go any time soon regardless.

“I could go for food,” Rhodey agreed as he stepped a little nearer, his faceplate folding back but otherwise remaining inside his suit. “I haven't eaten anything since that banana cake—”

“Of which you ate four pieces,” Barnes cut in, the words a low grumble spoken under his breath as if he were, for some reason, a little put *out* by that fact.

“It was good cake—”

“It was *not*—”

“As interesting as it is to listen to you telling Rhodes he *shouldn't* have liked your cake, Barnes, will you be joining us for dinner or not?” Loki asked— and there was enough

exhaustion mixed in with the bite to his tone that it stopped both Rhodey and Barnes in their tracks—

Though from their matching smiles, it was clear that they both were feeling just as giddy about the whole situation as Tony was. It still felt so incredibly surreal— they had managed to *defeat HYDRA*, they had *won*, and... here they were fighting about the quality of 21st century bananas.

To be honest... it was kind of perfect. *This* was all Tony needed— Loki and Barnes were his family now, and Rhodey... well, he wasn't entirely back in Tony's good graces quite yet, but helping with the rescue had certainly been a step in the right direction.

Tony had gone so long thinking that the only person he could properly trust was Loki, but then he had found Barnes, and Rhodey had come back to prove that even though he had made mistakes, he was willing to stand with Tony.

The Avengers, however... well. They hadn't exactly been at Tony's side, but it was impossible to deny that they had helped. And Tony could only hope that it would help he and Loki in their future plans, that having been *seen* with the Avengers on their side would continue to sway the court of public opinion, if not the courts themselves.

But that was all something to worry about in the future.

Right now, Tony needed to get Loki some food, and then to somewhere he could heal. Though, speaking of the Avengers—

It wasn't that he was complaining, but... he had been expecting some kind of response. Either that Steve would step in and tell them that they couldn't go and get shawarma, that there was some kind of clean up or whatever that needed to be done first. Or that Natasha or Clint would try to make them stay for a SHIELD debrief with Fury, or perhaps that Thor would demand to be allowed to speak with Loki before they left—

Or at the very least, that someone would try to arrest them—

And it was only when Tony turned to find the Avengers all staring at him with wide, shocked eyes, their expressions a total picture of horrified revelation that he realised his mistake.

Because... they'd heard him request shawarma after a fight before, hadn't they? And it would appear that they had finally made a rather obvious connection.

“Ah,” Tony said. “Oops?”

Chapter End Notes

The art in this chapter is by the amazing **Rabentochter**, and you can find it on tumblr [here!](#)

Struck by a ghost

When Steve heard those damning words, it took him a few moments to process what they meant.

I don't suppose anyone knows if there's a shawarma joint around here?

It didn't tug at Steve's memory— it had absolutely *wrenched* on a line, tearing him back into the past because—

He'd heard something like that said before, in the same tone of voice and in a very similar situation.

There's a shawarma joint about two blocks from here. I don't know what it is but I wanna try it.

Iron Man had said that. Steve's friend, who had been killed the better part of a year ago.

Perhaps Tony had just heard Iron Man say it— perhaps employee and employer shared a similar taste in food.

But Steve wasn't the only one whose mind had made a connection— Thor had frozen where he stood, and Clint was so pale he looked like he'd been struck by a ghost.

And, perhaps he had been—

Because with everything that had happened, perhaps this wasn't the most insane theory. In fact, when taken into consideration, everything fit—

Which meant that Tony was...

Tony *had to be*—

Iron Man.

At first, Steve felt an overwhelming surge of joy, and he stumbled forward half a step with his hands outstretched. He'd thought that Iron Man was dead— he thought he'd lost his friend, but here he found out that he wasn't dead at all.

Iron Man was *alive*—

But then the implications struck Steve in full force, and he felt like he had been hit by a bus, like all of the wind had been knocked out of him and his internal organs were all shifting out of place. This... this was—

If Tony was Iron Man—

Well.

Everything suddenly made a whole lot more sense.

Every mystery that he and the Avengers had been struggling to solve, every puzzle that seemed without a solution—

It all just fell into place.

One thing that none of them had been able to make heads nor tails of had been the *reason* why Tony Stark was in that Afghan desert in the first place. He was supposed to have been in a meeting— Steve had even seen the inventor in a business suit that morning as he'd waved Steve and Clint into the quinjet, telling them that Iron Man would catch up on his own.

If Tony was Iron Man, could have just waved them off and then left to get into the armour. Then when Steve had lost sight of Iron Man during the fight, the Ten Rings must have found a way to pry him out of the suit, so it would seem that Iron Man and Tony were two different people.

The Ten Rings had no doubt been laughing at the Avengers' *stupidity*—

Because Steve and Clint had not dragged their friend's corpse home as they thought.

They had brought back an *empty suit*, while Tony was left behind.

Son of a *bitch*. No wonder Tony hadn't come to them for help after he had escaped— he thought that they had abandoned him. And Steve had seen the documents that Tony released on the internet, and he'd heard what Tony said during the fight— he knew that Tony was accusing SHIELD of being the ones to order his kidnapping.

So instead of going back to those he believed to be his enemy, Tony had stayed with Loki and had turned his violent attentions upon those who had wronged him.

With that in mind, Steve supposed the Avengers were *lucky*. They probably deserved Tony's ire just as much as SHIELD had— and from what Steve had seen of the destruction Tony and Loki tended to leave in their wake, he didn't think that the Avengers would have been able to withstand it.

They very nearly hadn't when they'd fought the pair in Kiel, after all— and it seemed that Tony and Loki had only grown more deadly since.

And even as Tony uttered his *oops*, still smiling and leaning into Loki's side as if this revelation was hardly anything at all, Steve just *couldn't* remain quiet.

“Tony?” Steve asked, his voice low. “Are you—”

“Going to get shawarma? Why yes, I am,” Tony said. He curled a little further into Loki, apparently uncaring of the blood that was smeared across Loki's armour, and apparently unaware of the fire that was spitting from Loki's eyes.

For while Tony appeared almost nonchalant about the bombshell he had just dropped—

Loki was wearing an expression so vicious it might as well have turned anyone he looked at to stone.

And Steve realised that, for some reason, Loki was *protecting* Tony, as if he was worried that the Avengers would hurt him. That seemed rather backward, even though Steve was perfectly aware that Tony had come to the Triskelion in order to *rescue* Loki. And the way that they were standing—

Not to mention the impeccable unison with which they had fought—

It spoke of a perfect kind of intimacy that Steve didn't think he'd ever had with anyone in the past, not even Bucky or Peggy.

But the obvious bond between Loki and Tony was, remarkably, *not* Steve's current primary concern. Because regardless of who Tony chose to spend his time with, the fact remained that he was *Iron Man*—

And that he had not only attacked the Triskelion and announced that SHIELD was in fact a *terrorist* organisation, but he had also killed a member of the WSC and murdered rather a significant portion of SHIELD's personnel. And in doing so, he might as well have torn Steve's world from its axis.

Tony was Iron Man, SHIELD was HYDRA—

And on top of that, Bucky was *alive*.

Another friend that Steve had thought long dead—

And god, *Bucky*. He looked so different to how he had in the past, as if he had been ground into the dirt and forced into horrible things in order to survive. Bucky had the same look in his eyes after killing Pierce that Steve had seen in many who had fought in the war, that look of abject bleakness that haunted every thought.

It made Steve want to ask him what had happened, to know what horrors he must have been through to have ended up here. But there were too many things happening, and even though Steve's mind was still reeling with so many revelations in too short a time, the rest of the world was not going to pause for him to catch up—

Tony and Loki were getting ready to leave, that much was clear. Tony held out the hand that was not wrapped around Loki's waist toward Bucky, an obvious invitation—

And between the sight of Bucky and the knowledge of *who Tony was*, Steve still found himself almost a little frozen—

“Stark!”

Steve followed all the others in turning to see the newcomer— Fury was storming into the room, a gun in his hands and rage blazing across his expression.

“How did you get out of that mess?” Tony asked, his eyes narrowing. “*Were* those guys your friends, or—”

“Sometimes, the easiest way to get out of a fight is to just *not fight*,” Fury cut in.

“Ah, I see,” Tony said, nodding sagely. “So you were hiding underneath your desk. How valiant.”

Bucky snorted at that, and Loki’s lips pressed together as if he were trying to keep himself from doing the same.

Fury, on the other hand, remained unmoved as his gaze darted around the scene and came to rest on what was left of Alexander Pierce.

“Pierce,” Fury muttered. “I should have known.”

“Yes.” It wasn’t Tony who had spoken— it was Loki, his voice as sharp as his blades. “You should have. You *all* should have. That you didn’t realise what was happening under your noses in your *own* organisation is—”

“Lokes.”

Tony’s voice was quiet and gentle, so different to how he had spoken before— but it stopped Loki in his tracks. And to be honest, Steve was half expecting that Loki would turn his ire on Tony instead, because surely a god wouldn’t like to be interrupted—

But Loki merely softened.

And it was *then* that Steve realised what had happened. Tony hadn’t stopped him because he was angry at what Loki was saying— he had done so because he was worried *for* Loki.

Tilting his head, Steve took more careful note of the way they were pressed tightly together— and the longer he looked, the less it seemed like Tony was pressing toward Loki, and more like Loki was leaning *on* Tony, using him as a support.

Thor had said that Loki *wasn’t* tortured in his cell, but the fact that he’d had to make such a clarification in the first place meant Tony had expected something bad— and Thor had considered such a thing to be within the realm of possibility. That meant Loki still had to have been mistreated in some way. And, well... the evidence was there.

The skin around Loki’s mouth seemed to be rubbed raw, and there were dark shadows under his eyes. His shoulders were slightly slumped, and one of Loki’s arms was held tight around his middle. The pair were doing a good job of hiding it, but— Loki was clearly injured, and in a great amount of pain.

Steve had the sudden thought that if he and the Avengers were to attack now, then they would be able to overcome him—

But... those dark suits still loomed around the room, controlled by JARVIS in a clear display of power, reminding them that there were even *more* outside this room. And the fact that

JARVIS was on Tony and Loki's side was yet another thing to consider—

No. One thing at a time.

As Steve watched, Tony and Loki's gazes locked, and they stared at each other in silence for a couple of moments— and then Loki gave a short nod.

Tony turned back to Fury, his eyes blazing with a fire that Steve had never seen before, but which he was sure must have always been crackling under the surface.

“We will speak with you all *later*,” he snapped. “No thanks to you, we've had a rather *difficult* couple of days—”

“*You* have?” Fury asked. “You just wiped out my organisation—”

“No, we just wiped out *HYDRA*,” Tony snarled. “And if you *don't* want the same to happen to you, then you'll leave us the hell alone.”

“We can't just let you leave—”

“You *can*,” Loki hissed, cutting right over the top of Natasha's words. “And you *will*. If you still wish to speak with us, then JARVIS will set up a meeting in a few days. And *that* will be all.”

Tony jerked his head in Rhodes' direction. “Rhodey, you coming?”

Colonel Rhodes' eyes widened in surprise for a moment before he grinned. “Of course I am.”

“Then we'll meet you back at our place,” Tony said. “Lokes, are you... sure that you're all right?”

“Anthony,” Loki said softly. “I am better than I ever have been.”

Then both of Loki's arms curled around Tony's waist in a manner that looked both protective and loving— and somehow, this time that didn't seem strange at all. The pair of them fit together easily, as if they had always meant to be that way.

“Barnes,” Tony said— and the reminder had Steve's gaze flashing to his friend once more. Did Tony not even call Bucky by his first name?

“Go,” Bucky said, jerking his chin.

Tony didn't even give that a second consideration. He simply gave a small nod— and then both Tony and Loki disappeared, leaving only a light shimmer of green behind them.

The moment the pair were gone, the black Iron Man suits that were still in working order all straightened and turned for the broken window, picking up their more damaged counterparts as they went. Only one didn't, and Steve watched in surprise as it turned to Bucky.

“Mr Barnes?” JARVIS asked.

“I’ll be fine, JARVIS,” Bucky said. “Promise.”

The suit lifted off the ground and turned to follow the others, and Bucky made a move as if he was going to run for the window as well—

“Bucky,” Steve whispered— the name falling from his lips before he’d given it permission to do so, but once it was said he didn’t regret it. For Bucky turned slightly, his steps pausing. “Can I talk to you?”

Steve was expecting a no— but he had to try. And then—

“Not now.” Bucky’s gaze darted around the room, to where the other Avengers were still debating whether they should make a move, and to where Fury was still watching the proceedings with a hand on his gun.

“When?” Steve asked—

“I’ll find you.” Bucky’s gaze turned hard. “Don’t try to find us.”

Then he made a dash for the window, Rhodes flying right on his tail—

And by the time Steve reached the edge of the broken glass, Bucky and Rhodes were already gone.

—•—

To say that the Avengers were in a state of uproar would be a gross understatement— especially considering that the whole *world* was reeling.

The files that Tony and — Steve suspected — JARVIS had released were more than just details on what SHIELD had been doing, nor even details on HYDRA. It had *everything*, the full story— details on where Tony and Loki had been kept during their capture, the things that had been done to them... the things that the Ten Rings had *planned* to do.

Thor had almost broken down when he saw it— his fingers and eyes crackled with electricity, his teeth gnashing together with such anger Steve almost worried they would splinter. They had to talk him down from going up to Asgard and tearing Odin apart for not getting Loki out, and even though Thor eventually agreed to hold off for now, Steve didn’t doubt that Odin would eventually come to regret leaving his youngest son in the hands of torturers.

Still, Thor’s reaction couldn’t have been part of Loki and Tony’s plan, and Steve couldn’t understand *why* they would choose to release such information. Surely it wasn’t the kind of thing that they would want the world to be aware of?

If Steve had been through something like that, he thought he would have rather forgotten about it, not had it shoved back in his face every time he walked past a newspaper stand.

But Natasha’s expression had been stony serious as she looked through it all, and it hadn’t taken Steve long to follow her train of thought. Because now that the world knew *exactly* what had been done to them, now that there was no doubt as to *why* they had decided to

attack the way that they had, it would no longer be possible to frame SHIELD in a positive light. The organisation was well and truly *done*— which of course, was sure to have been Tony and Loki's plan from the beginning.

And not only that, but the dangerous pair were now framed in a light that was *sympathetic*.

Just as when Steve had first realised that Tony was Iron Man, it was as if all the pieces were falling into place. They had been planning this for a while, it was clear that they had laid an intricate trap that had snapped shut the moment STRIKE had taken Loki into custody.

The trail led all the way back, months and months. They had attacked Miami and made sure that Trevor Slattery saw Tony's face because they wanted it *on the record* that SHIELD (or, HYDRDA, as it were) knew where Tony was, so that when they released those files it would turn back all the worse.

The Avengers had already looked at the files on the quinjet but it felt like the more they looked, the more they saw—

And in the hours that followed, yet more and *more* information was released. Steve remembered the way that Loki had stood over Pierce just before the man had died, and realised that he must have pulled information from him such as passwords and locations of files that would help someone like Tony get into any system without complication. It would seem that Tony was not wasting any time with a reunion— he and Loki were using the momentum caused by their attack on the Triskelion to bring the whole performance to a decisive close, tying up loose ends and dropping the curtain within hours of their final act.

There really was no escaping it. As the Avengers walked down a street through the middle of New York, Christine Everhart's face was projected across every single screen or electronic billboard they passed, condemning HYDRA and SHIELD both and stating that even if Loki and his Iron Shadow — now known to be Tony Stark — had gone about it in a way that was violent and should be answered for, the result of their actions was inherently positive.

Not to mention that the fact it was *Tony* was another thing entirely—

Because, for reasons Steve had struggled to comprehend in the past, the world *loved* Tony. Perhaps it was the green energy— perhaps it was his showy character. But the world had mourned him when he was kidnapped, and had cried out in pain when it was speculated that he was being forced to build suits against his will—

And when the fact that Tony was Iron Man hit the news— something that Steve *certainly* hadn't been expecting, given the lengths Tony must have taken to hide it in the past...

That was just the final nail in the metaphorical coffin. Because that meant that when they'd exhumed Iron Man's grave, all they had taken was an empty suit—

Just the same as Steve and Clint, who had done far worse than they had known. Now, not only could they condemn themselves for having chosen a voluntary Avenger over a civilian, they also had to come to terms with the fact that they had saved an empty suit of armour over someone they hadn't even recognised was their *friend*.

And as if that hadn't felt like punishment enough, they had even released information on what had happened to Bucky, and it was that which hit Steve stronger than anything else. Bucky hadn't been frozen or locked away like Steve— at least, not permanently. No, he'd been part of the world, stepping through the decades without even being in control of himself.

What must it have been like, to have everything that he was torn away, to have his very being twisted until he was unrecognisable even to himself? Had Bucky been screaming inside his own mind the whole time? Or had he been entirely reprogrammed?

Steve wasn't sure which one was worse.

When Steve had first seen Bucky back in the Triskelion, when he had appeared to help Tony get down to the lower levels so that they could release Loki— Steve had been *angry*. He thought that Loki must have done something to his friend, to turn him into—

Well, into something *else*.

Since Steve had seen the more updated information that had been released onto the internet, when he realised what had been done to his best friend—

Everything that Bucky had been through since he'd fallen from that train—

How could Steve stay angry at the people who seemed to have helped him?

With all of those thoughts rolling through his mind, Steve still felt a little disconnected as he followed the rest of the Avengers to an out of the way, run-down Italian restaurant which, according to Natasha, was trying to hide the fact that none of their security cameras had been working for weeks.

The Avengers had also left all of their electronics in the tower, as well as any weapons that had been made for them by Tony. It really was a humbling and *daunting* thing, to realise that *everything* they had said while in Avengers Tower had likely been recorded by JARVIS and sent straight back to Tony.

At least... it meant that Tony had to know they had been looking for him, that the only reason they had been absent from the search was because the government had ordered it so.

And on top of that, it also gave Steve a *small* inkling of hope. Because if JARVIS were on Tony's side, then Tony could have ended them all without even needing to lift a finger. That had to be a good sign, right?

Well. At the very least, it meant that Tony and Loki needed them for something. Which was better than nothing at all.

They waited until their ordered food arrived before they began to talk— but the moment the waitress was back in the kitchen it was like there were no holds barred.

"I can't believe he kept it all a secret from us," Clint muttered, digging around in his food with a fork, tearing it to shreds rather than eating it.

“I can,” Natasha said. “And if I were him, I probably would have done the same.”

“Yes, but you’re a *spy*,” Clint pointed out. “Your secret identity is literally your life. I would have thought Tony’d be the kind of guy to not be able to shut up about the fact that he’s a superhero—”

“Not if it meant he couldn’t be a superhero at all,” Natasha cut in. “When Fury asked me to go to SI to keep an eye on Stark and Iron Man, he asked me to make a judgement on whether or not Iron Man would be a good choice for our team. And I recommended Iron Man for the Avengers Initiative— but I can tell you now that I wouldn’t have recommended Tony Stark. Surely he’s self aware enough to realise that no one ever would.”

“Not even if you’d known?” Bruce asked curiously.

“Not even then.” Natasha frowned down at her pasta. “He doesn’t have the right kind of personality to work as part of a team.”

“But you saw the way he was with Loki, and even Rhodes and— Bucky,” Steve pointed out. “And the way he used to be with us—”

“Tony and Iron Man seemed like two different people,” Thor mused. “He changed quite a lot when he was in his armour.”

“Code switching,” Natasha agreed. “He might have been doing it subconsciously, or it might have been a ploy. Either way, know I’m not the only one who never would have even considered that *Tony Stark* could be Iron Man.”

And you know what?

Not one of them tried to deny it.

The reality of the situation was that none of them had even considered the idea that Tony could be the kind of *selfless* required to put his life on the line to save other people. The golden faceplate had never been his disguise— his secret identity consisted of flashy smirks and expensive suits, the character played in the public sphere that meant no one would ever suspect him of being the same man who threw himself into danger.

Tony wasn’t enhanced. He didn’t have a serum, or godlike abilities, or gamma radiation coursing through his veins— he didn’t even have any specialised training. He was, quite literally, a man in a can—

Yet he had been one of the bravest Avengers out of all of them, always the first to put his life on the line. Hadn’t he been the one to fly the nuke into space during the battle of New York? The one to go *inside* the engine of the helicARRIER, saving hundreds at great risk to himself?

And... Iron Man hadn’t just been a hero. He was Steve’s *friend*.

Now here the Avengers were, arguing over whether or not he deserved to be condemned.

It didn't sit right with Steve, not in the slightest— not now that he knew the Iron Shadow and Iron Man were one and the same. Not even when some of the arguments that the others had were actually rather compelling.

“He killed SHIELD agents,” Clint said, breaking the heavy silence that had settled around them after Natasha's statement. “I'm sorry, I know we wronged him, but he's killed people who did nothing to deserve it—”

“He thought that SHIELD and HYDRA were one and the same.” Nat glanced up, her expression flintlike. “He thought he *was* attacking people who deserved it.”

“Yeah, but ignorance isn't an excuse for murder—”

“Do you know what I did in the war?” Steve kept his voice soft, but Clint fell silent regardless. “I led the Howling Commandos from HYDRA base to HYDRA base, and we killed every single person in every single one. We did not take prisoners, we couldn't, not when we were such a small group and we needed to move quickly through a war zone. So we *killed* them. We didn't stop to ask whether they signed up voluntarily, or whether they were conscripts. They might have been forced to fight, just ordinary German people who wanted nothing to do with a war that their tyrannical leader had forced them into— we didn't know, and we couldn't stop to think about it. Because they were still part of the larger machine.”

There was a heavy moment— and Steve wondered if any of them even *could* understand. Perhaps Natasha might have been able to, but... the others?

They hadn't lived through a war like the one Steve had fought. They hadn't known that inherent *fear* that defined every single waking moment, the inability to feel safe even when you *knew* that your surroundings held no threat.

And... maybe it was just the fact that Steve couldn't get *Bucky* out of his head, but his mind just kept on going back to the way he'd felt during that dark time of his life, and wondering whether Tony hadn't felt exactly the same.

Clint was shaking his head. “That was a *war*—”

“And so was this,” Steve cut in. “We just didn't know it.”

He paused for a moment, letting that sink in.

“Listen. How would you have felt if you learned that the organisation you had been working for was the very thing you had been fighting against your entire life?”

“I think we all know *exactly* how that feels,” Bruce muttered— and Steve inclined his head.

“Exactly. But... Tony learned about it just after he had been kidnapped and tortured, and he knows better than anyone how many eyes SHIELD has. Nothing would have felt safe for him. Nothing except perhaps the person who had suffered alongside him. So instead of coming to us, to people who, for all he knew, might as well have been HYDRA, he stayed with Loki and they did what they needed to so they *could* be safe.”

“He couldn’t have thought *you* were HYDRA,” Clint said— though Steve could tell from his tone that he was starting to be swayed. “You’re Captain America—”

“He knew we were all with *SHIELD*,” Natasha interrupted. “That would have been enough for him.”

“Tony has been fighting a war since the moment he busted out of Turkey,” Steve finished. “And the only reason he hasn’t been doing it alone is because he had Loki. We shouldn’t be condemning them for it— because of them, we now *know* about HYDRA.”

“We might even be able to use that,” Natasha said. “We need to clean house, and if we can get Tony and Loki on our side...” She tilted her head, and her brow rose in suggestion.

“And how are you going to do that?” Bruce asked. “They won’t trust us.”

“No, but a common enemy goes a long way. Think about what we know HYDRA wanted to do to Loki,” Natasha said. “And think about the way Tony and Loki were acting around each other. You saw how they were.”

“I have never seen my brother that way around anyone else,” Thor agreed. Then he sighed. “When I visited Loki in his cell yesterday, I offered to take him to Asgard where he would be safe from SHIELD. But the mere suggestion of leaving Midgard left him shaking with rage. I think I know why, now.”

And perhaps Steve could understand that as well. After Bucky fell, Steve was in a terrible kind of place. He would have done anything if it had meant tearing HYDRA apart— and he had even very nearly given his life in the process.

“Well, yeah, that was definitely a development that I didn’t see coming,” Clint said. “But it did make a lot of sense.”

“A lot of this makes a lot of sense,” Bruce groaned. Apart from Thor, who had already scoffed down every bit of his food and was already eying Clint’s mangled plate, Bruce was the only one who had eaten anything— but it didn’t appear to have settled him any. “You know, when Rhodes started getting suspicious, he came to me. We made a device that could track Loki’s magic, and when it started going off— well, I was *sure* that it had worked. Hulk even thought he saw Loki *and Tony* in the lobby, but. Rhodes told me that the device hadn’t worked, and that there would be no reason to try and make another.”

“Wait.” Clint pointed his fork at Bruce— then without even looking slid his plate a little further away from Thor’s reaching hand. “Hulk saw Tony? And you didn’t think to—”

“He *thought* he did, but it was all a little muddled— and you know I can’t remember what he sees,” Bruce snapped back. “I thought he was just being hopeful. But to be honest? I actually *wanted* it to be him.”

Clint blinked. “You wanted Tony to be working with Loki?”

“If it meant that he was still alive?” Bruce asked. “Then, yes. Look, I haven’t been treated brilliantly by SHIELD either, and Tony is my *friend*. I just want him to be okay. And... Nat, I know you mean well, but I don’t think using the guy he’s clearly in love with against him is a good idea.”

Clint looked like he was about to speak, but Steve quickly beat him to it.

“I think we’re looking at this the wrong way. Bruce is right, Tony’s *alive*,” he said. “Iron Man’s alive. And Thor... your brother has, no matter how inadvertently, been trying to make the world a better place. Isn’t... that what we should be focusing on?”

“Yeah. Iron Man’s been alive this whole time,” Clint murmured. “And Tony’s gone and fallen in love with Loki.”

Steve sighed, and the group fell silent as they slowly finished the rest of their meal. It was a lot to take in, but— Clint was right. That was what it came down to—

And they each had to work out how they were going to react to it, and what they were going to do.

—•—

When they returned to the tower, all of the Avengers retreated to their individual rooms. They knew that this was far from over— they still had to deal with the fallout and the rest of the world, and they needed to speak to Fury about what was going to happen to the blaring gap that SHIELD’s destruction was going to leave in the world. And, of course, decide whether or not they were going to go after Tony and Loki.

But, for now, they had an awful lot to think about and... they needed the time away from everything else.

Steve especially was glad for the space. Everything he’d spoken about had rattled him right to the core, and he felt like he needed more time to process—

But even more than that, he needed to talk to Bucky.

And maybe it was a bad idea. Maybe it would only make the situation worse, but... Steve had never really known when to stop when it came to his best friend.

“JARVIS?” Steve asked— and he half wasn’t expecting an answer at all. JARVIS hadn’t answered Steve since Tony had been kidnapped— well, since Steve had *left Tony* in the hands of the Ten Rings. At the time, they’d thought that it was anger and grief. Now, with everything that had come to light, Steve couldn’t help but wonder if it might have been something else—

A suspicion that was only heightened when—

“Yes, Captain Rogers?”

Steve let out a breath he wasn’t aware he had been holding.

“Look, I’m not going to try and get you to talk to Tony for me, I know that you won’t do it—and I know that’s not what Tony wants right now,” Steve said. “But... would you mind asking Bucky when a good time would be? He did say that we would be able to talk.”

JARVIS was silent for a moment— and Steve wondered if it was because JARVIS was already relaying information to wherever the others were hiding. Surely, after all, a computer wouldn’t need the time to *think*. Right?

But before he could ponder more on the matter, both of Steve’s questions were answered.

“Mr Barnes would like me to inform you that he will be with Mr Stark and Mr Liesmith when they come to speak with you and the rest of the Avengers,” JARVIS said.

Mr Barnes? Steve thought with a frown. First there was Tony calling Bucky by his last name, and then this. JARVIS usually took care to use people’s titles— at least, he did unless he had been instructed otherwise. Maybe there was something else that he was missing.

So he decided to let that go, and answered the AI with a slight smile that felt like a lie.

“Thank you, JARVIS,” Steve said. “Then I will look forward to it.”

He sighed as he sat down on his bed, slumping forward and rubbing his hands over his face. He didn’t want to bother Bucky anymore, not when it was clear that he had been through so very much and no doubt needed a break, even more than Steve did himself.

He didn’t *want* to be a burden, he didn’t want to cause any more pain. But he wanted Bucky to know that Steve was there for him, that he had *missed* him.

For Steve, it had been less than *two years* since he’d lost Bucky into the ice.

For Bucky, it had been almost seventy.

There was such an imbalance of time between them that Steve couldn’t even begin to contemplate just how difficult it would be to cross, but he knew that he had to try. For the friend that he used to know—

And for whoever it was that Bucky had become.

“Hey, Steve.”

Steve’s head snapped up—

There was a holographic screen in front of him— a video link to his best friend. And for a moment, all Steve could do was stare.

Bucky looked better than he had during the fight— as if he’d had a hot shower, a long nap, and a hearty home cooked meal. His hair was longer than Steve had ever seen it during their youth, and he wore a well-trimmed beard. And there was something light to his gaze that hadn’t been there before, untouched even by the tightness that worried at Bucky’s jaw.

“Bucky!” Steve exclaimed.

“I promised that we could talk, didn’t I?” Bucky asked. “You know, I’m not actually the bad guy. Not anymore. And, I don’t go by Bucky anymore, either.”

And there it was— the answer to that question that had been tugging at Steve. He knew that it was such an insignificant thing compared to everything else, but... it *felt* like something important. But regardless— if Bucky wanted to go by another name, then Steve was hardly one to be contrary.

“All right, Barnes it is,” Steve said easily. “Do... you mind if I ask why?”

“Well, you just did anyway,” Bucky— *Barnes* sighed. Then he shrugged. “I just don’t feel like Bucky. And Barnes is what Tony and Loki both called me when I started staying with them, so. It felt closer than anything else.”

“How... how *did* you end up with them?” Steve asked. “Did Tony find you in one of the bases they attacked?”

“No.” The corners of Barnes’ lips quirked up, as if he were going over an amusing memory. “I tried to kill them. And I was just lucky they decided to try and get information out of me instead of just killing me. And when they realised it wasn’t *me*, they decided to help.” Barnes paused. “You’ve seen the stuff Tony released about HYDRA?”

Steve nodded, his lips twisting at the reminder.

“Then you’ll know what Tony and Loki went through as well,” Barnes said. “They’re not bad guys either, you know? They helped me when no one else would have. Even after everything they’ve been through, they let me live in their home and they treated me like a real person. And Steve? I will do anything to protect them.”

Those last words were said with such surety that Steve realised— *this* was the whole purpose for Barnes agreeing to talk to him. It wasn’t that he wanted to rekindle their friendship, it was that... he wanted to make sure Steve knew where his loyalties lay, and what Barnes would do if Steve tried to harm the people that he had come to care for.

And... when it came down to it?

Well, there was truly only one thing that Steve could say.

“I’m glad that they helped you,” he said simply. “I’m happy for you.”

Barnes actually smiled at that— a proper one, aimed at Steve. “I wondered whether you would be,” he said. “I know you don’t approve of what they did, and of what *we* did in the Triskelion. But I’m glad, too. I got lucky.”

Steve really *was* glad. He was glad that both of the friends he had wronged had managed to find each other.

“How is Tony?” Steve asked—

And Barnes tilted his head. “Are you asking after Tony Stark, or after the friend you thought was dead?”

“I’m asking after *Tony*,” Steve said firmly.

Barnes seemed appeased by that, for he said— “He’s resting right now. I think he deserves it.”

Steve could tell that it was the only answer he was going to get— but if recent events had taught him anything, it was that pushing against a barrier was only going to make things worse.

“Then... would you be able to do me a favour?” he asked.

“I won’t go and get him—”

“No,” Steve said. “That’s... I was just wondering if you could let him know that I’m sorry? For leaving him there. I made the wrong call, and he was the one who suffered from it—”

“It’s not just that you left him there,” Barnes sighed. “He knows that you didn’t know he was Iron Man.”

“Then, what—”

Steve was cut off by another voice coming from Barnes’ end of the link— a voice that Steve recognised.

“Hey, Barnes, get out here!” Rhodes yelled. “I can smell something burning!”

“Then turn it down!” Barnes shot back, twisting away from the screen for a moment— and Steve couldn’t help but be struck by the way Barnes’ demeanour changed just by speaking to a different person, his whole posture shifting into something far less on edge. “It’s not rocket science— I’ll be out in a minute—”

Barnes was cut off by the sound of curses in more than one voice some distance away, but when he turned back to Steve he was shaking his head almost fondly.

“Look,” he sighed. “I have to go. But... just remember, if you don’t want to make an enemy of Tony, Steve, then... you’re going to have to accept that Loki is the most important person in his life, and that’s not ever going to change. If you can’t make amends with them *both*, then he’s never going to forgive you.”

“Right,” Steve sighed, feeling oddly deflated. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to try — as he’d said to Thor, it was clear that there was more to Loki than any of them had realised — but there was a lot that he still needed to come to terms with. He might be able to rationalise the killing, but that didn’t mean he hadn’t seen the promised violence spitting out of Loki’s piercing eyes. However— “I think... I can do that. For Tony.”

“Good.” Barnes gave a short nod, and then his gaze flicked to the side— and Steve knew that the conversation was over. And that was all right.

“Barnes?” Steve said.

“Yeah, Steve?”

“Just... take care, okay?”

Barnes’ expression softened minutely. “You too.” And then he turned away, and Steve’s holographic screen flickered out of existence.

“JARVIS,” Steve sighed. “Tell the other Avengers and SHIELD that I’m standing down. I’m not going to do a thing until Tony contacts us.”

“Very well, Captain,” JARVIS said. “And might I say, that is the best idea you have had in quite some time.”

And as Steve settled back down on his bed and waited for the inevitable fallout, he couldn’t help but feel like he might have *finally* done something right.

Painted with smiles

When Tony's feet hit solid ground once again, he glanced around in confusion. He'd been expecting that Loki would take them back home, considering all that they'd been through—but instead, it looked like Loki had brought them to a random street in the middle of New York City.

“Lokes?” Tony asked, tilting up his head to meet Loki's gaze. “What...?”

“You said that you were hungry,” Loki said simply. Then he gestured to one of the buildings that lined the street—and Tony's lips turned up into a smile as he recognised it.

It was the same one, the very same shawarma joint that he and the Avengers had visited after Loki's invasion. Tony didn't have to wonder why Loki had chosen *this* one—it was certainly the only one that Loki knew, and Loki had come here just because Tony had mentioned wanting to. That made something warm blossom in Tony's chest, and he turned in Loki's arms and pulled him down for a soft, slow kiss.

And perhaps it wasn't the place for such a thing. Perhaps he should have been more worried about the gathering crowd, about the camera phones that were no doubt trained on them. But in that moment, Tony really couldn't care less. All that mattered was that he was with Loki, and that they were both *alive*—and the rest of the world would just have to fucking deal with it.

“I love you,” Tony said as they parted, their noses still brushing together and both of their lips painted with smiles.

“And I you,” Loki replied—and then a spark of mischief entered his bright green eyes. “However, if you *don't* want to eat here, then might I suggest we head back home? We *do* have a full fridge—”

“But *shawarma*, Lokes,” Tony said, taking a step back and pulling Loki forward, his arm still wrapped firmly around Loki's waist. “Come on, you gotta try it at least once. The food in the fridge can wait.”

“Of course it can,” Loki chuckled, not putting up a fight in the slightest.

As they walked the few yards down the sidewalk, Tony's gaze was drawn to the spot just outside the door, where the Avengers had once left Loki chained to Mjöllnir while they had gone inside to eat their food. Maybe they should have dropped him off somewhere first, but—they were all pretty starving, and after what had happened before they'd gone for food they all felt a little... off, about letting Loki out of their sight.

Pierce and his STRIKE team had all but ambushed the Avengers in the lobby of then-Stark Tower, and had demanded that they hand Loki and the Tesseract over. They had relinquished the sceptre easily, but—Thor had refused *point blank* to let them take Loki. It had turned into

a fight in the end, Thor scuffling with the SHIELD agents and Steve trying to break them up— and Tony had turned around at the sound of a snort to see Loki rolling his eyes.

Of course, back then he'd never have thought that there could actually *be* something between the two of them. He'd thought Loki was fucking hilarious and that his Steve impersonation was on point, but other than that he just saw him as— well, Bruce had put it best, hadn't he? And Loki was most certainly his *enemy*. But... Tony could look back on it fondly *now*, could smile about the way that Loki had just given absolutely no fucks as they'd chained him up. Because... yeah, now that Tony knew all the circumstances it could have made him angry, but— Loki was safe now, and he was in Tony's arms.

And Loki still rolled his eyes in the exact same way when Tony shoved open the doors and loudly demanded that they be given the best shawarma in the house.

Well, okay. Perhaps not *exactly* the same. Loki's eyeroll hadn't held quite the same level of fondness back then as it did now.

The server's eyes widened as she took them in— after all, Loki was still in his battle armour, they were both still splattered with the grime of battle, and, well. They were *Tony Stark and Loki Liesmith*. They'd just released the details of everything they had done, and everything that had been done *to them* onto the internet. The whole world knew every detail, and—

Well. Tony just wanted his shawarma, and then he wanted some bloody rest.

Thankfully, though, the server was able to push past her shock, and she prepared their food for them in record speed. Tony didn't have any money on him, but JARVIS had them covered, making sure the place was paid at least three times what was owed—

And then, foil-wrapped shawarma in hand, Tony stepped back into Loki's arms and met his gaze with yet another smile.

“Come on,” he said. “Time to go.”

—•—

There's nothing quite like having a place where they could feel safe, where they *knew* that they didn't have to be on show and they could just *be*. It had been a while since they'd had the house entirely to themselves. Even though Barnes was hardly a high maintenance roommate, just knowing there was someone else in the house was never the same as being *alone*.

But... in that moment? After all of the fear, all of the pain, all of the deep, staggering *relief*—

There was nothing that Tony wanted more than to curl up in Loki's arms and sleep for about ten years. That was all.

But— the fight wasn't over yet. If they wanted HYDRA to stay down for good, then they had to make sure that the heads weren't just chopped off— they had to burn the bleeding stumps and bury the remains in a pile of rubble.

So, despite the way that his eyes felt ready to close, despite the bone deep weariness that was threatening to overwhelm, they both knew that they needed to finish what they'd started before everything began to cool off.

They went to the kitchen first, and took a few moments to eat their food and drink a cup of coffee, pushing their chairs close so their thighs pressed together and their arms brushed with every movement. They didn't talk as they ate, they didn't need to— they just exchanged pleased looks and small smiles, their fingers skimming together every now and then in light touches that grounded them both.

Things... things were different now, weren't they? It wasn't them against the world anymore, not the way that it had been at the beginning. They weren't alone, not anymore. They had Barnes, and they had Rhodey. Pepper was, well, Pepper, and although Tony didn't know yet how the Avengers were going to react... well. The whole world was turning around, and they wouldn't have to hide in the shadows any longer.

And their relationship... it had been forged in a fiery crucible, and now that they'd found their way out into the light, things wouldn't be the same as they had been.

But...

All Tony had to do was meet Loki's smile, and he knew that it didn't have to be that complicated. They'd come a long way, hadn't they? They'd been through a lot, and they'd come out the other side— and yet... the love between them was simple. *They* were simple, and if things changed? Then they would weather it together.

When they'd finished eating and regained a little strength, Tony held Loki close against his side, still supporting him as they made their way down to the workshop. The food had certainly helped— Loki was a little stronger, but he needed *rest*.

So, Tony made sure he worked quickly.

It took them both a long time and yet, it felt like hardly any time at all. Loki gave JARVIS all of the information he had pulled from Pierce's head, all of the passwords and filenames that Tony needed to tear the whole organisation apart. JARVIS also did a lot of heavy lifting, hacking into news channels and networks and spreading the information everywhere, both on TV and on the internet. Not a single person with access to a screen could have missed it if they'd *tried*.

They did exactly what they had been planning from the beginning, following through and filling in all the pieces as if something truly was coming to an end. They threw out the clues and let the world put everything together, their breadcrumb trail leading theories and debates exactly where they wanted them to go.

And then, when Tony had done all he could— when HYDRA's firewalls were all in tatters and the entire planet was rallying with sympathy for all that Tony and Loki had been through—

Then, *finally*, Tony felt like he could relax.

He slumped back into the couch at first, the holograms hovering throughout the room still whirring with numbers and information and interviews and *articles* but Tony just leaned back into the cushions, let his head fall to Loki's shoulder, and breathed out a long sigh.

Loki's fingers stroked through his hair, and Tony felt Loki's lips press lightly against his forehead.

"You are incredible," Loki murmured. *'And I am so lucky to have found you.'*

"Nah," Tony sighed, turning his head slightly to press a kiss of his own to the skin at Loki's throat. *'I'm the lucky one.'*

Tony felt Loki's lips curve up at that, but Loki didn't argue. They held each other for a few moments more, neither of them wanting to move, but both knowing that they couldn't stay where they were. They were both exhausted, and while they had slept on that couch before, they were still just aware enough that if they stayed where they were in their sore state, they would likely wake up unable to move at all. Yet, neither of them felt like they would be able to make it upstairs to their bed.

So, instead, they tugged at the couch cushions, and threw them to the ground. Loki made them a little bigger with the last of his energy, and then they both fell on top of them, arms curling around each other as they pressed as close as they could.

Tony felt himself softening as he melted into Loki's chest, breathing him in and letting the steady beat of Loki's heart calm his own. It was almost habit now to match his breathing to Loki's, to let that slow rhythm pull his own into something relaxed, chasing away any remaining demons and keeping the darkness at bay.

Just as Tony was drifting off, there was a slight movement and the soft whirr of a machine—and then the suit Tony recognised as the one that had been almost destroyed in Edinburgh draped a blanket over the pair of them with the kind of care that made Tony's smile brighten, even as his eyes fell gently closed.

"Thank you, J," Loki murmured, his voice barely comprehensible through his exhaustion and the way that his face was still pressed into Tony's hair.

"It is my pleasure, Sirs."

And as the soft blue light of the holograms which assured them that their plan had *worked* floated through the air above them, they both fell into a deep and untroubled sleep.



Something was tickling Tony's left ear.

It wasn't anything major, just a minor annoyance. Other than his ear, Tony was comfortable—so comfortable, in fact, that he didn't want to move. He felt like he was surrounded by warmth, every piece of him turned to mush and his mind perfectly content – for once – to *sit still*.

He felt like he could lie exactly where he was forever, feeling safe and peaceful and so perfectly happy—

Were it not for that goddamn *tickle*, growing worse by the moment, turning into more of an itch that scratched at his ability to stay relaxed. The feel of it was so rhythmic as to be maddening— something small brushing against the ridge of his ear, the lightest of caresses that felt designed to turn Tony insane—

Giving in, Tony moved one of his heavy arms and swatted at it—

“Anthony,” Loki groaned, pushing Tony’s hand away from where he’d managed to smack him in the face.

Tony winced, and opened his eyes. “Sorry, Lokes.”

Loki looked more adorable than a chaos god had any right to be, especially when Tony noticed that he still had a bit of dried blood clinging to his skin. They hadn’t taken the time to shower the night before, and after a few nights in SHIELD maximum security and then a fight for their lives, Loki was absolutely gross.

But... Tony smiled anyway, and reached up to brush a strand of oily hair away from Loki’s face— the culprit of the tickling.

“What is it?” Loki asked, leaning into Tony’s touch as his hand cupped Loki’s cheek.

“I missed you,” Tony whispered— knowing it was a sentiment that he’d already expressed, but feeling the need to repeat it regardless.

“I know.” Loki leaned in, and touched their foreheads together. “But that will not happen again. Not ever.”

Tony smiled in agreement, and tilted his chin so that he could touch their lips together. It was just a light kiss, but one that held more than enough feeling to it. He knew what Loki meant— this wouldn’t set them backwards, this wouldn’t send them back to where they had been in the past. They were stronger together, but that didn’t mean that they *couldn’t* be apart. They just... didn’t want to be.

And they stayed together as they made their way out of the workshop, just leaving the cushions and the blanket where they were as they climbed the stairs hand in hand and walked toward their bedroom.

They undressed each other with careful tenderness, dirty and bloodied clothes finally peeling from skin under the instruction of deft fingers. And when they stepped into the shower, Tony washed Loki down first, gently sponging away the blood and making sure that the wound in Loki’s side was clean. He berated himself for not doing it the night before— but when Loki noticed that he was upset about something, Loki just tilted his fingers under Tony’s chin and kissed him once, twice— again and again until Tony was smiling once more.

And Loki *was* fine— he had already started to heal, the food and the rest apparently just what he needed. Then Loki returned the favour, his fingers scratching pleasurably over Tony’s scalp as he washed his hair. And when they were both clean and they stepped out of the shower, Tony had Loki sit on the edge of their bed while he wrapped Loki’s wound in a clean white bandage.

“Thank you,” Loki said, catching Tony’s hands in his own once Tony was finished. And Tony knew that Loki was more than capable of doing such a thing himself, but... he also knew how nice it felt, to have someone do such things for you. To have someone you *knew* truly cared.

“You’re welcome, Loki,” Tony replied, and then he smiled as Loki leaned forward to bring their lips together.

The kiss wasn’t just one of the sweet touches they’d been sharing over the past few hours— it wasn’t just a tender reassurance. Even though it remained slow and languid, there was an edge of hunger that urged them both on. Tony pushed up from where he had been kneeling on the floor as he deepened the kiss, their mouths and tongues moving together in a sensual rhythm that had a spark racing all over Tony’s skin.

Loki leaned back against the mattress, pulling Tony with him— and their lips remained connected even as their linked hands moved to the bedding above Loki’s shoulder, their fingers clinging together as Tony’s other hand slid down Loki’s chest and then paused at the edge of the bandage. They only broke the kiss when Tony felt the need to breathe— and then Loki’s lips were Tony’s throat instead, nipping and sucking as he reached down to take Tony’s already hard cock in his hand.

Tony held Loki’s hand tighter as he moaned, bringing their lips back together and kissing Loki once again. Loki arched his spine and pressed up into him, his hand starting to move in slow, torturous strokes. Tony’s hand shifted lower, nudging Loki’s legs open, brushing past his arousal to press against Loki’s entrance. Loki whined as Tony rubbed his fingers over the pucker there— and Tony almost did the same as the warmth of Loki’s hand disappeared from his cock. But then Loki took Tony’s hand in his, and after a familiar prickle of Loki’s *seiðr*, Tony’s fingers were slick with lube. He kissed Loki soundly once again as he pressed his fingers inside Loki’s entrance, curling them just the way he knew Loki liked it, and he grinned against Loki’s lips as his movements pulled perfect moans from Loki’s throat.

And when Tony finally pushed inside him, he did so slowly, gently, being careful of Loki’s injury. Their eyes remained open- it was a struggle, but Tony didn’t want to miss a single emotion flickering across Loki’s face. And their gazes stayed locked as Tony started to move, words of love whispering between their minds as their bodies rocked together in a sweet passion that burned brighter than anything.

And after, as they curled together in the middle of their bed, Tony didn’t think it was possible to be happier.

This, this feeling coursing through him now was what they had been *fighting for*— and it had certainly been worth it.

By the time they finally worked up the energy to move again, it was well past noon. They found themselves down in the living room, their screen displaying the fruits of their work the previous night— but other than the odd cursory glance Tony didn't bother watching all too carefully. Taking down SHIELD and HYDRA had been his mission for so long now, but... it was *done*. He trusted that JARVIS would let them know if anything went amiss, but for now, there was nothing they could do but recover and wait for the right moment to get back in contact with the Avengers.

And to be together with nothing hanging over their heads? It was freeing in a way that Tony hadn't entirely expected.

But of course, just because it *felt* like they were the only two in the world, that didn't mean that the rest of the world was going to stop and pause.

"Sirs," JARVIS said, sounding almost reluctant to cut through their moment. "Colonel Rhodes and Mr Barnes are approaching; they will arrive in approximately half an hour."

Tony grinned, and a quick glance to his lover showed that Loki was smiling to match. Because they loved their time alone, and it had been just what they needed— but they weren't *alone* anymore. They didn't have to be.

And when the final two black suits came to land in the front garden, Tony and Loki were ready and waiting for them.

"You two look a lot better," Rhodey said by way of greeting, his faceplate snapping up so that they could see his smile—

But any response that Tony or Loki could have given was drowned out as the other suit all but exploded open, and Barnes fell out of it with a groan.

"I hate that thing," Barnes muttered— then he glanced to Tony. "No offence, I just— it's—"

"It's okay," Tony said, not even bothering to hide his amusement. "I get it."

"And *I'm* sorry for telling JARVIS to save your stubborn ass," Rhodey said, rolling his eyes. "I'm sure freezing to death while clinging to the outside of *my* suit would have been far more comfortable than—"

"It might have been," Barnes cut in. "How would you know?"

They continued to bicker as Rhodey stepped out of his suit, and as they made their way inside Loki slipped his arm around Tony's waist and pressed a kiss to his temple— and it was all just so... *domestic*.

And... Tony had thought of a certain word before, at the tail end of the fight. He hadn't thought much of it then, but. Now?

Tony slipped his hand under Loki's shirt and pressed his fingers against bare skin— and he smiled as he watched his two friends argue whether or not Barnes would have been able to survive a flight from New York while holding on to the outside of Rhodey's suit rather than flying in one himself.

And he couldn't help but think that single, dangerous word again.

They settled down on the seats in the living room, with Tony and Loki on the couch and Barnes and Rhodey taking an armchair each. They filled each other in, Tony and Loki giving them the details about all that they had released to the internet and then the other two explaining why they'd taken so long getting back.

They'd apparently stopped in Britain to sleep, taking the needed rest and splitting their travel time. Rhodey framed it as the practical thing to do, and really, Tony knew that he was right—but he was also half sure that they had done it to give Tony and Loki that time with the house to themselves, and he was more than grateful for that.

And then... they just *relaxed*, just like Tony and Loki had been doing before. Rhodey didn't bring up the Avengers — though there were moments when Tony was fairly sure that Rhodey wanted to — and they didn't talk anymore about what they had done. They just... chatted, asked questions, got to know each other a little better.

But, again—

It wasn't going to last, and Tony tried to hold in a sigh as JARVIS cut through the conversation with the kind of news they had all been expecting, but had hoped would not appear for a while longer.

It would seem that their few hours of respite were already coming to an end— though, hopefully, the remaining issues that needed to be dealt with would not take too long, and they would be able to return to just... living their own lives.

“Mr Barnes,” JARVIS said, cutting through the conversation. “Captain Rogers is asking to speak with you. What would you like me to tell him?”

Barnes' brow furrowed, and he glanced over to the couch.

“It's your choice, Barnes,” Tony said— and he could feel that Loki agreed. “Whatever you decide.”

Barnes drew in a breath. “Okay,” he said, getting up from his seat and moving toward the stairs. “JARVIS, tell him... that I will be with Tony and Loki when they speak with the Avengers, don't say that I'm happy to talk to him now. We'll see how he reacts.”

And as Barnes disappeared upstairs for some privacy, Tony wondered if one of them should have gone with him— not to watch, as he might have suggested a few months before, but just to offer *support*. But... Barnes had come arguably even further than Tony and Loki had, and Tony was reluctant to butt in where it was not his business.

So, he stayed back with Loki, leaning his head on Loki's shoulder as Loki wrapped an arm around him. He couldn't *quite* relax, not knowing that Barnes was up there having a rather difficult conversation, but—

Then Rhodey shifted in his seat, leaning forward slightly over where his hands were clasped in his lap.

“Loki?” he asked, his voice not quite as firm as Tony was used to seeing. “Can I... there is something that I've wanted to say.”

Tony could feel Loki tense a little, his fingers stilling where they had been drawing light patterns onto Tony's waist. And Tony kept quiet, but he just—reached across himself and took Loki's hand in his own, tightening his grip and offering silent support.

He knew that Loki had accepted Rhodey on the battlefield, but of course it was always a completely different thing to accept someone into your *home*—and after what Rhodey had done, Tony knew that he would stand by *Loki*. No matter what was decided here, Loki would always come first.

Rhodey drew in a long breath. “We haven't... really had much of a chance to talk,” he said, his gaze not leaving Loki's face, his voice low and sincere. “But I wanted you to know... well, I just wanted to say that I'm sorry. And I wanted to say that to you personally, Loki, even though we don't really know each other. I did wrong by you, and I'm *sorry*.”

Loki seemed to turn that over in his mind a little, his teeth worrying at his lower lip before his breath escaped in a low sigh. “You did what you thought was best for Anthony,” he said. “And while I cannot forgive what almost happened, that is certainly something that I can appreciate. And I *am* thankful that you helped Anthony come to rescue me.”

Rhodey smiled at that. “Then I guess, just, look after Tony, yeah?” Rhodes said. “And I know you'll do it no matter what I say, but... I need to say it.”

“I will always look after him,” Loki replied. “Though you are right. I hardly need to swear that to you.”

‘Pft,’ Tony murmured. *‘I don't need any looking after—’*

‘You would not have survived this long on your own.’

‘Well, yeah, obviously, but that's a totally different thing—’

‘I am quite certain it isn't—’

‘And I've saved your life lots of times—’

‘That is hardly relevant—’

‘So really, he should be telling me to look after you as well—’

‘Which you do,’ Loki said, his fingers tightening around Tony's once more. *‘You always do.’*

And, not even caring that there was someone else in the room, Tony moved to press his lips briefly to the line of Loki's jaw.

"Are you guys talking in your heads?" Rhodey asked, interrupting with a slight smile. "Barnes warned me about that—"

"Have you been talking about us behind our backs?" Tony asked. "Because *that's* rude, you know."

"How did you even learn about it?" Rhodey asked. "Have you learned how to do magic?"

"It's not magic," Tony cut in— and Loki's smile turned almost nostalgic. Which... well, it was an odd thing to be nostalgic for, but. Tony supposed that no matter how bad a beginning they'd had, it *was* still *their* beginning. "It's... more of a connection. And Loki's a really good teacher."

"One does need an awful lot of patience when teaching you," Loki teased— and Tony didn't even bother trying to deny it this time. He knew his partner had him there.

"Yeah," Tony agreed. "I struggled a bit with it, but I got it in the end."

"And here I thought you might have been doing it on purpose because you enjoyed my hugs," Loki sighed.

"I will always enjoy your hugs," Tony replied, super serious— and then, not quite just to prove his point, Tony wrapped his arms around Loki's shoulders and pulled him as close as was possible.

Rhodey watched them fondly for a moment before moving to change the subject.

"Barnes is taking a long time," he said, glancing over to the stairs. "Is he all right?"

"He is speaking with Captain Rogers," JARVIS said. "Neither of them are irate, however..."

"Okay, I'll be back in a minute," Rhodey said, getting to his feet— and then he followed in the direction that Barnes had left earlier.

"What is he doing?" Loki asked.

Tony smiled. "He's going to give Barnes an out," he said. "He's... good like that. He had a fair amount of practice doing it for me when I was in college."

They heard Rhodey yelling something about burning, and then something about rocket science being easy anyway—

"Hey how dare you!" Tony yelled in the direction of the stairs, not able to let that one go. "Rocket science requires fucking *skill*—"

"But it's easy for people *with* the skill, right?" Rhodey shot back, appearing from the upper floor again.

“I guess,” Tony muttered—

“There, there,” Loki said, patting Tony’s arm. “We all know you love your rockets.”

“You’re the worst,” Tony said, narrowing his eyes.

“But you love me anyway,” Loki grinned.

“You know,” Barnes said as he came back into the room. “There *could* have been a better way to do that than to make it seem like I am the only responsible person in this house.”

“Aren’t you?” Tony asked, tilting his head.

“Well...” Barnes sighed. “I suppose I would like to think that there was *one* among you who could cook, but I saw that attempt at roast beef last month. If I ever see a spit set up in the middle of the living room again—”

“It would have worked,” Loki muttered.

“It’s okay, sweetheart,” Tony said, gently patting his hand. “I know you have other skills.”

“Well, *I* thought it was a good excuse,” Rhodey broke in. “After all, one of your cakes burning *would* have been a tragedy. That banana cake was—” He put his thumb and his forefinger together and kissed them dramatically.

“It could have been a lot better,” Barnes muttered as he threw himself back down on the armchair that he had been occupying earlier. “If I had the *right ingredients*.”

Rhodes sighed at that— and then, to Tony’s confusion, he got out of his chair. “I’ll be back in a bit,” he said. “Don’t wait up for me.”

They all watched as he walked out, heading for the front door, half expecting him to come back in a moment— but all they heard was the engine on one of the cars.

“What was that?” Barnes asked, turning to Tony with a bewildered expression.

“No idea,” Tony replied— and Loki just shrugged.

Whatever.

Rhodey’s weirdness mostly fell from their minds after a while, and they went back to just... being. It was easy, when it was the three of them— they’d been living together for so long now that everything just felt natural. And yes— there was that word again, and this time... Tony just smiled because, yeah. They did feel like a *family*.

When it hit time for dinner, Barnes *did* end up making some food, reluctantly letting Tony and Loki to help cut up the vegetables for stew— which they managed *without* almost cutting off a finger, thank-you-very-much. And they were just scoffing it down when Rhodey finally returned, his hands held behind his back and a strange expression on his face.

It was like... he was excited for something, his lips quirked and his eyes bright.

“I have something for you,” Rhodes said, nodding to Barnes. “Hold out your hands.”

Barnes looked a little wary— but he placed down his spoon and reached out with his hand — having removed the metal one earlier — and Rhodey took his arm from around his back and placed a package in Barnes’ palm.

Tony strained his neck to see, more than just a little curious. And it was... a bag of candy, all of the pieces yellow and curved in a very familiar shape.

“You have got to be kidding me,” Barnes said, actually turning up his nose. “There is no way I’m going to—”

“Just try one,” Rhodey said. “Come on, I just drove all the way to Florence for these—”

“Did anyone see you?” Tony asked, looking up sharply. “Because—”

“I was *fine*,” Rhodey replied. “I promise. Just... come on Barnes. What have you got to lose?”

Even more warily than he had when he’d taken the bag in the first place, Barnes tore the packet open with his teeth and then poured a few pieces of candy onto the table beside his plate. Then, hesitantly, he took a single, tiny banana between two of his fingers, and popped it into his mouth.

He looked entirely unconvinced as he began to chew, but then—

His eyes widened, and he stared at Rhodey in shock.

“*Where*,” he asked after swallowing the candy, “Did you *get* that?”

“The supermarket,” Rhodey said. “I remembered seeing some documentary a while back that mentioned how banana candy tastes different because it’s based on the taste of *old* bananas. I wondered if you’d be able to tell.”

“It’s not as good as the real thing, obviously,” Barnes said— but he was already picking up another piece. “It doesn’t have the texture. But... it is definitely the closest that I have come yet.” He turned to smile up at Rhodey. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Rhodey replied, smiling in return. “Now, is there any of that stew left, or have you lot eaten it all?”

Once they were done with dinner, they all went back into the living room and introduced Rhodey to their traditional movie night. The banana candy was shared around while they watched— a little reluctantly at first, but Tony *did* promise Barnes that they would be able to buy more whenever he wanted. Barnes did, however, draw the line when Rhodey threw one at Tony’s head, clutching the bag close to his chest after that and glaring at anyone who looked like they might even be *thinking* about wasting a piece.

Well. At least until—

“Mr Barnes,” JARVIS said as the movie came to an end, his tone sounding almost apologetic. “Colonel Rhodes’ additional information has led me to understand that you wish to procure some Gros Michel bananas?”

Barnes frowned. “Uh—”

“I have located a plantation in Florida where you can purchase some,” JARVIS said. “I can give you the location, if you wish it.”

Barnes’ eyes widened, and Tony turned his head to stifle his laugh in Loki’s shirt— and he could feel Loki shaking slightly with the effort of doing the same.

“That would be great,” Barnes said,

“Aw man, JARVIS,” Rhodey whined. “You didn’t have to show me up.”

“It’s all right,” Barnes chuckled, his fingers closing a little tighter around the packet. “I appreciate the gesture.”

And from the way that his eyes warmed as he spoke, Tony thought that Barnes might even have been downplaying how much it actually meant to him.

It was the little things, Tony supposed— the small moments that held them together. Something as small as a bag of banana candy could bring a smile to one’s face—

And something as small as a message from Nick Fury could dampen it.

—•—

It must have looked ridiculous to someone from the outside.

The conference room in SI was, after all, rather large. The table was long with plenty of seats either side— but... only about half of those seats were being used. All of the Avengers, Fury, a few other high-up SHIELD agents – including Maria Hill *and* Sharon Carter – were all seated on the one side, while just Tony, Loki, and Rhodey sat on the other, right in the middle. Barnes, rather than opting to sit, decided instead to stand behind them.

The room was almost comically silent for several minutes— the Avengers had already been sitting in place by the time Loki skywalked their group right inside. Pepper had been the one to organise the meeting— JARVIS had contacted her after receiving Fury’s message, and had asked for the space, knowing that Fury wouldn’t be able to find something better. And having the meeting at SI gave Tony the benefit of a home-field advantage.

Pepper had helped them organise the distribution of information and was currently helping to field the media— and Tony *was* pretty sure that she was genuinely remorseful. It was hard to forgive her, but... seeing Loki forgive Rhodey had highlighted for him that Pepper had been trying to *help*. She’d gone about it the wrong way, and Tony couldn’t forgive what had happened as a *result*, but. He wanted to give her the chance to try and prove that she was still

on his side, and so far, she hadn't done anything to suggest the contrary. And she *had* been the one person looking after his interests while he had been gone, keeping a hold on SI and making sure no one got into his workshops. She had *tried*.

So, yeah. The Avengers arrived first, and were ready and waiting as Tony, Loki, and Rhodey took their seats. And then they just... stared at each other. But, Tony wasn't about to speak first, not when Fury had gone against what they had asked. So, he waited— he, Loki, and Barnes, all waiting impassively for one of the others to crack.

It took a few minutes, but. Eventually—

“Thank you for coming,” Fury said, his voice a little stiff.

“We almost decided not to, after you summoned us here,” Loki replied testily. “I believe we told you that *JARVIS* would inform you of a meeting time. Not the other way around.”

“New information came to light,” Fury said.

“Oh?” Tony asked. “And what's that?”

Fury reached down under the table— and Tony froze. Of course, he knew that they'd all agreed that no one would bring a weapon, but—

Tony was still wearing his arc reactor. Of course he was— it was a matter of *necessity*, it kept him alive. And if the reactor was now connected to his suit, well... the Avengers didn't need to know that, did they?

And besides. Barnes was wearing his arm. Steve still had serum in his blood. Loki had his seiðr, and Thor could call Mjölnir at any moment—

So, you know. The word *weapon* was really just a little bit subjective, in Tony's opinion, and there was a chance that Fury could have been retrieving anything from under the table.

But, when Fury lifted his hand, he was only holding a tablet— and when he showed Tony and Loki the screen, Tony realised there was one type of weapon in particular that Fury had been interested in.

“These rings you were using during the fight at the Triskelion,” Fury started, flicking through the images of the fight. “They're powerful. Alien. Like nothing that we've seen before.”

“They let off a particular trace,” Bruce said. “Not unlike the Tesseract, just a little weaker.”

“Yes, I know,” Tony said— and he was suddenly very glad that he and Loki had made the decision about the rings that they had, because... if Bruce decided to try and track them while they were sitting in the attic of the house in Florence, then. Well, Tony didn't really want to think about it. He'd grown fond of that house.

“Don't think we didn't notice you using them, and where you got them from,” Fury said. “Now, tell me. What have you done with them?”

Loki smiled wide enough that his teeth flashed in the electric lights. “They’re hidden,” he said. “Somewhere that you’re never going to find them.”

Tony’s own lips curved into a smirk— because Loki wasn’t lying. Even as Tony felt the weight of the white ring on the cord around his neck, warming every now and then and assuring him that Tony would only hear the truth... the Avengers *wouldn’t* be able to find it.

Fury frowned— but then Steve cleared his throat, and—

“Then I suppose... that all that is left to ask about is the future,” Fury said, sounding a little put out. Tony glanced to Steve curiously, but the captain wouldn’t meet his eye. “What’s done is done— I think we all know that we cannot prosecute you. There will, however, still be reparations that need to be made—”

“JARVIS has already donated a rather hefty sum for the repair of Neuschwanstein, and to the Da Vinci Museum,” Tony cut in, his gaze flashing back to Fury. “And I’ll do the same for the Edinburgh botanical gardens, don’t worry.”

“It’s not just the money, and you know it,” Fury said— and Tony narrowed his eyes.

“I’m not planning on taking SI back from Pepper, and I’m not planning on rejoining the Avengers, even if you *wanted* me to,” Tony said. “All we want is to be able to live in *peace*. If you leave us alone, then we’ll do the same to you.”

“Are you going to stop being Iron Man, then?” Steve asked, leaning forward over the table, his eyes widening slightly.

“Can’t you keep up?” Tony asked. “Iron Man’s long gone. But... it’s not just because of what you did. Iron Man was just an idea, or, perhaps a cocoon. And I’ve already emerged out of the other side and become something better.” He smiled. “I’m Tony Stark. Suit or not, that’s all the world needs to understand. And no, I won’t simply throw away my suits, and I’m not going to stop taking out people who *deserve* consequences for what they’ve done. And that means that you have an option here, the ball is in your court. You see, Loki and I, we’re more than happy to live in the States— my bots are still in Malibu, and I have a lot to catch up on in R&D. Actually... I wonder how they’ve been going without me.”

“There have been far more explosions since you left, Sir,” JARVIS said— and Tony probably shouldn’t have been quite so amused by the way that everyone jumped at the sound of his voice, but. Ah well.

“That doesn’t seem right,” Tony mused.

“Tony,” Clint said. “If you’re not going to be Iron Man—”

“That does not mean that he will stop being a hero,” Loki cut in. “As Anthony said. You Avengers do what needs to be done on this side of the country, and we will be on the other. Unfortunately, we may be forced to be in contact, because until something is put into place to solve the gap that was left by SHIELD, we are all your world has. Leave us be, and we will give you whatever information we have left about where to find HYDRA— you can finish

what we started and put the world back on its feet. But if you *do* decide that you need to meddle in our affairs unnecessarily, and if *anyone* attempts to impede our privacy *or* our safety, then..." Loki trailed off, staring at them impassively.

"Then you'll what?" asked Clint, his eyes narrowing. "Will you attack us instead?"

"Not necessarily," Tony said, glancing over to meet Loki's warm gaze. "Loki promised me not that long ago that he would take me to see Alfheim, and I think I'd quite like that. It might be better for us, to make a new home *there*, away from all the people on Earth who want to hurt us."

Fury's brow furrowed, but it was Natasha who spoke up. "You're threatening to leave?" she asked, surprised.

"Maybe you don't care whether we leave or not," Tony mused. "but you've *heard* what the world is saying right now. How do you think they'll react if they hear that you chased us off this planet? How will you cope without us, when these events just proved exactly how much we can do?"

"And what are you going to do," Loki added quietly, "if the next threat to come is so much worse?"

"So you need to weigh up your options, because we know who we are, and we know where we stand." Tony arched a brow. "Do you?"

There was a small moment where it seemed that no one would meet Tony's gaze, all of them looking at their hands— all except for one.

"Why did you do it?" Sharon asked. "Why did you decide to take everything on yourself? You could have contacted *someone* in SHIELD, or even just Rhodes. Someone that could have helped sort the good from the bad, rather than just destroying every base you could find?"

Steve glanced at Sharon as if he didn't agree with what she was saying, but as interesting as that was Tony didn't pay him so much as a glance.

"Imagine you've been locked away," Tony said, his eyes boring into Sharon— though his words, of course, were for them all. "Cut off from everything, from *everyone*. And through all the torture and the fear, you manage to survive and with help of *one* person, you break out of the facility but— then you're in the middle of a foreign country. There's only that one person in the world that you *know* you can trust, and they're injured, unconscious. So you're on your own, you're afraid, and there's no one you can turn to— all you have is your wits, the knowledge that there are people everywhere who want to throw you right back into a cell, and a crushing *fear* of anything that could be even remotely dangerous. If you were me... would you have gone to the organisation you *knew* were behind your capture? Or to the friends who might rat you out to SHIELD whether they knew what they were doing or not?"

"Tony, we understand," said Steve, his voice strangely calm. "We're not upset—"

“Aren’t you?” Tony frowned. “Even now you all look at Loki like he’s about to explode. You look at *me* like I’m under his control, like we’re both monsters deserving of being put down. But all that we did, we did to *survive*.” He turned his gaze back to Sharon, who was still watching him with a blank expression. “All of my fears came true, Agent Carter. But I fought them, and I’m here. Is that enough reason for you?”

Fury was looking strangely as if he was *agreeing* with Tony’s words, his brow furrowed. But then, even Clint looked like he was starting to sway to... well, if not their way of thinking, then at the very least toward something of an understanding.

“I say we give them a shot,” said Hill, leaning back slightly in her chair, her arms crossing over her chest— and Sharon agreed with a short nod.

“I will speak with what is left of the World Security Council,” Fury said, his voice heavy, his palms pressing flat into the table in front of him. “I will get you your pardon. Though I’m warning you, it’s not going to come cheap.”

“I think that ridding your world of the greatest terrorist threat it has ever seen should work as the start of a down payment,” Loki said— and Tony’s lips curled into a harsh smile.

“If it works out, we’ll stay,” he said. “But if not, then we’ll take an extended trip to Alfheim.”

Fury nodded shortly, his expression tight— and then Tony moved to stand.

“Right, well, this was... not fun at all. Let’s not do this again.”

Loki stood with him, and the pair of them turned to face Barnes— but Loki was called back by the sudden grate of a chair across the floor and a loud exclamation.

“Broth— *Loki*,” Thor said. “Listen. I am going to go to Asgard, and I am going to demand that Odin answers for what he did to you, for leaving you to be tortured at the hands of mortals. And with your permission, I would see the whole of Asgard knowing what happened—”

“If you do that, Earth will be facing another invasion,” Loki cut in. He glanced to Tony, and when he explained, Tony got the impression that it was as much for his benefit as it was for Thor’s. “They might not care for me, but disgraced or not they will not allow the insult of *mortals* torturing an Asgardian Prince to go unpunished.”

“Then what would you have me do?” Thor asked, sounding almost a little desperate. “What can I—”

“There is only one thing that I want from Asgard now, Thor,” Loki said, his voice turning sharp. “Only *one thing* that Asgard could possibly do for me. Other than that... well, Odin is the *reason* why I ended up in that cell. Were it not for him choosing an Infinity Stone over the person he called *son* for over a millennia, then none of this would have happened.” Then Loki curled and arm around Tony’s waist, drawing him close against his side. “I suppose in a way, that means that I owe Odin a thank you— but I will give it to him by *not* going up there to destroy him. And if Asgard cannot give me what *I* want, then they can leave us alone.”

Thor's blue eyes widened for a moment, and then he inclined his head, but he didn't say anything more. And Tony still felt the need to strangle him every time he looked at Thor, every time he remembered what Mjölfnir had done to Loki's ribs—

But... while Tony couldn't forgive, he knew that he might be able to move on from it. Thor was paying for what he had done, and Tony doubted that he would ever try to do it again.

And maybe, now, they would *finally* be able to—

“Tony.”

“Steve?” Tony groaned. “What?”

“I'm sorry,” he said. And god, was everyone going to apologise today? “I'm sorry for everything. For leaving you there, for trying to stop you when all you were doing was trying to—”

“It wasn't your fault, Steve,” Tony sighed, interrupting him before he could finish. “You didn't know. And I was wrong to pin it all on you, you didn't have that much power.” He felt Loki shift beside him, and took comfort from that as he continued. “This was all HYDRA, and HYDRA's gone. I'm not going to be able to just forget all that happened, but... I *will* be able to move on.”

Steve seemed to pause for a minute, turning that over in his mind— and he glanced over Tony's shoulder to where Barnes was standing. And something must have passed between them, because when Steve turned back to Tony, his voice was firm.

“Yes,” he said. “I can do that.”

“Then I'll see you around,” Tony said. Then his gaze flicked to Fury. “We look forward to receiving news of our pardon,” he said. “For *all* of us.”

“I'm actually going to stay a while,” Rhodey said, offering a small smile. “Someone needs to hold them accountable.”

Tony inclined his head. “Thank you.”

“I don't think you should be thanking me,” Rhodey said. “But, you're welcome regardless.”

And then, *finally*—

“Come on Lokes,” Tony said, taking Loki's hand. “Let's go back home.”

Loki smiled as Barnes took his other hand, and then— without bothering to give any of the others a proper farewell, Loki brought them all back to their home in Italy.

But, there *was* still one more thing that they needed to do— and once they'd dropped Barnes off back at home, Loki took Tony's hand, and pulled him through the space between worlds once again. But rather than stepping along Yggdrasil's branches and rushing to a new place like they normally did— Loki paused, his feet stilling.

'Don't look down,' Loki said. *'It's a very long fall.'*

'I know,' Tony replied, squeezing Loki's hand. *'Don't worry.'*

They held five rings each, the coloured stones looking almost dull against their palms even as the cuts of the Chinese symbols caught the glittering lights of Yggdrasil. And Tony knew that they could have kept some of them— used them, perhaps, to make sure that no one could ever hurt either of them ever again. But that way lay a dangerous path, a temptation that could result in them never being able to relax again, always creating something *new* to fight.

No. It was better this way.

So, with their free hands clasped between them they both simply twisted their wrists, and allowed the ten Makluan rings to fall into the gaping, colourful abyss of Ginnungagap.

They didn't watch them fall— they didn't look down. They just turned their backs and headed for home, looking toward not the past, but rather, what was to *come*.

And Tony knew that no matter what the future held— so long as they had each other, then they would be able to survive it.

Epilogue: From the ashes

Chapter Notes

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

The sun sinking down over the ocean was a sight that Tony never thought he would tire of, the orange tint that glittered over the waves more than breath-taking. The water was calm, just the slight rolling swell that was present no matter what, but with no breaks in the surface until the waves hit against the base of the cliff.

The sound of it still bothered him sometimes, that rushing of water over rock filling his head with swirling memories and cold shards of fear. But only *sometimes*. Most days, Tony could stand on the edge of this cliff, the sounds of the water almost soothing. It reminded him of how far he'd come, just how far away all that horror was from where he was now.

A soft sigh escaped his lips as he leaned forward, resting his forearms on the low wall that lined the cliff outside their house. *Their* house– the one that had once been Tony's, but which now belonged to the both of them. As they'd planned, they had moved themselves to Malibu after Steve and the other Avengers had agreed to leave them alone, and Fury had followed their lead. Tony was still unsure about Fury– he genuinely did seem glad that Tony had risen from the ashes, and he had given up trying to rebuild SHIELD on the down-low. But Fury still thought there should be something *more* than the UN watching over the extraordinary beings of the world, and Tony... well.

He quite liked having everything out in the open, actually.

The Avengers operated out of a facility in upstate New York, while Tony and Loki lived in their own home. They had a system that worked, a system which meant they didn't need to bother each other. And Tony and Loki were able to live together in peace.

He still missed the house in Italy sometimes, but it wasn't as if they never went back– and besides. It wasn't the house itself that was important. It was the times that he had spent there, and the people he had spent that time with that was truly precious. And they really did visit quite a lot, because Barnes was still Italy, enjoying his own slice of peace and quiet among the rolling hills and thick forest.

Loki was there now, actually– Barnes had asked him to go over to help with the wards on the house, which were starting to get a little old. And Tony would have gone with him, of course, if not for the fact that Rhodey had all but *begged* for Tony to give a lecture at MIT, since the department there had apparently been sending him hundreds of emails. So, you know. It was for a good cause, and Tony agreed.

They could have gone together. Barnes could have waited for them until Tony was done in MIT, but... they had a plan to take a vacation, and they hadn't wanted to delay. So, rather than postponing their trip, Loki had skywalked across the oceans alone, and Tony had flown to Boston in his black and green suit.

It was... hard, being away from Loki. But it wasn't unmanageable. They remained connected through JARVIS, who was able to let them know that the other was safe at any given moment, and they still had that thread between their minds that had only grown stronger with every day of being together. Once, being that close to another person might have scared him but... Tony revelled in it.

Not *just* because it meant that he knew Loki was safe, but because it held that perfect intimacy, that warmth of being *known* that he wouldn't trade for the world. It wasn't something that he needed—the connection could fall away tomorrow and he would love Loki just the same. It simply brightened his day in moments when Loki was not there, because even half a world apart—whenever Tony realised that Loki was smiling about something, it was hard not to smile in response.

Take earlier that afternoon, for example. Tony *knew* that Loki had been hit with a sudden and intense *joy*, the soft glow of it curling through the back of his mind. Loki was almost *giddy*, and Tony had paused in the middle of the lecture he was giving to a very... unconventional group of students as his lips curved into a smile, just... happy that Loki was, as well.

Just like Loki seemed to be *now*—that small spark of warmth pressing into him again, different to the intense happiness of before. This was... softer, a kind of gentle contentment that Tony knew very well, and which had a light glow of excitement curling through his chest.

His eyes remained closed and his smile felt easy as familiar arms curled around his waist, and Tony every ounce of tension melted away as Loki leaned down to touch a kiss to Tony's shoulder.

'*You're back,*' Tony whispered, tilting his head so that his lips brushed over Loki's temple.

'*So are you,*' Loki replied. His hands slipped under Tony's shirt as he pulled him a little closer, so that Tony's back was flush against Loki's chest. Loki's arms were firm around his waist, and Tony's own slipped from the wall to rest over Loki's instead. '*How did it go?*'

"As well as could be expected," Tony said. "It was fun. Even though most of them seemed to be confused anthropology students, and the physics went a little over their heads. I think they snuck in with hopes of meeting *you*."

"I shall make sure to come with you next time," Loki promised— and Tony felt Loki's lips curve into a smile as they brushed along his cheek. "I wouldn't want to leave the students disappointed."

"Of course not," Tony snorted— though despite his amusement, he felt warmth blossom in his chest. He always enjoyed things more when Loki was by his side, even if it had taken a while for the world to accept that they came as a matched set.

Their plan to release all that HYDRA had done worked exactly as they had hoped. The world saw *why* they had acted, and the court of public opinion had swayed in their favour. That hadn't meant that people had forgotten what they were capable of, however. Even now, after three years of living in peace, there were still those who watched them warily on the streets,

or servers who took orders with nervous trembles to their fingers when he and Loki went to a new restaurant on a date.

But... things were still getting better. They had been pardoned for what they had done, and they had even been forgiven when they paid back damages. Even the American media had mostly got off his back after he had donated a whole pile of cash to Arlington to make up for the damage he and Loki had done to the grounds.

And when Tony was invited to a lecture at MIT, he had once again been met with cheers as he had stepped out onto the stage, his arms spread and a flashy grin stretched across his face. It was nice, in a way, to have that back. Even if every moment he spent on that stage, he just wished that he was already on his way to Alfheim for his and Loki's planned vacation. As much as the lecture *had* been fun, he just... he would have preferred to be spending the time having adventures with his other half.

Tony really did *love* going to Alfheim, to that place where everyone accepted them for who they were and didn't care about the things that they had done on Earth. That place where they could just be themselves. But... Barnes was on Earth, and Rhodey. So were JARVIS and the bots who had come to adore Loki so much that Tony had begun to wonder if there was reason to be jealous. So, they had decided to remain with Earth as their home, but the option to leave was always there— and by god, that was freeing.

“How was Barnes?” Tony asked. “Still looking after those goats?”

Honestly, when Barnes had decided to turn the old Faraday cage into a goat pen, Tony'd thought he was joking. But then he actually went and *bought* the goats. Oh well, he seemed like he was enjoying himself over there and that was all that mattered.

“He's doing well,” Loki said. “The goats are as rude as always. Oh, and he has requested that we video call more often.”

“Yes, *mom*,” Tony sighed. Then he perked up a little as he remembered— “Did he like the bananas you brought him?”

Loki laughed, his breath tickling over Tony's skin. “There's a banana cake in the kitchen. We're to give an opinion.”

“Is that what had you so happy earlier?” Tony asked— and as he did, he turned in Loki's embrace so that he was leaning back against the wall instead, looping his arms around Loki's neck to exchange the view of the glowing sunset for something far more beautiful.

Loki's expression was soft, softer than Tony had been expecting, and he was smiling as his hands began to stroke up and down over Tony's waist.

“I may have lied to you,” Loki admitted— but his smile didn't dim.

“You *may* have?” Tony asked, arching a brow, his fingers starting to play gently with Loki's hair. “I should have known. I *knew* DUM-E wasn't the one who took that last bit of pizza.”

Loki snorted. “He’s a menace,” he said. “And he needs more coaching when it comes to telling lies. He gave himself away far too easily—”

“Don’t you *dare* start teaching the kids how to lie—”

“It is a useful skill,” Loki insisted. “And stop distracting me.”

Tony grinned, and leaned forward to press his lips to Loki’s in a quick touch that could *barely* be called a kiss. “All right,” he said. “What did you lie about?”

Loki’s lips quirked. “Barnes didn’t need help with his wards. They remain as strong as ever, of course.”

“Of course,” Tony said, amused by the smugness in Loki’s tone– but too curious to make more of a comment on it. “And...”

“And that lecture at MIT was full of confused anthropology students because... it was an anthropology lecture,” Loki admitted. “It was the only one available that day with a lecturer who was willing to lose a class to a guest speaker.”

“Okay...” Tony blinked. “So you, Rhodey, Barnes and probably JARVIS conspired to get me to go to Boston. Where were *you*?”

Loki’s eyes were bright, far brighter than Tony would have expected when he said– “Asgard.”

“*Why*?”

The whole time that Tony had known Loki, he had *never* expressed a desire to go back to Asgard. Not *once*, not even on the days when he talked about his mother. He was happy on Earth, he was happy with Tony– and Asgard had always been something of a risk.

But, after everything, Thor had apparently delivered Loki’s message to Odin, and that had been that. They didn’t bother Loki and Tony on Earth, and they didn’t bother with Asgard. That was the way they liked it.

“Thor assured me that I would be safe, and he arranged the meeting with the Allfather,” Loki said. “And when I was granted an audience, I made the argument that I have served my time– that my sentence was to be served on Midgard in *decent* conditions, and that what had happened should constitute completion of my punishment. My *mother*...” Loki’s hands tightened slightly. “She said that she is happy for me. She spoke in our favour, and Odin was forced to agree.”

“I’m sorry I missed it,” Tony said. And he *did* half mean that watching Loki get one over Odin no doubt would have been glorious, but... he just wished that he could have stood at Loki’s side and supported him as he overcame this demon from his past.

“I am, too,” Loki said. “But, Anthony... it *worked*. Thor came through for us, and after all of that... Anthony, I have it.”

Tony's eyes widened— after all of the conversations they'd had over the years, he didn't need any more than those words and Loki's joyously tender expression to understand. "You mean..."

"I have something for you," Loki said, one of his hands shifting from Tony's skin to lift between them, palm up.

"I was going to give you this on Alfheim, but..." he glanced out to the orange-stained sky for a moment before turning back to meet Tony's gaze with yet another soft smile. "I realise that there isn't any reason to wait. This moment is as perfect as any."

Then Loki curled his fingers in a bright shimmer of green, and then there was an apple sitting in his hand— almost glowing gold in the light of the setting sun.

Once, Tony would have reached out and taken it immediately, would have bitten down into that crisp sweetness and tied his life to Loki's in a hurry. But... the apple wasn't going to run away, and there were some moments that didn't need to be rushed. Not when Tony already knew that he had the rest of his life with Loki, not when he knew that they were *safe*.

So he simply curled his hand over Loki's, their fingers fitting together over the smooth skin of the apple while his other hand slid through Loki's hair, pulling him down to bring their lips together in a kiss. The kiss wasn't an answer to a question, and it wasn't a promise— it just *was*. They kissed because they wanted to, because they loved each other, and because they didn't *need* any other reason. And with the golden apple held between them, there was no need to say anything. They already knew where they were headed.

Because... yeah. Sometimes, the sound of the ocean *was* too much for Tony to bear. Sometimes, there were still days when Loki wasn't able to stomach eating a single thing. Sometimes they would wake up screaming, because there are some wounds that don't quite heal.

But that was only *sometimes*, and that was okay. Because in those moments they would always help each other pull through, with calm breaths and whispered words of comfort. Neither of them would ever be entirely the same as they were, but... there was something exquisite in the broken, glittering shards of their lives. Things weren't perfect, but Tony didn't think that *perfect* was what either of them needed.

Because as Tony shifted from calming himself with counted breaths and lists of things he could *see* to instead making a list of things that *mattered*, he knew that he and Loki? They were going to be all right.

They were safe, they were happy, and they were together.

And really, that was all they would ever need.

End.

Chapter End Notes

So, I'm in a slight state of shock right now. But I know I wouldn't have been able to manage this without a few people, especially **Rabentochter** and **STARSdidathing**, who put up with me whining literally every single Sunday for almost a year. For that matter, pretty much everyone in the FI discord who had to deal with a hundred sprint notifications every Sunday without fail. ♥

But, thank you as well to everyone who has been reading, kudosing, leaving comments, keeping me motivated to get a chapter up every week. Here's [my tumblr](#) if you want to say hi. Just, thanks everyone, ~~and I'm sure it won't be long before I'm back with weekly updates on something or other xD~~

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